



Executive Summary

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

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This study is part of a multi-country research project "[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration](#)" also involving Pakistan, Turkey, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The research team interviewed 21 migrant women and three third sector practitioners in the greater Beirut area in Lebanon. Twelve of the migrant women are migrant domestic worker (MDWs), five are Syrian skilled professionals, and four are undocumented Syrians engaged, in sex work to varying degrees or unemployed. The interviews explored participants' economic and socio-cultural drivers of migration, their living and working conditions, and their experiences of the multiple crises Lebanon is facing.

Results of the study indicate that the migrant women we spoke to exhibited high levels of agency in their decision to migrate. Leaving behind unbearable conditions of discriminating gender norms and/or familial and social gender-based violence, poverty and/or conflict-related hardships, was perceived as emancipatory and empowering. Financial independence and being able to help their families were a source of pride for the MDWs and the four undocumented Syrians, while they were living at the margins of the hosting society. The five Syrian professional migrants were instead integrated into Lebanese society, but as second-tier citizens, suffering from structural discrimination. They were also the ones affected the most by the Lebanese triple crisis (economic collapse, COVID-19 and the August 2020 port blast).

Coupled with the triple crisis, legal and societal unpreparedness to respect and protect the rights of female migrant workers and refugees in Lebanon, and to cater for their support needs, urgently calls for improved policies, legal tools, and international and local assistance services.

Background

In 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that the number of migrant workers in Lebanon exceeded 400,000¹. 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. In relation to undocumented migrants, recent estimates calculated that Syrian refugees in Lebanon, being approximately 1.5 million, are more than one-quarter of the Lebanese population².

Regarding gender, statistics suggest that about two-thirds of the employees in the service sector are migrant women; 75 per cent of those legally registered are listed as domestic workers³. MDWs coming to Lebanon (those legally registered) under the *kafala* system (a private employer sponsorship system) are excluded from the country's labour legislation. This leaves them

vulnerable to exploitation and denies them basic rights. In relation to undocumented migrants and refugees, about 92 per cent of Syrian workers are engaged in informal work relations, including sex work, with no work contract and more than 50 per cent of the refugees residing in Lebanon are adult women⁴. One of the most pressing issues for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in terms of a legal framework, is the lack of legal residency⁵. Additionally, Lebanon is increasingly a destination country for human trafficking, and Syrian women are at exceptional risk of trafficking for sexual abuse and exploitation⁶.

The COVID-19 crisis has hit Lebanese society, and its migrants, at a time of economic collapse and political turmoil, exacerbated by the disastrous Beirut port blast of August 2020. Job losses, reduced or unpaid salaries, and currency devaluation have led to rising numbers of female migrant workers who cannot meet basic needs, like food and shelter. Simultaneously, levels of gender-based violence have been rising due to the triple crisis in Lebanon too⁷.

Methodology

This study has a qualitative participatory design, based on individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews and a purposeful sampling method. Twenty-one (N. 21) adult migrant women living in Beirut were interviewed in 2020/21 during a period of COVID-19 and then the Beirut explosion. While most of them had a residence permit, work permit and visa, four of them were undocumented and four were Lebanese-Syrian professionals (with a Lebanese mother/husband and a Syrian father). Participants were divided into three sub-groups:

- 12 MDWs, comprising 10 Ethiopians, one Nigerian and one Filipino.
- Five skilled Syrian professionals, comprising a deskilled homosexual waitress, one translator, one frontline NGO officer and two teachers.
- Four undocumented Syrians, comprising two women sex workers and two transwomen, unemployed and occasionally engaged in sex work.

Three participants were NGO practitioners employed in a service active in the field of migration and/or gender in the city of Beirut. The analysis was guided by the following themes: drivers and processes of migration, gender discrimination in the country of origin, living and working in the host country, migrant women's 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 was also explored.

Results and Discussion

In relation to the MDWs, the migrant women showed agency in their decision to migrate, motivated by a strong desire to change their lives. The choice of Lebanon as a destination was, to a great extent, pre-determined by the market of the recruitment agencies under the *kafala* system. The main, self-reported driver for leaving home was that of finding either their first employment or a new one with a higher income. Poverty and restricted life prospects can be considered the main drivers of migration for the MDWs group. Being able to make, send and save money is a source of empowerment and pride, which appears to set a reassuring temporal limit to their stay in Lebanon, while also making their life conditions there more acceptable.

The MDWs interviewed were at a stage where they perceived their experience in Lebanon as temporary, as is typical of circular migration. For this, they did not seem to be on any pathways to integration in Lebanon. Many declared that they did not go to public spaces, had no social life and attended no social event, whereas they spent their little free time on their phone, watching the television and talking to their family back home. The use of technology as a virtual place of freedom and empowerment emerged as an important phenomenon requiring further investigation.

Among the four undocumented Syrian migrants, the two sex workers, whose stories sit within the spectrum of human trafficking, are representative of the higher levels of familial and social violence women are more vulnerable to, yet strive to flee from. Gender-based violence, against women and the LGBT+ community, was in Syria exacerbated by the long-term conflict. On the other hand, their desire and will to effect change in their lives is translated into a great level of agency. This is despite their declared unhappiness relating to their profession as sex workers and other adversities they have to face in Lebanon.

The coping strategies of the sub-group of the four undocumented Syrian women, which includes two refugee transwomen too, consist in the choices, actions, and narratives that can mitigate the hardships of their situations as undocumented migrants with undesired jobs, or with no job at all. 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 also ways to cope with their situation. Plans for future migration endeavours are also signs of an orientation towards change.

Finally, the case of the two refugee transwomen is important when looking at the dynamics of support-seeking. The support of the third sector is not considered very helpful by the participants. Nonetheless, seeking support is an important action of self-protection and coping with difficulties. The experiences of these women disclose also questions around the reputation of Lebanon as a country of freedom in contrast with a country where discrimination against different types of minority groups is instead widespread.

The third sub-group of the Syrian professional migrants calls for the need to acquire a better understanding of the experiences of professional, skilled migrant women workers in Lebanon. Attention to skilled migrant women invites a recognition that they are present in several realms, beyond domestic work and care, and are part of globalised labour markets in complex ways, which involves several South-to-South circuits around the world.

Two participants in this sub-group have a story of family migration from Syria to the UAE – where they were born. Their migratory route is a good example of a South-to-South circuit revolving around the historic regional centre of the Emirates. Two other overlooked areas that our results indicated in relation to the sub-cohort of the Syrian professionals are: the effects of the war and the Lebanese triple crisis on what we can refer to as middle-class Syrian communities in Lebanon; and that of mixed-family Lebanese-Syrian migrants, since four women in this sub-group were half Lebanese. Their story uncovers the racialised and patriarchal policies of the Lebanese government which does not grant citizenship to the offspring of Lebanese mothers, if the father is of another nationality. These participants express an ongoing negotiation between integration and

remaining as a foreigner belonging to the discriminated Syrian minority. While they are well educated, found 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.

The NGO practitioners interviewed described the impact of the triple crises on MDWs, as well as on undocumented migrants from Syria, as far more significant and devastating than that described by the migrant women in this study, who mainly suffered from increased isolation and reduced income. Echoing what has been mentioned above, the practitioners described a scenario where MDWs were fired, not paid, and abandoned in front of their embassies. Many wanted to return home, faced increased discrimination, hostility and sexual violence. However, one NGO practitioner provided a reading of hope of this tragic situation, and suggested that the growing number of MDWs falling out of the exploitative *kafala* system might be the start of a bottom-up, freelancers-based alternative system to the *kafala*. Finally, looking at the wider migrant population, including the even more vulnerable undocumented migrant workers, the NGOs' participants indicated that gender-based violence and the violation of sexual and reproductive health rights considerably increased, whereas in-person support became impossible.

Conclusion

The migrant women involved in this research exhibited high levels of agency in deciding to leave behind conditions of gender discrimination and violence, poverty, other conflict- and non-conflict related hardships. They perceive their choices and their greater financial independence as emancipatory and empowering. However, in Lebanon women migrant workers do not enjoy standard labour conditions, and suffer from social and institutional discriminations. National and international tools to protect female migrant workers are still insufficient. It is thus important to explore the relationships between the state, international and national institutional actors, and civil society, including migrant associations, to gain a better understanding of the limitations of the attempts at global and local governance, and act upon these limitations to overcome them. Improving the conditions of female migrants, from the domestic and the informal to the higher-skilled industries, should be prioritised on the national and international agenda.

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