

The World Humanities Report

# Case Study: The Anti-Racism Movement

---

Reem Joudi



The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and the Human Science (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

© 2023 The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System

This work carries a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License. This license permits you to copy, distribute, and display this work as long as you mention and link back to the World Humanities Report, attribute the work appropriately (including both author and title), and do not adapt the content or use it commercially. For details, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>.

This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Joudi, Reem. *Case Study: The Anti-Racism Movement*. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

More information about the author can be found at the [end of this document](#).

# Case Study: The Anti-Racism Movement

Reem Joudi Arab Council for the Social Sciences

The Anti-Racism Movement (ARM)<sup>1</sup> is a nongovernmental organization founded in Lebanon in 2010. Their main goal is “to decrease racist discrimination and abuse in Lebanon on the social and institutional level, by advocating for changes in the systems that perpetuate racist, exploitative practices.”<sup>2</sup> They focus primarily on migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, with a lesser emphasis on migrant workers in general. According to a Human Rights Watch article, an estimated 250,000 migrant domestic workers (MDWs)—the majority of whom are women—live in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> The group aims to make tangible improvements in the lives of MDWs, as well as build their capacity to self-advocate and advance their own rights. The ARM’s work is particularly important in the context of the Lebanese state and its *kafala* system.<sup>4</sup>

The ARM’s advocacy work seeks to abolish *kafala* and looks to “critique the racist narratives promoted by the state and the media, the unjust migration and labor policies, and the inhumane social practices targeting migrant workers in Lebanon.”<sup>5</sup> They build on literature in the arts and humanities to frame their positionalities, including themes like social justice, labor justice, labor rights, migration rights, and migration policy. In addition to their nationwide media campaigns,<sup>6</sup> ARM has run migrant community centers since 2011, where “migrant workers meet, organize, build alliances, and access information, resources, and direct assistance.” These spaces are critical meeting points for

<sup>1</sup> See <https://armlebanon.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Zeina Ammar, Anti-Racism Movement, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> “Lebanon: New Safeguards for Migrant Domestic Workers,” Human Rights Watch, September 18, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/18/lebanon-new-safeguards-migrant-domestic-workers>.

<sup>4</sup> *Kafala* is a sponsorship system that “links the legal status of domestic workers to that of her employer, who must be a citizen or legal resident in Lebanon” (Dina Mansour-Ille and Meagan Hendowe, “From Exclusion to Resistance: Migrant Domestic Workers and the Evolution of Agency in Lebanon”, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, no. 4 [2018]: 451). This delegates the state’s responsibility of providing an adequate legal framework to protect migrants’ labor rights to the Lebanese citizen or resident, giving the latter power over the status of the former, jeopardizing their safety in the process.

<sup>5</sup> Ammar, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://armlebanon.org/abolish-kafala>.

migrant domestic workers on sociocultural and political levels, allowing them the opportunity to form ties of kinship and build awareness around their rights in the Lebanese legal context.<sup>7</sup> Sophie Chamas echoes the importance of MDW spaces and visibility, particularly in the context of Lebanon’s precarity. Rather than focusing on the vulnerabilities many of these women face, she emphasizes their agency, their various advocacy techniques, their community solidarity, and the power of their demands to shape alternative imaginaries:

There is much to be learned from this movement of radically vulnerable individuals, who refuse to compromise on their demands, to appeal to a state that treats them as subhuman. . . . In, in the midst of hopelessness, frustration, and stuckedness made ordinary, amid the everyday ugliness of absent opportunities, they do the work of sustaining a social movement as community, as family, keeping each other and their cause alive and actively intersecting the struggle against *kafala* with others in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup>

The issue of migrant domestic labor in Lebanon is intimately tied to the feminization and racialization of labor and exploitation. Amrita Pande places the history of MDWs against the backdrop of the 1970s oil boom in the Gulf, which “dramatically expanded inter-Arab and Asian–Gulf migrations.”<sup>9</sup> Although the majority of these migrations were by men, there was an “increased feminization of the migrant labor force in the 1980s and early 1990s,” and women from Southeast Asia (in particular) arrived to work in Lebanon as domestic workers, seen as “not only less expensive but also considered more submissive than their Arab counterparts.”<sup>10</sup> According to Priscilla Ringrose and Elisabeth Stubberud, MDWs “play a central role in the construction of the Lebanese population’s

<sup>7</sup> One of the most significant modes of resistance against the injustice of the *kafala* system are unions. Through community-based and NGO-led activism, a Domestic Workers’ Union was formed in 2015 and had its founding Congress in January 2015. However, the request to formally register the union with the Lebanese Ministry of Labor was denied. Since then, and particularly on the occasions of International Workers’ Day and International Women’s Day, domestic workers have taken to the street and called for the implementation of ILO Convention 189, their inclusion in Lebanese labor law, and abolishing the *kafala* system (Mansour-Ille and Hendowe, “From Exclusion to Resistance”; Bina Fernandez, “Racialised Institutional Humiliation through the *Kafala*,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 19 [2021]: 4344–61).

<sup>8</sup> Sophie Chamas, *Researching Activism in “Dead Time”: Counter-Politics and the Temporality of Failure in Lebanon* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Amrita Pande, “From ‘Balcony Talk’ and ‘Practical Prayers’ to Illegal Collectives: Migrant Domestic Workers and Meso-Level Resistances in Lebanon,” *Gender and Society* 26, no. 3 (2012): 386.

<sup>10</sup> Pande, “From ‘Balcony Talk,’” 386.

self-image since nearly one-quarter of the population employs a MDW.”<sup>11</sup> They argue that “Lebanon’s self-understanding as a white nation” is “a process that is enabled by the othering of MDWs who are primarily non-white.”<sup>12</sup> Not only does this practice shape Lebanon’s approach toward domestic workers’ labor rights (or lack thereof), it carries significant implications on how migrant domestic workers are negatively portrayed and stereotyped in public discourse and the media.

That said, one main challenge the ARM faces is the dearth of research and critical analyses on the policy frameworks that shape MDW labor realities in Lebanon. They note that “the few sources that exist regurgitate the same (sometimes false) information and rarely do they add anything new to the discussion around migrant work in Lebanon.” This lack of systemic analysis makes it “very difficult to abolish *kafala* and to propose alternatives.”<sup>13</sup> In the survey, they identify the need for regional and international collaborations to better understand the policy landscapes that frame migrant labor practices in other countries, notably Gulf states that operate on sponsorship systems. Thus, a more comprehensive analysis of the policy framework that shapes migrant domestic labor in Lebanon should consider how globalization and neoliberal capitalism shape the flows of people, labor, and capital to and from the Arab world.

There are two crises that affected ARM’s work in 2020: first, Lebanon’s economic and financial crisis amid a global pandemic, which left many MDWs homeless and unemployed after their employers abandoned them without salary. Second was Beirut’s tragic August 4 blast. In response to these events, ARM implemented an emergency intervention, which expanded their scope of work, “distributing food and hygiene kits to more than 900 migrant households since April 2020 . . . [and offering] migrant communities free legal advice and [support] with cases of unpaid wages and abuse.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the group published a release condemning the racism that tainted the Beirut blast solidarity efforts, highlighting the Lebanese state’s negligence in identifying the number of migrant workers who were deceased, as well as the increased precarity of migrant workers whose homes were destroyed.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Priscilla Ringrose and Elisabeth Stubberud, “The Emotional Politics of Representations of Migrant Domestic Work in Lebanon,” *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 4 (2019): 408.

<sup>12</sup> Ringrose and Stubberud, “The Emotional Politics,” 408.

<sup>13</sup> Ammar, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

<sup>14</sup> “Homelessness among Migrant Workers on the Rise,” Anti-Racism Movement, September 2, 2020, <https://armlebanon.org/homelessness-among-migrant-workers-on-the-rise/>.

<sup>15</sup> See “Beirut Blast Solidarity Tainted with Racism,” Anti-Racism Movement, August 13, 2020, <https://armlebanon.org/beirut-blast-solidarity-tainted-with-racism/>.

On September 4, 2020, the Lebanese Ministry of Labor adopted new policies aimed toward abolishing the *kafala* system. This decision must be read in the context of ARM's and similar NGOs' consistent advocacy over the years to reframe the legal, cultural, and social landscape that shapes MDWs' lives. The decision included drafting a standard unified contract that includes the following: "allows workers to terminate their contract without the consent of their employer and provides key labor guarantees already afforded to other workers, such as a 48-hour work week, a weekly rest day, overtime pay, sick pay, annual leave, and the national minimum wage, with some permissible deductions for housing and food."<sup>16</sup> Although some NGOs viewed this step as a win, others saw it as a veiled attempt by the state to amend rather than abolish *kafala*. What both reactions illuminate is the difficult road that lies ahead for achieving social justice.

<sup>16</sup> "Lebanon: New Safeguards for Migrant Domestic Workers."

**Reem Joudi** is a media researcher and writer based in Lebanon, currently working as a researcher and project coordinator at the Arab Council for the Social Sciences. She earned her MA in media studies from the American University of Beirut and her BSFS in international economics from Georgetown University. Her research interests lie at the intersection of visual culture, digital technologies, and affect theory, with a particular focus on Lebanon and the Southwest Asia and North Africa region.