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Social Networks, Collective Organizing, and Freedom of Association

A Qualitative Participatory Action Research Study with Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

Background

Worldwide, women migrant domestic workers (WMDWs) occupy a weak position in the global economy due to intersections of gender, race, and global economic inequalities. Lebanon hosts more than 250,000 WMDWs who are recruited and employed through the infamous *Kafala* system that binds a worker to one employer. With Lebanon's economic crisis, a large number of WMDWs are currently working as freelancers whereby giving and receiving support from other workers plays a crucial role in their adaptation and economic survival. This study is a component of an international evaluation of the Work in Freedom Project carried out by the International Labour Organization. It focuses on Lebanon and aims to assess the impact of the project on the ability of WMDWs in Lebanon to maintain viable social networks and organize collectively. Its main objective is to investigate the different ways in which WMDWs have maintained social networks and engaged in collective organizing efforts (at the individual, meso- and macro-levels), to improve their lives and to ensure non-exploitative work conditions.

Methods

The study utilized a qualitative participatory action research methodology (PAR) integrating feminist approaches that focus on agency and choice. Nine WMDWs from Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Kenya were recruited through the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon. They underwent training as co-researchers and participated actively in the design and conduct of the qualitative study. The research question and interview guide were co-designed by the academic and co-researchers. The final research question that resulted from the participatory process is: "How do women migrant workers try to improve their situation, whether through working alone or working together, to help themselves and other women from their nationality or different nationalities?" Each co-researchers conducted 2-4 in-depth interviews with WMDWs (total of 24 interviews) and transcribed the data. Most of the transcripts were translated to English by a professional translation firm. This enabled data analysis to be conducted by both the academic researchers (in English) and co-researchers (in the original language of the interview). Data analysis was carried out through standard qualitative methods of open coding followed by grouping the codes into broader categories and conducting thematic analysis.

Results

The analysis uncovered six main themes, with each consisting of a few subthemes. The theme on social networks and collective organizing includes a subtheme on helping, the term coined by co-researchers and explicitly stated in the research question. Although the social networks that bind WMDWs within their own communities and across national boundaries carry limited if any financial resources, they are instrumental during times of collective crisis. The social networks that WMDWs invest in provide them with tangible resources like food, shelter, and medicine, when needed, but also information and advice. An important form of advice that WMDWs provide each other is about how to manage worker-employer relationship and demand rights. The study uncovered the strategies through which WMDWs provide help to each other whereby the nature of the help needed, and the situation determine whether direct help can be provided or whether a referral to the embassy or an NGO would be the course of action to take. Helping is altruistic and participants who provided support to others in need expressed a sense of moral gratification. The study also showed that, among the select group of participants, helping is an activity that transcends national identity. These findings interrogate the focus on WMDWs as bounded beings whose experiences can only be understood through the employer-worker prism. Instead, the findings expand the discourse on WMDWs in the Arab region to highlight multidimensional relationalities within and across their national group.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are an estimated 250,000 women migrant domestic workers (WMDWs) in Lebanon who provide domestic and care services in exchange for low wages, with the largest proportion coming from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. The plight of these workers surfaced during the past two years in light of the triple crisis of the economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the August 4, 2020 Beirut port explosion. Abandoned by employers who could no longer pay their meager wages in dollars, scores of WMDWs were abandoned in front of their embassies, sometimes with months of unpaid wages and little more than a suitcase.[1]

For a number of years, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has been leading the *Work in Freedom* project (WiF) which aims to reduce vulnerability to trafficking, forced labor, and exploitation of women migrants from South Asia to the Arab states (specifically Lebanon and Jordan). Funded by the Department for International Development (DfID-UK), the specific objectives of WiF are to: 1) provide women migrants with more choices throughout the migration pathway; 2) create an enabling environment for safe migration and decent work; and 3) strengthen policies and systems in sending and receiving countries. Given the challenging policy context in Lebanon and the entrenchment of the sponsorship system (*Kafala*), ILO has turned to supporting efforts that build community support networks and facilitate community mobilizing at the grassroots level.[2] As such, they have invested in local organizations and collectives that provide legal support to WMDWs and deliver trainings on leadership and collective organizing.

2. AIMS & OBJECTIVES

As the WiF project is part of a global effort to eradicate trafficking, forced labor, and exploitation of women from South Asia who travel to the Arab region to engage in work in the domestic and care sphere as well as in the garment sector. A group of international researchers, led by CEDIL (Centre of Excellence for Development Impact and Learning), was commissioned to evaluate the impact of WiF on reducing migrant women's vulnerability throughout the migration pathway. A research team from the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut oversaw evaluating the impact of WiF in Lebanon. The team decided to conduct the evaluation utilizing a qualitative participatory action research (PAR) study to assess how social networks and collective organizing impact the lives of WMDWs in Lebanon, feeding the results into the overall international evaluation. The PAR study utilized a feminist methodology lens and in-depth qualitative data gathering by trained WMDWs from various national backgrounds to understand how migrant women work collectively to expand their choices, enhance their capabilities, and exercise agency to improve their circumstances.

The study considered the impact of the context of multiple crises – namely, the triple crisis of the economic collapse, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion – on WMDWs. On the one hand, the multiple crises may have stymied or even reversed efforts by ILO through the WiF program and other local organizations aimed to empower and support WMDWs' collective organizing efforts. On the other hand, the crises may have opened a window of opportunity for WMDWs to organize differently and more proactively to realize the potential of their collective efforts.

[1] This has been extensively covered in mainstream and social media, as well as human rights organizations such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch; this coverage is reviewed in a paper in press by S. Abdulrahim and F. Salka.

[2] This is based on a personal communication with Mr. Igor Bosc, ILO Chief Technical Advisor.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Gender, Transnational Migration, and Domestic/Care Work

Sustainable development goal 5 (SDG5) requires states to commit to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." The ILO estimates that there are about 11.5 million WMDWs who work in private homes worldwide. Thus, including this group of transnational workers in plans to achieve SDG 5 requires recognizing the value of domestic and care work and supporting safe migration opportunities (Schmidt-Traub, De la Mothe Karoubi, & Espey, 2015). Migrants in general, but particularly WMDWs, have an undeniably positive economic impact on their host and home countries' economies. For example, the Philippines experienced an outflow of almost 4.28 million migrants by 2010 and an inflow of over USD 21.4 billion by 2012. Further, 75% of the overseas Filipino workers are women (Hoang & Yeoh, 2015), marking the country as the third largest remittance recipient in the world, accounting for over half of all remittances in Southeast Asia (IFAD, 2013). Outmigration has helped ease high unemployment rates in the country and improved economic indicators (Opiniano, 2002). Another example where the remittances of WMDWs contributed to the overall resilience of the economy is that of Ethiopia. The estimated number of Ethiopians working abroad ranges between 800,000 and 1 million with a remittance inflow of over USD 800 million (National Bank of Ethiopia, 2008); unofficial estimates of unrecorded migrants seem to suggest an equivalent, if not even a higher, level of economic contribution (Fernandez, 2010).

In host countries, WMDWs lack access to social protections. In this regard, social protections include measures undertaken by governments to protect all their citizens against economic loss, disability, or ill health. As non-citizens, WMDWs are neither protected in their own countries of origin nor in host countries where they spend years if not decades of their lives. For example, Ghanaian and Filipina domestic workers in Holland are denied access to social protections, making them more vulnerable to exploitation by and dependency on their employers (van Walsum, 2016). Similarly, migrant workers in most countries in the Arab region (i.e., Lebanon and the Arab Gulf states) are excluded from labour laws or any forms of social protection under the *kafala* system (Gammage & Stevanovic, 2018, p. 12). Moreover, labour standards in many countries around the world do not tackle the human rights violations faced by WMDWs, which are an outcome of racial capitalism that lead to global economic and gender inequities (Elias, 2010). The failure to value reproductive work (including domestic and elderly care) is a deeply ingrained patriarchal and sexist systematic issue. Care work is "often deeply rooted in affection, and is seen as a naturalized extension of the role women have in society" (Gammage & Stevanovic, 2018, p. 2). Since both the care provider and care recipient may view this type of work as not requiring skills, it is then underestimated for its price and effort (Gammage & Stevanovic, 2018).

3.2 Agency and Collective Organizing by WMDWs Worldwide

Sociological research on transnational labor migration has generally focused on economic relationships on a macro-level and national policies in the receiving and sending countries. More recently, research began to examine micro-level factors – such as household relations and the agency of migrant women themselves – that impact labor negotiations and work conditions of WMDWs (Gamburd, 2009, p. 47). There are interconnections between labor regulations and the agency and power of workers' collective organizing, be it through the formal channels such as forming unions or informally (López, 2019). Collective bargaining of wages is considered one of the multiple strategies under the umbrella of labor activism. This form of activism is one of negotiation and conflict resolution, focusing on "elements not only of agreement, but also of

discontent and discord" (López, 2019, p. 41). In the case of WMDWs, the precarious nature of informal domestic/care work, the multinational recruitment and hiring mechanisms, and gendered social structures impacts their organizing efforts locally and weakens transnational networks (Zulfiqar & Khan, 2018). For example, the hiring of WMDWs through third parties (private agencies) and recruitment on temporary contracts has created what Collins (1990) described as the "vertical disintegration of the employment relationship." In many cases, WMDWs are not included under standard forms of employment, which leads to their exclusion from national labor laws and protections. In other cases where the migrant workers' status and residency in the host country is solely dependent on the employer, as is the case in Arab countries, the legal standing of WMDWs becomes extremely weak. Subcontracting and binding a worker's status to her employer divide the workforce and discourage solidarity that can lead to forms of collective bargaining, collective action, or trade unions (Zulfiqar & Khan, 2018).

In the case study of women homeworkers in India, Zulfiqar and Khan (2018) argued that whilst non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have supported the workers through a feminist policy agenda, their efforts have led to the NGO-ization of women's collective organizing. This has led to a top-down mode of collective organizing that forced the organizers into a professional relationship with the state. Other gender and migration scholars (Fernandes, 2018) have also voiced criticism of the top-down NGO-led organizing efforts that tend to bureaucratize grass roots movements, while maintaining advocacy discourses based on class, gender, and other forms of inequalities. The current global economic crisis, globalization, and the continuous growth in technological innovations has changed current forms of employment and labour, as well as the face of collective action in labor communities. This change is evident through the creation of global unions, international trade agreements and structures of representation such as work committees, and other forms of national collective bargaining. As such, the "multiplicity of sources of regulation, the increase of inequality and the growing segmentation of the working class" is reflected in the transformation of collective action and its regulation at the local, national, and transnational dynamics (López, 2019, p. 44).

The nature of domestic work as labor provided in the employers' homes has stymied workplace forms of mobilization and led to dismissal of domestic work as a legitimate form of labor. This has contributed to women domestic/care workers being excluded from broad collective bargaining efforts as their feminine gender roles were seen as an obstacle to collective action. However, some writings have addressed the role of community building and social movement organizing on the capacity to organize while spatially separated and across ethnic lines, as in the case of efforts to bring together African American and immigrant women in the United States who provide domestic work and child and elder care in private homes (Boris & Nadasen, 2008). The authors describe how women utilized coalition-building and political strategizing "to gain respect, recognition, safety from violence, and living wages" (2008, p. 414).

In general, WMDWs have avoided high exposure forms of public protesting in such destination countries as Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, and especially the Arab Gulf states. However, the 2005 Consulate Hopping Protest and Hall of Shame Awards event in Hong Kong is a prime example where WMDWs have used public forms of organizing and mobilizing to voice their concerns regarding human rights issues (Constable, 2009). The majority of the WMDWs who planned and coordinated this event over the span of many months included Indonesian and Filipina women in Hong Kong and in the Philippines under the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body (AMCB), as well as women from other nationalities such as Thai, Malaysian, Nepali, and others. The Consulate Hopping Protest achieved two goals: 1) it highlighted the importance of organizing across the

different nationalities of workers; and 2) it "mapped wider geopolitics and networks of activist affiliation" through the involvement of international activists from other grassroots movements worldwide (2009, p. 152). Asia's temporary migrants recognized the need for self-organizing and advocacy due to the lack of global migration governance and the marginalization of poor and unregulated workers who oftentimes lacked legal work or residential status (Piper, Rosewarne, & Withers, 2017).

3.3 WMDWs in the Arab Region

The Arab region is both an emigrant sending region and a host to a large number of labor migrants. Macro-economic factors have led to massive migration from specific Asian countries to the region, and the Arab Gulf states became labor importers due to the abundance of capital and a shortage of labor workforce (Fargues, 2006). Until the 1980s, most labor migrants in the Arab region were men but a shift towards increasing migration of women began onward. Initially, as nursing was considered a low-status profession, some countries in the region recruited female nurses from outside the Arab world, such as the Philippines and India (Moors & de Regt, 2008). Following, women began to out-migrate in large numbers from East and South Asian countries to work as domestic and care workers in high-income Arab countries. The migration of women from Sri Lanka is a prime example. The Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) estimated that, by 2008, there were 1,792,368 million Sri Lankans working abroad, of whom 50% were women and 88% traveled to work as domestic workers in the Middle East (2008).

The rise in transnational labor saw a rise in the feminization of labour migration to the Middle East from a number of countries in Asia and Africa (Moors & de Regt, 2008). This led to an increase in the employment of foreign women as domestic workers in wealthier Gulf states, and later on to low- and middle-income countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen. Women migrant workers in Jordan engage in different sectors of the economy, ranging across domestic work, agriculture, the service industry, and the garment industry (ILO, 2017). Although the ILO has worked closely with Jordanian constituents to enforce policies to protect the rights of migrant and garment workers from exploitation and trafficking, the achievements were limited because they were not integrated into labor law and legal regulations. Most Asian WMDWs who migrate to the Middle East come from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Oftentimes, these women leave husbands and children behind. Ethiopian migrant women who constitute the highest number of WMDWs in Lebanon, on the other hand, are often unmarried and between 18 and 30 years old (Fernandez, 2020). Studies examining the remittances sent back by immigrant women suggest that about four to five family members depend on each woman migrant who in most cases is the main breadwinner in her family (Gamburd, 2010, p. 3). To continue to support their families, WMDWs who travel to work in an Arab country, engage in serial migration whereby after completing one contract, a woman returns home for a period of time before migrating again for another job or to another country (Fernandez, 2020). In these cases, WMDWs move between temporary and multi-country migration patterns, oftentimes between jobs that have limited income-earning options. Recent research suggests that extremely poor women initially migrate to the Middle East through a recruitment agency but later search for jobs in higher-cost destinations such as Malaysia or Hong Kong (Parreñas et al., 2019).

The high number of WMDWs from countries in Asia and Africa to the Middle East prompted sending countries to develop new policies to manage female migration, mainly to increase the remittances these migrants send back but also to reduce the exploitation of their female nationals. The Philippines embassies abroad, for example, organize activities and provide facilities in the receiving countries to actively encourage and control labor migration and to bolster remittances

which constitute a major contribution to the national economy. To further control migration, Filipino WMDWs, donned as 'economic heroes' (Constable, 1997), are required to participate in the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration which entails that they register with private government licensed agencies and participate in pre-departure trainings (Moors & de Regt, 2008, p. 155). They are not allowed to travel to work abroad if the contract is below a set wage level, although these contracts are oftentimes not enforced in the receiving countries. Other countries, on the other hand, have banned WMDWs from traveling to specific Arab countries or have enforced stricter policies. In 2004, Ethiopian WMDWs were no longer allowed to travel to Lebanon due to the high cases of abuse that the women suffered (Fernandez, 2020; Moors & de Regt, 2008).

3.4 The Sponsorship System (*Kafala*)

In most Arab countries, WMDWs are excluded from state labor laws and are recruited and employed through a unique sponsorship system, *Kafala*. The *Kafala* system binds each migrant worker to a specific employer giving the employer full legal oversight of the contractual relationship. This means that a WMDW has to secure an employer in the destination country a priori and to commit to work for that employer throughout the contract period. If the employment relationship ends, at the end of the contract or earlier, the worker will no longer have legal residency or the right to continue to work in the country. The WMDW also cannot change her employer without the permission of the original employer (sponsor) and securing another employer. Although *Kafala* is not a written policy document, it is nonetheless a powerful system based on set of normative practices that are perpetuated by employers, recruitment agencies, and even state institutions (Nasri & Tannous, 2014). Despite it not being a policy, *Kafala* manifests through relationships of unequal power. For example, although *Kafala* does not state that the employer has the right to withhold the worker's passport, this is a very prevalent practice across the region, as is denying the worker the right to leave the employer's house on her day off. These practices are oftentimes interpreted as stipulations of *Kafala*. The nature of the working relationship, where in most cases the WMDW lives in the employer's house, contributes to further control, exploitation, and abuse in the working relationship. The *Kafala* system opens a floodgate of other forms of abuses and lack of social protections such as the lack of medical access, food deprivation, lack of privacy, being cut off from family and friends, and movement restrictions (Amnesty International, 2019).

Under the *Kafala* system, WMDWs are prone to exploitation and forced labor conditions perpetrated by both employers and recruitment agencies (Anti Racism Movement, 2019a). This is evident in the harmful yet legal practices Bangladeshi workers experience during the recruitment process to work in the Arab Gulf states. Private recruitment agents, brokers and social networks intentionally deceive WMDWs, fully aware that they will face exploitative working conditions in destination countries. Recruitment agencies play a pivotal role in trafficking of WMDWs under the *Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act, 2012* of Bangladesh (2012) as well as the United Nations Trafficking Protocol (Azad, 2018). Some scholars claim that the *Kafala* system is comparable to "modern day slavery" where contracts are fictions rather than legally binding agreements (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2006, p. 583).

3.5 WMDWs in Lebanon

There are an estimated 250,000 migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, most of whom come from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and other countries in West and Sub-Saharan Africa (Mansour-Ille & Hendow, 2018). During and following the Lebanese Civil War (1975-

1990), wealthy Lebanese families who used to employ rural Lebanese, Palestinian, or Syrian women as domestic helpers turned to recruiting women from Asian and African countries. The national origin of the women recruited set in place a process of racialization and sexualization of these women added to their social, economic, and legal vulnerability. As such, the first wave of writings on WMDWs in Lebanon has primarily focused on highlighting the women's daily experiences with exploitation and abuse and the pressing need to abolish the *Kafala* system as the main cause (Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2006; Mansour-Ille & Hendow, 2018; Moukarbel, 2009).

Recent writings informed by sociological frameworks on gender and migration have shifted the discourse on WMDWs in Lebanon (and the Arab region in general) to one that brings out more complexity and nuance in how women's agency interacts with structural constraints in the context of an unequal global economy. WMDWs have engaged in collective organizing even though the Labor Law in Lebanon denies non-citizens the right to participate as union representatives. In 2014, six Lebanese workers submitted a request to form a union for domestic workers to the Ministry of Labour. Three months later, over 300 domestic workers from a range of backgrounds gathered for the Union's inaugural congress. Unsurprisingly, this request was denied, although it was in violation of the country's obligations under Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which stipulates that "everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests" (Amnesty International, 2019).

Activist efforts to advance WMDWs' rights to organize through unionizing is ongoing through efforts by local and international NGOs as well as the workers themselves who continue to mobilize to create informal networks and support systems. Moreover, WMDWs engage in community organizing at multiple levels, relying on community-formed networks of friends and relatives for support, protection, and survival. Following the model of coalition-building utilized by domestic workers in the US (Boris & Nadasen, 2008), WMDWs in Lebanon who hail from different nationalities come together on the basis of their common experience as women, migrants, and workers as well as on the basis of their unjust exclusion from labor laws. Some authors have highlighted how WMDWs have come up with creative and powerful forms of meso-level resistance in the restrictive physical spaces of their employers' homes (Kobaissy, 2015; Mansour-Ille & Hendow, 2018). Meso-level resistance is everyday forms of resistance where migrant domestic workers demonstrate agency by "carving out spaces of their own as forms of semi-private and public collective resistance" (Mansour-Ille & Hendow, 2018, p. 7). This can include meeting and collectively organizing in churches, phone centers, other migrant workers' homes or neighborhoods, or even across balconies when employers are out of sight (Pande, 2012). Many freelance workers – often those who have left exploitative work situations – organize in shared apartments, ethnic markets, or churches. Although these acts happen at a smaller scale, they are a critical form of support for domestic migrant workers who may not have access to formal channels of organizing.

The Economic Crisis, COVID-19, and the August 4 Beirut Port Explosion

Crises such as wars, natural disasters, and pandemics can exacerbate underlying vulnerabilities. The multiple crises that have visited Lebanon over the past two years – the economic collapse, COVID-19, and the Beirut port explosion – have had a tremendous negative impact on WMDWs in Lebanon. The unprecedented devaluation of the Lebanese currency and the inflation that ensued meant that WMDWs lost not only their ability to send remittances to family members but in fact many could no longer survive in Lebanon. Like Lebanese workers, WMDWs have been heavily impacted by the collapse of the Lebanese currency as "the multiplicity of exchange rates readily

creates space for abuse both at the level of wage payments and at the point of money transfers" (Salti & Mezher, 2020, p. 25). Even as early as December 2019, the director of National Federation of Employees' and Workers' Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL) stated that migrant workers' salaries lost a 30 to 40 percent of their value due to the exchange rate or the employers' inability to pay (Hamdan, 2019). These losses have multiplied in 2020. Many migrant workers lost their jobs including WMDWs, many of whom became homeless.

Matters were made worse when COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in early March 2020. Workers who were laid off became further impacted by social exclusion after the pandemic. WMDWs, who did not have access to public spaces in Lebanon to begin with, became completely cut off from their communities during COVID-19 lockdowns. In many cases, they experienced more abuse and exploitation as many employers became unable or unwilling to pay wages in full or cover repatriation flights. As a result of the *kafala* system, many WMDWs became abandoned yet continued to be legally tied to their employer. Nepalese WMDWs, as well as those from other nationalities, were trapped in Lebanon, unable to return via repatriation flights (Kilby & Wu, 2020).

WMDWs found themselves, yet again, even more vulnerable after the August 4 Beirut port explosion that left over 200 people dead and 300,000 people homeless, adding more pressure on the need for support and aid (Anti Racism Movement, 2020a). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), eight percent of those who became homeless as a result of the explosion were migrant workers from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, along with 15 dead and at least 150 injured (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020). Moreover, many WMDWs lost identity documents, became homeless, and faced discrimination in receiving food and medical aid (Lonnquist, 2020; UN Women, CARE, UN ESCWA, ABAAD, & UNFPA, 2020). Their medical needs were not covered by any insurance plan; their employers were either absent or unable themselves to cover the wages let alone the medical expenses of the worker. The Anti-Racism Movement's (ARM) Emergency Response reported a sharp increase in WMDWs' demand for food, housing, and other forms of support (Anti Racism Movement, 2020a).

Recent Efforts at Collective Organizing by WMDWs and Allies in Lebanon

Most of the literature in Lebanon and the Arab region in general has focused on WMDWs' experiences with oppression, abuse, and exploitation, as well as the *Kafala* system. Whilst this is relevant and necessary, what is lacking is scholarship that examines how women exercise agency through a gendered and feminist lens. Recent writings have presented a more nuanced view of WMDWs as agents of change who engage in resistance acts, rather than solely as victims (Fernandez, 2020; Pande, 2012). In her study of Ethiopian migrant women's agency in Lebanon, Fernandez engages with feminist scholarship, reminding us to follow Mohanty's (1991) critique and move away from "feminist representations of poor and marginalized 'third-world women' as tradition-bound, needy, and vulnerable 'victims' who lack agency and need 'rescue'" (Fernandez, 2020, p. 13).

The multiple nationalities and the cultural and linguistic differences of the domestic migrant workers in Lebanon make collective organizing difficult (IDWF, 2015). In 2012, ILO partnered with FENASOL, the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), and three NGOs to assist with organizing domestic workers in the form of a trade union (2015). Over the course of seven weeks, they organized weekly meetings where community leaders from the Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Madagascar, and Congo gathered to discuss the significance of organizing in the form of a union. The community leaders were women who

had established relationships with NGOs, embassies, and other domestic workers within different communities, and who oftentimes were members of collectives through which freelance domestic workers linked with employment opportunities. The meetings "created synergies between the community leaders and solidarity around their identity as workers in the same sector rather than around their nationality" (2015). As such, the trade union was formed with over 500 women from a range of national backgrounds. FENASOL, the ILO, and other NGOs including ARM, along with a diverse group of WMDWs, worked together towards the creation of the 2014 trade union movement. Many Q&A sessions with Ethiopian workers and those from different nationalities were carried out as part of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) model, which helped with the creation of the union (Kobaissy, 2015).

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Study Design, Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Research on the rights of WMDWs in the Arab region has steadily increased in the past few years. However, most studies are framed within a victimhood and exploitation discourse failing to present the multitude of experiences of the community members involved. The present study was driven by Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, which allows members of a community that is impacted by social inequalities to participate in the design and implementation of a study and interpretation of its results. PAR is a form of action research driven by a collaborative methodological approach that allows researchers and participants to work together to resolve social problems (Brown & Strega, 2005). Through this methodology, the researcher considers "the varied worldviews and life experiences" of participants of research, particularly the marginalized (Stringer, 2007, p. xv). The philosophical foundations of PAR belong to research traditions that are critical, anti-oppressive, intersectional, feminist, queer, Marxist, indigenous, anti-racist, and anti-ableist, aiming to challenge "how knowledge should be created and assessed… [within a] white, heterosexual, patriarchal framework" (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 12).

PAR is not exclusively research oriented, but is rather embedded in the praxis of challenging and re-constructing power dynamics and notions of knowledge production (Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1992). The methodology can be used as a tool by oppressed groups to organize and build authentic movements. PAR's philosophical foundation is heavily based on Paolo Freire's work and his concept of *conscientization* (Freire, 1972) that emphasizes moving towards critical consciousness based on the equal transfer of knowledge between teacher and learner, participant and researcher. This praxis is the core of PAR to ensure true and participatory anti-oppressive work, and to ensure that the research revolves around themes of interest to the community, rather than solely to the researcher.

PAR must follow "socio-political thought processes" to truly be anti-oppressive (Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1992, p. 8). The methodology is thus suitable to research with women who are often disproportionately impacted by economic downturns and political crises. In their report on the economic impact of the current economic crisis in Lebanon on women, Salti and Mezher highlighted how the present moment may be seen as an opportunity to:

> "(re)build the foundations of a more equal and equitable society [beginning] with deliberate policy and programmatic interventions in the political (leadership and decision-making), economic (structural reforms to reduce inequalities and social investments in vital sectors such as healthcare, education and care economy) and social (recognition of the value women bring not only for themselves but the entire community) realms of the country." (2020, p. 13)

PAR is particularly useful in understanding the experiences of WMDWs in Lebanon who have been experiencing discrimination and lack of legal protection, and who became severely impacted by the triple crises in Lebanon over the past year and a half. Although much of the documented literature expands on the workers' daily abuses in Lebanon, true change can come only when the women impacted by the abuse themselves propose actions and solutions to improve their social conditions and wellbeing. Collective organizing through trade unions, public protests, collective bargaining, as well as other forms of resistance operating at the meso-level are all necessary ways for women to take up space, privately or publicly (Pande, 2012). Researchers need to engage with

WMDWs on an equal footing in any attempt to address the political, economic, and social structures to move towards true emancipatory social change.

In this study, our goal was to provide the space for WMDWs to reclaim the agency in their own stories, to reflexively and intellectually express their individual and collective concerns, and to translate the dialogue into more practical forms of collective organizing and activism. We initially partnered with the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM),[3] a grassroots collective established in 2010 by Lebanese feminist activists working alongside WMDWs. ARM is committed to the struggle against racist discrimination and towards improving the rights of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. The Migrant Community Centers (MCCs) were established as a sister organization to ARM with the intention of offering a dynamic and community-building space. These centers serve as cultural spaces for the women to gather and socialize, and where they can take free educational, social and capacity-building classes. ARM has stated that the MCCs' mission is to allow room for an improved quality of life through classes and a space for a support network, while also offering the resources to "self-advocate to advance their socio-economic rights, and to contribute to a strong and powerful migrant civil society, with a focus on women as leaders of change" (Anti Racism Movement, 2020b). ARM has experience conducting participatory research as they had collaborated with the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) to carry out a feminist PAR study focusing on the needs of members of *Mesewat*, a collective of Ethiopian migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. The feminist PAR methodology was chosen by ARM due to its connections to reflexive and dialogical approaches that challenge the notion that knowledge can only be produced by researchers in inaccessible places such as academia (Anti Racism Movement, 2019b).

4.2 Participant Recruitment

We recruited two groups of WMDWs who live and work in Beirut and its vicinity: 1) 9 co-researchers who underwent training on research methods and PAR and 2) 24 participants who were invited to complete in-depth interviews by the co-researchers. Group 1 (co-researchers) are socially connected WMDWs who have attended numerous events and trainings organized by MCC; they were recruited with support from MCC staff members. These co-researchers were from Ethiopia (2), Bangladesh (1), Sri Lanka (1), Philippines (2), Nepal (1), and Kenya (2). All co-researchers were older than 21 years of age, have been in Lebanon for more than a year, had at least middle-school education, and were proficient in their own language. The Ethiopian, and Sri Lankan co-researchers spoke but did not read or write Arabic whilst the co-researchers from the Philippines, Nepal, and Kenya could speak and write in English. The co-researcher from Bangladesh was tri-lingual – Bangla, English, and Arabic – and had a high school education. All co-researchers had engaged in activities at MCC that contributed to the wellbeing of members of their ethnic/immigrant community. They were asked to commit to twelve days on the project over the course of a four-month period: 1) 4 days of training on basic research skills and PAR; 2) 2 days to complete two in-depth interviews; 3) 2 days of open studio during which a collective process of transcription and data management and analysis will take place; and 4) 4 days for analysis and interpretation of findings. The 4-day training was carried out at MCC premises in Beirut. The lead researcher and research assistant used both English and Arabic during the training.

Following the 4-day training on research methods and PAR training with co-researchers, we advertised an open call to recruit 24 research participants, 4 WMDWs from each one of the six national groups, who were willing to participate in in-depth interviews about social networks and

[3] About Us: https://armlebanon.org/about-us

collective organizing. The recruitment of participants was carried out by the AUB research team to safeguard against group pressure from co-researchers or other women in their community. The study was advertised through a variety of social media venues to ensure reaching WMDWs of different nationalities and backgrounds. The participants did not need to be proficient in English and/or Arabic as the interviews were run in their own respective languages and by one of the co-researchers from their own national community. In-depth interviews were conducted at MCC premises in Beirut and participants received a transportation voucher and a symbolic stipend.

4.3 Study Phases

4.3.1 Phase 1: Training

The training of co-researchers took place at MCC premises during four consecutive Saturdays. Breakfast and lunch were provided, and co-researchers received a transportation voucher and a stipend commensurate with a full day of work. The training content was adapted from the guidelines presented in a manual produced by the IDWF in collaboration with the Research Network for Domestic Worker Rights (RN-DWR). The manual, titled *"We want to be the protagonists of our own story" - A participatory research manual on how domestic workers and researchers can jointly conduct research*, is a guide into the training of different groups of domestic workers in the Netherlands and South Africa to think about social security (2014). It was designed to create an illustrative outline to "encourage other academics, trade unions, and organizations to undertake research projects that position domestic workers as experts in their own experience" (2014, p. 7). Although the manual focuses on the joint process of creating a questionnaire, and our PAR study is qualitative, we found it very useful to utilize in building our methodology. The manual delves into step-by-step instructions for conducting interviews and implementing activities, time limits, and goals for each section which we will follow in our study. Below is a summary of what was covered during each of the four training days:

Day 1: Introductions and Dialogue about Collective Organizing

On day 1 of the training, co-researchers introduced themselves and shared their experiences of migration and work in Lebanon. Following, the co-researchers were briefed about the project as well as the PAR methodology. Dialogue about collective organizing was conducted through a series of interactive activities based on those presented in a manual on group learning developed through the fieldwork from two regional training of trainers workshops carried out in Indonesia and Uganda in 2016 by IDWF and ILO (2017). The manual includes detailed activities, games, handouts, and tools that are extremely useful in exploring what successful organization planning looks like, and how to develop a successful organizing campaign plan. The exercises come with materials and time limits and were adapted to fit the schedule of the first day of training. These exercises build cohesion and friendship between participants who have different nationalities and migration and work experiences.

Day 2: Basic Research Methods, PAR, Data Collection, and Ethics

On day 2, the training achieved the objectives listed below related to the basics of research methods. The aim was to utilize activities that will better prepare the co-researchers for the data collection process and other research steps.
-Understand the different research and data collection methods
-Acknowledge the value of qualitative PAR methods
-Explain techniques and tips on how to facilitate discussion circles and conversational interviews
-Arrive at a common understanding of the used research topic and terminology

-Discuss both technical and substantive aspects of research ethics, such as the meaning and importance of informed consent and respect for diverse views

Moreover, on day 2, co-researchers engaged in role play exercises on obtaining consent, interviewing, probing, and allowing participants to express their views freely. This was carried out following guidelines and tips presented in the training manual by (RN-DWR & IDWF, 2014).

Day 3: Co-Creating the Research Question and Introduction to In-Depth Interviews

Although the research study was driven by the overarching aim of the WiF project evaluation – to examine the different forms and capacities of collective organizing efforts by WMDWs in Lebanon – we strove to be true to the PAR methodology. We explored questions of power and truth alongside co-researchers. The first part of day 3 was dedicated to generating specific research questions with the co-researchers that fell within the larger aim of the WiF evaluation. These more specific questions were based on conversations held with co-researchers about their experiences, interests, personal goals, and perspectives with regards to both their identities as women and domestic workers and their experiences as community organizers in Lebanon. As recommended by the training manual (RN-DWR & IDWF, 2014), this joint brainstorming took place between members of the research team and co-researchers. Once the research questions were formed based on the co-researchers' collective interests, open-ended interview questions were discussed and listed in priority. With support from members of the research team, the co-researchers brainstormed prompts that they will later use to engage participants during interviews:

-WMDWs' sense of belonging in Lebanon
-The role of community in the WMDW's daily lives
-Family relations, motherhood, religious and social gatherings, cooking, shopping
-Forms of collective organizing in which WMDWs have engaged
-Collective wage bargaining and collective action in Lebanon
-Interactions with *kafala* and micro-/meso-level forms of mitigating exploitation
-Relationships with WMDWs from different communities and with Lebanese individuals
-The use of social media in maintaining connections and community organizing
-The use of art forms (i.e., performances, music, song, dance, visual art, photography) in maintaining connections and community organizing
-Relationships with friends, family, and former WMDWs back home or in diaspora communities
-A reliance on technology and internet as a connection to communities in Lebanon and abroad
-Interest or lack of in traditional forms of collective organizing such as joining marches or union meetings
-Changes in the sense of belonging or community organizing in the context of the economic crisis, pandemic, and Beirut port explosion
-Life during and post COVID-19, and repatriation flights

Day 4: Facilitating a Mock Discussion Interview, Data Transcription, Data Management, Basics of Qualitative Data Analysis

On day 4 of the training, co-researchers worked in pairs whereby each facilitated a 20-minute segment of a two-hour mock conversational interview using the guides prepared during day 3. Unlike more structured forms of interviewing and data collection methods, conversational interviews encourage moments of active listening, language, narrative processes, contexts, and moments, that are just as necessary to paint a picture of a participant's individual experience

(McCormack, 2004). They are in line with PAR methodology allowing the researcher to actively practice 'reflexivity' throughout the research process (2005).

The goal of running an exercise in which the co-researchers conducted a mock conversational interview was to facilitate in-depth and rich dialogue while maintaining ethical and best practices. Moreover, this mock experience was an opportunity for co-researchers to practice using their audio recorders and transcribing the data. Although the research team members had intended to introduce co-researchers to basic steps of descriptive data analysis through open coding, it was decided to postpone this part of the training in order not to overwhelm the co-researchers and to give them ample time to absorb the content of the training thus far.

4.3.2 Phase 2: Data Collection & Transcription

Phase 2 marked the implementation process for co-researchers as each conducted 2-4 in-depth interviews at MCC premises in Beirut and transcribed the data by hand in their own language. The AUB research team provided support to the co-researchers throughout. It was hoped that all interviewing and transcription would be completed in March-April 2022. However, the process took longer than originally anticipated due to several reasons. The training was completed right before the two Easter holidays during which time co-researchers were involved in several other community activities. As the co-researchers got used to group activities, they delayed data transcription, which is a lonely activity and is the most tedious phase of a qualitative research study. With constant support and encouragement, the co-researchers completed transcribing most of the 24 in-depth interviews they carried out by June 2022. All the transcripts in a language other than English were translated to English by professional translators.

4.3.3 Phase 3: Data Management and Analysis

Once the data from 24 in-depth interviews was transcribed and translated to English, the AUB research team carried out full open coding on the data. However, PAR demands the participation of individuals from affected communities in all phases of the research process. The literature on involving participants in PAR studies actively in the data analysis phase is scarce. The majority of the PAR literature is highly participatory during in the project's conceptualization, development of themes, and data collection phases; participation then vanishes during the data analysis and interpretation phases. We were not able to identify any guidance in the literature on engaging participants in data analysis and interpretation, which is a critical phase in the PAR continuum. This gap in the PAR literature was echoed in a report of a PAR study with women in prison: "Indeed at one point, one of the inmate researchers asked the appropriate question about exploitation, 'So we just collect the data with you, and then you get to analyze and interpret it?'" (Torre et al., 2001, p. 156). This may be due to the fact that data management and analysis is more difficult compared to other aspects of a PAR study (McCormack, 2004, p. 219).

Considering this methodological challenge, the AUB research team scheduled an additional set of training days designed to reinforce qualitative data analysis concepts – open-coding, categorization of codes and the generation of themes, and interpretation of data. As of the writing of this paper, this process is ongoing and two out of a set of seven training days have been completed. The AUB research team aims to triangulate the codes and themes generated from the analysis they carried out with those generated by the co-researchers. This comparison promises to lead to deep insights on how positionality impacts analysis and interpretation of data.

4.3.4 Phase 4: Dissemination of Findings & Reflections

The final phase of the PAR study marks the dissemination of findings and reflections based on the collective findings that will result from the second set of training days. Co-researchers will share a final product based on the collective analysis they conducted. During the dissemination meetings, the research team members will ask questions about the main themes that transpired through the study with some emphasis on the central research question of the project – the role of community building and collective organizing in protecting WMDWs from exploitation, forced labor, and trafficking. They will also inquire about what the findings hold in terms of future actions to take in solidarity with Lebanese activists and groups, and whether these actions involve advocacy at the policy level. The PAR study will strive to act as "evidence-based" claims, since "the voices of domestic workers themselves become part of organizational claims through the use of research data" (RN-DWR & IDWF, 2014, p. 47). The final sharing can be either a collection of journaling throughout the process, a report, a presentation, or a more creative outlet.

5. STUDY FINDINGS

5.1 Open Coding

This section delineates descriptive findings from the analysis carried out by the AUB research team, considering that the analysis of the data by co-researchers is still ongoing. Under the supervision of the study's lead researcher, open coding of the data was carried out by the main research assistant on the project, Ms. May Adra, and a graduate student who has been involved in the study since the co-researcher training commenced in winter 2022, Ms. Rejoice Obiora. The table below lists the main categories of codes obtained following a rigorous process of open coding 24 interview transcripts in English:

Life before migrating to Lebanon -Childhood -Family back home -Education -Marriage and relationships
Migration experience -Reasons for coming to Lebanon -Traveling to Lebanon -Recruitment agency -Adapting in Lebanon
Living and working in Lebanon -Family & friends in Lebanon -Work & living arrangement -Work responsibilities/tasks -Relationship with employer -Salary -Transportation costs -Legal documentation -Changes over the past two years
Social networks/collective organizing -Activities -Helping others/seeking help -Use of cell phone -Use of social media
Women's agency
Negative experiences in Lebanon -Discrimination -Sexual harassment
Miscellaneous -Religion/religiosity -Health -Motherhood

5.2 Descriptive Analysis

In this section, we present descriptive analysis of two codes examined thus far – 1) Women's negative experiences in Lebanon with a focus on "discrimination" and 2) Social networks and collective organizing with a focus on the subtheme of "helping others/seeking help."

5.2.1 Discrimination

Participants' description of general experiences with discrimination

Because participants were specifically asked during the interview to recount experiencing discrimination in Lebanon, such as in a taxi or supermarket, the information revealed about these experiences are not new or interesting findings. Nonetheless, they are important to summarize. In a nutshell, WMDWs do experience discrimination when taking public transportation in Lebanon (when taxi or bus drivers ask them to pay more, drop off at a different location than what they requested, or drop off a Lebanese or "white person" first). Participants described feeling afraid and unsafe during/following these taxi experiences.

At the supermarket/store, participants described how Lebanese customers receive quicker and better service, and how they are sometimes quoted a higher price than Lebanese customers. In shops, a number of participants recounted experiences that can be labelled as "micro-aggressions," such as when they are told that a garment is too expensive or not suitable for them. Some of the offensive/racist phrases WMDWs recalled hearing in Lebanon are: *aswad* and *asmar* referring to dark skin color; in some cases, women were subjected to vulgar sexual insults.

Some participants reported that they have had positive experiences with employers and never experienced discrimination. Others described racist experiences with employers akin to what has been amply described in published articles and media accounts, such as not being allowed to use the employer's cups, plates, and utensils or sit on their chairs in the living room. Of note, some of the excerpts in the section on discrimination by employers represent abuse and exploitation rather than just discrimination.

Responding to discrimination

Participants recounted different reactions to discriminatory experiences. Those come in three different ways: 1) accepting discrimination/ignoring it and brushing it aside; 2) reminding oneself of one's own value despite the negative feeling experienced following an incident; and 3) standing up to the person discriminating against them.

"Lebanon is not ours. We are strangers … I do not expect good behavior in a taxi"; "Took care not let anything unpleasant come"; "But we don't have to react negatively. You have to have patient to explain"
"They do not regard us as human beings"; "We are human beings too"; "After school she [child daughter] tells me what they insulted her. I advise her to ignore them and tell her that all human beings are equal"
"I shouted at him and went out of the cab. What will I do? You are defenseless here in their country"; "I am not your servant; I am your father's employee"; a WMDW shouted at the person who poured water on her child. "I know I am a foreigner but what I will do to you, you will regret the day you let a foreigner in your compound (pause)"

Race = skin color = class

Participants from Kenya and Ethiopia evoked having dark skin color as central to how they or their children experience discrimination. Skin color was salient in excerpts where African participants spoke about discrimination not only by Lebanese but also by WMDWs from other nationalities.

"My daughter is discriminated at school because of her black skin color" Ethiopia1_Amharic

"The first is in relation to skin color. Being called a black is upsetting for both us and our children. I don't like when people refer to him "a black child" … "your mother is black" … "Asmerani" … Skin color is an issue in Lebanon." Ethiopia3_Amharic

"There is, indeed, discrimination. Even when they pay, they pay more for Filipinos and less for the rest of us. It is cheaper for Bangladeshis and we are better off. Of course, there is difference in skin color. Since we Africans have dark skin color, they are not good for us. The Filipinos are white so there is a bias towards them." Ethiopia4_Amharic

"Yes, like when you go to a shop, people with white skin get served first even when you got there first. In a taxi if, if a white person gets in after you, they will be taken to their destination first before they drop you because you do not have any other choice." Kenya1_Swahili

"Yes, Instances [of discrimination] have been there. I used to live with a Filipino who used to tell us that my skin is like that of an Ethiopian and that Africans do not shower, and they smell. She continued to tell me that if I wanted work here, I must apply creams to lighten my skin so that I find work. Because dark-skinned people cannot find work here." Kenya1_Swahili

In addition to discrimination based on skin color, a couple of participants highlighted negative experiences based on class position as domestic workers. In these cases, participants related how some Lebanese perceive housemaids as dispensable and not worthy of respect despite its value.

"They have it in their head sometimes that every Sri Lankan is a housemaid. But even if we are a housemaid, we should respect our job. A housemaid is doing a valuable service. But there is no such mentality among some Lebanese nationals." Sri Lanka_Sinhala

"Lebanese girls considered us dispensable. They considered those who work as domestic workers to have no rights." Nepal4_Nepali

5.2.2 Helping Others and Seeking Help for Self and Others

When WMDWs first arrive to Lebanon, they don't know where to go or who to ask for help. With time, they build social networks and learn how to access help when they need it:

"20Q: Did you get support from MCC, KAFA or other agency at that time?
20A: At that time I didn't know about MCC. Of course, now, I know MCC. It provides us foods, oil and so on. When I came in Lebanon at the first time, I didn't even know the phone number of the embassy. I didn't have a mobile phone to report my problem, and no one at home would let me touch the phone. I was very troubled at that time because there was a lot of problem. But now thanks to God, I know a lot of things (I have the information). I know number of people. Hence, if I get a problem, I can call someone that can help me. Now I have cell phone. So I can use it. But at that time there was no one who helped me." Ethiopia1_amharic

There are "socio-stars" who are known to be the go-to for help in the WMDWs' community:

"Yeah actually that's my weakness, when i see people who are in need of help. I will really extend my help. Now in my line of work we are doing that. We are giving aid to different migrant workers, we are giving them goods and medical assistance. But even before i worked there, I love to help people in my college days. I normally go to volunteer in an orphanage or in elderly care home." Philippines2_tagalog

Forms of Help

Language

"Language is the most important thing for newcomers to communicate with their employers (family members in general). You primarily help them (immigrants) with language. I also guide them on how to manage their jobs." Ethiopia3_amharic

Information and advice, including advice on how to manage their relationship with the employer

"34A: If she becomes ill, I can advise her on where to go first for treatment. I can direct her to the appropriate treatment (?) facility if she requires it. If she wants to buy something, I'll tell her where she can get it cheaper. This is a support by itself." ethiopia4_amharic

"Q: Okay, is there anything that you have done for those who come from Ethiopia?
A: I give them advice at least. I advise them not to engage in illegal work (not to abandon their legal job). I advise them to be good for their employers, even they are bad for you; they may be changed. There is an employer (Madam) at my neighborhood she is very bad for her employees. I gave advice the new employee whom came from Ethiopia. Now the Madame (employer) is completely changed and become good. I ask my friend that what you do to her, how she is changed? At least, I give my advice. I share my experience with what I'm going through today as a result of leaving my legal job. I advised them to return home rather than remain here illegally." Ethiopia2_amharic

"MDW: Recently I have this Filipino friend who went through in a not so good situation in her work. I help her to speak with her employer
Me: uhum
MDW: I advised her to talk to her employer if they can release her. I found a new employer for her they fix her papers, everything. Now she's okay.
srilanka4_english_rejoice
P: Yes, I told her go fight for your right, "I am working very hard madame I am not sleeping even sometimes 11 o'clock I am working you cannot give one day for me off day?" We should fight to our right. Why we want to be afraid?
I : and you just shared earlier that you spoke to your employer about increasing your salary?
P: yes , eh I told her if you don't give my salary dollar, send me back." Philippines1_tagalog

"Some madame they don't listen because some maid, you know, some migrant domestic workers they are afraid (pause) we should to teach them (strong tone), you know, we have experience because we pass this life, you know, we pass, we … for this face that's why in my society, who is coming, the new ones I am giving training for them khalas you will go ask your right,
I: ok

P: they will say no we don't have holiday I say no you will have holiday, go and speak, no need to be Sunday, if she need Sunday you, you tell your madam you need Monday. This is your right. am I right or wrong ? you have your rights
I: yeah, you have your right, of course. This is the part of the whole point
P: some madame will say oh she is going out she is wearing shorts, she wearing, she have… I don't care, maybe, she will have a boyfriend, this is not the madam's problem. the migrant domestic worker she should to know to take care of herself she can keep her boyfriend, this is not, this is fair, human beings." Srilanka4_english

"P: He should help me not to find myself in trouble in these days, because I find myself, because when you tell me "I came here with the salary of $250 and my boss is paying me a $100, or $150" so immediately I tell you give me the boss number or your agent's number
I: (laughing)
P: and with courage, I am calling them, with
I: OH MY GOD
P: why are you doing this? And if the boss, I tell take that girl back to the office with an immediate effect
I: wow
P: and the girl is taken to the office and someone: who are you, don't ask who I am , you will know later." Kenya4_english

Food and shelter
"MDW: Before with my first employer, there's this one Filipina. We are living in the same building during that time, She's not well fed. The fruits was well counted by her employers and after they eat meals, all food will go straight to the containers to keep. What little food her employers will just give to her. She has no day off, every afternoon you will just see her standing at the balcony of the building. As if she wanted to go out, to be free. What I did was, I will cook Filipino foods since my employer allows me to do so. I'll give her food and some fruits. Then one day I get the chance to talked with her employer, I told them that I have rest day and this is the place I go every Sunday. Until her employer realized something and they trust me so they allowed the Filipina to take her off and about her food she was not deprived anymore. When it comes to other nationalities i do experienced too, even in little things that I can help. The maid was just new, I buy her some clothes and some medicines then if I have some extra clothes I will hand it to her. I will also buy her food, in some little ways i know i could be a help for them. Even a little help." Philippines3_tagalog

Financial & raising money to help a fellow WMDW to cover medical bills
"I: Do you remember a time when you helped a migrant worker, from our country or from another country?
P: Yes, I have used my personal wealth and time and helped a lot of people in numerous ways. If some people find it difficult to return home—
I: Do you provide the necessary help?
P: Yes. If someone arrives here and becomes ill. I have got medicines from my personal wealth. Also, if it is difficult to return home, I have helped them with my money(?).
I: How did you help?

P: If they need an immigration service, I have searched according to the law and helped them to the best of my ability. Sometimes financially. Sometimes by providing food and drink. Always try to help in any possible way.
I: What would you do if you could help?
P: I would like to do anything. I am bound to provide whatever help, within my financial capabilities." Srilanka2_sinhala

"I will use her real name, ~~XXX~~, because I don't know what her real name is in her passport. She was in big trouble, she was working in the company and didn't have any money, so she went to her coworker and said, "Brother, please can you give me 100-150 dollars?" So that person gave her a bad offer, saying if you meet me or do something with me, I will give you then she came crying to me saying ~~XXX~~ why people don't let other people live in a halal way, I am working there for 2-4 months and now I have a little trouble so I asked my co-worker to help me and he gave me this offer, so I told her forget it and I gave her $150. What can I do? I have to send money back home, and who helps the other in a foreign country? But I always helped people with $20-50, which I used to set aside because I helped a lot of people several times. She is poor, her husband died, she has one child, and she has a brother who is in college, so I give her 50$ when she doesn't have money, every month she has to send $150, which is 12000-15000 BDT to her brother. She is struggling a lot, she often doesn't have gas, so she asked me to give her 20,000 l.l, which was 1000 BDT, a few days ago I met her, she was standing beside the road, I had with me 200,000-300,000 L.L and I know I need money when I go out for transportation. She needed money, so she brought some items and I was looking for money to pay for a taxi." Bangladesh3_bangla

"My friend had a Galstone and was on the verge of death. Money was raised to pay for her medical treatment." Ethiopia2_amharic

Helping in times of crisis (rape, COVID-19 & Beirut explosion)
"P: we helped her we bring to this center, Nepal center, after that we sent her to the Nepal We bring her to the Nepal center, they keep her there, we go to the doctor and she say they already raped her you know and we take care of her, she is very young girl, you know, and she is beautiful, and we ask for her, we find one house, we will put her to work, she ran away from her madame house, she ran away from her madame house, when she coming, they see
I : before?
P: yes
I : before she got raped she ran away from her madame?
P: yes yes, when she come to street, she see this man, he take her and he raped her
I : Lebanese man?
P: and he leave her
I : Lebanese man?
P: yes yes, and when we ask from her we will find a house to work for her she says no she want to go to Nepal." Srilanka4_english

"Me: What are the different kinds of activities that you are doing?
MDW: Of course in organizations like the Alliance we do repacks of relief goods and we will distribute it in different places. We are giving migrants, specially when the pandemic hits and the crisis. We extended our help with medicines, we are distributing clothes not only food. Any help that we can give to our fellow migrants." Philippines3_tagalog

"P: they need (pause) , they need to talk, yaane most of them like they are loosing…? so they need advise from you, you have to sit that person down, at least you can try to give advise …, you have to …, it is not that I know but what I see I try to help that person and most give them courage, you know, you have to encourage them this is not end of world, this is not, this is not where we are supposed to be, life will be better, tomorrow will be like this you are going to get more job, you are going to get more salary, more…., that is it." Kenya3_english

Social support to relieve stress

"P: When we meet, we try and come up with ways of building each other but often its hard because we hardly have enough. But we help each other by sharing, it helps one relieve the stress they have mentally." Kenya1_swahili

In addition to receiving help from fellow WMDWs, participants also mentioned receiving food and shelter aid from MCC, Caritas, and other organizations. However, some participants reported that they did not receive help from anyone during COVID-19 or the Beirut explosion

"S: Oh okay, when there was COVID and people couldn't leave their houses, how did you manage to live?
F: I wasn't able to work a bit, I was suffering so much that I couldn't describe it. I was newly married at the time, and my husband was also not working because they had to shut down, so it was bad on all sides. If I worked, they used to pay me 5,000-7,000 L.L instead of 10,000L.L, So we brought things that could be brought with 10,000 L.L, I was struggling a lot, and when I think back about those days, I still feel very bad, I spent those days badly, madam wasn't taking me to work, everything was going in a bad way.
S: Did you receive assistance from anyone?
F: No, no, no. No I did not receive any assistance from anyone." Bangladesh4_bangla

"18A: The person who brought me did not treat me well. Only God helped me. but I have helped many people." Ethiopia1_amharic

Help Strategies

WMDW try to help one another directly before asking for the support of others or referring to the embassy or service organizations.
"If it is an ordinary help we are able to do, then we help her ourselves. If not, we will refer her to the relevant institution. Firstly, we would refer her to the Embassy. And we also refer to such relevant places to get required help." Srilanka1_sinhala

The nature of help depends on the situation and what is needed (money, legal, medical, etc.).
"How do you help people?
Some people have legal problems. We refer them to places where they can get legal advice. Sometimes we direct them to the places where medical facilities are available. Sometimes we direct people who were unable to pay for their rooms and are without food and drink to the organizations where they provide such assistance. There have been many such cases. There are also cases where we voluntarily help with our personal money. When someone is sick, there are many opportunities to volunteer to help out of our own salary." Srilanka1_sinhala

"Did you request the help from someone else, a migrant worker, from a country migrant worker, from a different country, a Lebanese person, an organization like MCC, Kafa, Egna Legna, Siri Lankan Women Society, what do you think is the best person, institution to turn to if a migrant worker needs help ?
P: mostly I get sick people
I: Okay
P: And so far, I would say MSF are the best,
I: okay
P: because any moment I call them, they will pick my call
I: okay
P: knowing what is it? How can we help you? I would say I have this patient, it's like this and this, and they respond with an immediately effect , and if the person is like on contract migrant workers I would contact Kafa and the person will also get help, so I really thank God for them, or if maybe others suggestable they need somewhere maybe they need to socialize, I will direct them to MCC, and at the end everyone is happy, yeah all happy
I: okay, okay thank you." Kenya4_english

Referring a WMDW who needs help to her embassy was evoked by many participants; Bangladesh embassy is not helpful whilst the Sri Lankan ambassador was praised for being strong and supporting WMDWs.
"eh , every Sunday, sometimes my madame, my ambassador, she will check how many Siri Lankan go to Sri Lanka, she will go visit in the airport, she can go she is ambassador , then when she go, she sees this girl they say 5 years she work she will not pay any money for her madame , she will send her to , my ambassador bring back her to Lebanon to the embassy and she called her lawyer and she make court for this madame and she pay each money for her, $5000 she pays for her to go to Sri Lanka." Srilanka4_english

Helping does not have to be big. Helping oftentimes can be whatever the person can give (big or small) or can take the shape of directing someone where to go
"S: Okay, have you ever helped someone from your country or another country?
F: I have never helped with something big, but if someone has a small problem, I try to stay beside them and give them something even if I don't have it. I believe that because I am a girl, I have to help other girls, or even boys, so if I see a helpless person on the street, I try to help by giving them something. If I had a lot, I could give a lot, but I help with what I can." Bangladesh4_bangla

Some WMDWs experience hardships but they do not ask anyone for help because they feel embarrassed. Others are unable to help because of their limited means and they themselves have difficult circumstances and need help.
"J: Yes, There was a girl with me she was going through the same issues I'm facing in Lebanon, she is struggling against poverty in Bangladesh, plus her husband is sick, so she talks to me about what she is going through but there is nothing I can do to help her, I can't help myself how can I help someone else?"Bbangladesh1_bangla
Help is reciprocal and women feeling good about helping other.
"Just as they helped me, I help others with my capacity." Ethiopia1_amharic

"P: … and somebody will say "thank you" and I say thank you God for giving me this chance , so I feel I am happy when I see others being helped, so my number is all over and everybody is calling me, I cannot run away from it, I am trying severally to severally run away from it but I can't.
I: my friend, that's not gonna happen (laughing)
P: because I believe maybe this God has put in these
I: yeah God has just chosen you to help people
P: yeah for sure." Kenya4_english

"Me: Did you liked the experience or not and what are the results on other occasions. Or what are the later results, what it means about what you did what you do. You like the result or not on certain occasions.
MDW: Of course i did like the experience from those activities that i participated. Because first of all you are able to help your fellow migrants and you make them happy. Even if you are of a big help or in small ways. You make them smile in times of crisis and the pandemic and there's no dollars. Even in small things you make them happy." Philippines3_tagalog

Helping Outside One's National Group

Participants help WMDWs outside their national group in the same way they help those from their own country.

"MDW: … And if they don't have money, I also help them if I have extra. Some of my Ethiopian friends and Nigerians if they will to travel to take their vacation. I give them a lot, bunch of chocolates and I also give them dollars to bring back to their country not that much same as for my fellow Filipino friends." Philippines1_tagalog

"ah – ok ya- example if I met Sri Lanka Women because in the group [we] have a Sri Lanka Woman Society if I met Sri Lanka needs help I will call my colleague (?) "MALA" or other from Sri Lanka Woman Society I know that person needs help or we have lot of local "NGO" here like MCC if they needs someone assistance we have "Kafa" we have "Insan" we have a lot of local NGO not only a local NGO even private personalities I mean that they help migrant so if someone needs help of course I ask assistance if I don't have a capacity to help them." Philippines4_english

"N: I have a lot of experience helping not only migrant workers from my country but also migrant women workers from other countries because they also are migrant workers like us. During the pandemic during the lockdown, and in the Beirut explosion, I have helped a lot, if I could by myself and if not by taking help from organizations. For example, I have made a list of names in the pandemic and appealed for relief. I have appealed for the room rent. I also have the experience of treating my friends who were affected by the Beirut blast with the help of the Rosa organization." Nepal1_nepali

In a couple of cases (mainly participants from Bangladesh), there is lack of trust within the community and more trust to receive help from individuals outside the community.

"Other nationalities, in my opinion, are way better than Bengalis. Because if I share something about my trouble or stress to a Bengali, they go and share it with someone else with 5 extra statements, which means that if I tell them this much (hand gesture which means less), they will say a that much (hand gesture which means a lot). So I discovered that if I share something with someone from different nationality, they give it a value, I feel comfortable, and they will not go

and tell anyone else about it, or if I ask them for something, they will give it to me without hesitation, but if I ask it from a Bengali, they won't give me." Bangladesh2_bangla

"Q: Is there anyone who helped you when you come from Ethiopia? Similarly, have you helped anyone who come from Ethiopia?
A: I believe that the person who forced me to leave my legal job is from my own country who works with me who is the maid of my employee's mother. My employee was a doctor and she don't stay at home during the day time. My employee took my friend to her mother. I was new at that time. There are two kids at home: 7 month and 3 years old. The older one was very tough to manage. She annoyed me a lot. The older child asks me to buy something, as I was in outskirts (Halaleye Saida) I had to push the stroller for longer time. As a result I get back pain.
Q: Halaleye Saida?
A: Yes! When I become enraged and insulted, she (the person who works with her) informs my employer's mother, and the employer hears from her mother. I believe that by doing so, she has caused my employer to lose interest in me. I am sure she did that. God forgive me." Ethiopia2_amharic

Receiving help from Lebanese was not salient and only a couple of cases were mentioned in interviews. For example, Bangladesh3_bangla story1 about an older man who used to get her food; he left to America but sent her $200 to buy a ticket to return to her country after the crisis (but she didn't because she had to pay for her child's treatment). The same participant recounted another story about going to a pharmacy to test her blood sugar because she didn't have any diabetes sticks. The pharmacist tested her and her blood sugar was 300. A passerby whom she could not identify gave her 100,000 L.L. and told her to keep the money because she will need it. Below is an excerpt from an interview with another participant from Bangladesh:
"J: Yes, the place where I live on the fifth floor, there was a Bengali sister she used to talk using sign language I couldn't understand her. I was new for about 1 or 2 months so my madam brought me new clothes, she treated me well, gave me food. Here is when everything started to mess up, a new Bengali came to the third floor, they beat her, insulted her, after they killed her, they threw her off the roof. So my madam told me that if you do the same I will kill you the same way that Bengali sister (she was using the sign language). My madam got pregnant so the Bengali always came to my madam with a lunch box, we used to see each other with the excuse of the lunch box, once she came and rang the bell, I opened the door she went to my madam and talked to her so she asked me where is my home district and other questions, I told her "I am not very well my madam locks me inside she keeps all food locked in refrigerator she doesn't give me food." She told me, "If they don't feed you, leave. If you work outside for 3 months, you'll have money to go back home." After that, when I found that I was unable to control the torment, I had no choice but to run away. That way the help." Bangladesh1_bangla

Help around Childcare
"A: There are number of issues, with regard to finance and taking care of your children. Back at home there are number of people who can help you. Here, I have to leave my son at home alone while going to job. Whereas, there (home country) you have at least a family member to look after. Sometimes, I am afraid that my child get electric accident. I keep him awake the whole night and let him sleep day time. Then I go to my work place.
…

A: I am planning to not to send my daughter to school. Last year both of us cannot afford to pay. I was about to stop her schooling last time, but I'd rather not eat than stop her, so I decided to keep her schooling. Because of inflation, school fees continue to rise. I argued that I couldn't afford to pay, but the school manager told me to leave the campus with my daughter. This thing worries me. I'm hoping for a better day, or else I'll return to my home country. Of course, things are also worst there!" Ethiopia2_amharic

"G: What kind of help was this?
P: I once helped a lady with taking care of her child while she went to work. At that time, I did not have work. I used to take care of her child and I would live in her house and she would provide for food." Kenya1_swahili

6. DISCUSSION

The main trajectory described by WMDWs in the study is that, when they first arrive to Lebanon, they are socially disconnected and have very little knowledge of where to go to seek help. With time, however, those who transition from a live-in arrangement to working as freelancers begin to learn about sources of support and build social networks. Some WMDWs accumulate extensive knowledge and networks that they develop a "socio-star" persona where they assume a go-to status for other workers who need information, financial help, or medical assistance. These participants and others spoke extensively about the forms of help they seek, obtain, and share with other WMDWs. As such, help can be small or big, tangible or intangible. A main form of help participants spoke about is that of providing newcomers with information and advice, including advice on how to manage their relationship with the employer and demand their rights.

Although advice is a critical form of support, the social networks that WMDWs build also provide them with tangible resources such as food and shelter, money when they are in need, and a safety net if they experience an illness and incur medical expenses. Some migrant workers provide childcare or babysitting to others, a form of help that is not often mentioned in the literature on WMDWs in Lebanon. That most participants indicated willingness to help others in need, and some even reported that they do so from their own personal wealth, is indicative of the strength of the ties that bind the workers despite limited financial resources. These social networks become highly instrumental during times of crisis. The onset of COVID-19 coincided with an economic crisis in Lebanon that has had a tremendous impact on both citizens and non-citizens alike. With the shortage of US dollars and the rapid devaluation of the Lebanese currency, large numbers of live-in WMDWs were abandoned by their employers. On the other hand, freelance WMDWs found it increasingly difficult to sustain their living on salaries paid in Lebanese. This was a time of heightened solidarity among the workers as revealed in the data. They helped each other through distributing food, clothes, and medicine.

The study also uncovered the strategies through which WMDWs provide help. In general, the nature of the help provided would depend on the situation and migrant women try to help each other directly with whatever means they have. When help is not tenable given the limited capital available in their social network, they seek outside support. Even though some participants presented scathing critiques of their embassies, interestingly, the embassy was almost always evoked as the first go-to place when a WMDW needs support. In addition to the embassy, participants recalled numerous social service and advocacy organizations in Lebanon that they seek support from and refer each other to.

Helping is altruistic and participants who provided support to others in need expressed a sense of moral gratification. The study also showed that, among the select group of participants, helping is an activity that transcends national identity. Almost all participants either received help from or helped someone outside their nationality. Notwithstanding a few reported cases of conflict between migrant workers from different nationalities, the data point to class solidarity that supersedes nationality. On the other hand, receiving help from Lebanese was not salient in the data. When participants spoke of their relationships with Lebanese individuals, these were brought up in the context of the employer-worker relationship, although not all were negative. Although WMDWs reported either receiving help from NGOs or volunteering through their relief activities, they did not frame their relationship with these NGOs as one with Lebanese individuals.

In conclusion, the data from in-depth interviews with participants revealed a tapestry of ways through which WMDWs provide and receive help within the community of women migrant workers. Although the social networks that bind WMDWs within their own communities and across national boundaries carry limited if any financial resources, they are instrumental during times of collective crisis (COVID-19 or the Lebanese economic meltdown) or individual crisis (such as during times of financial need). Participants spoke of different types of and strategies for helping and expressed pride in their ability to support those in need. These findings interrogate the focus on WMDWs as bounded beings whose experiences can only be understood through the employer-worker prism. Instead, the findings expand the discourse on WMDWs in the Arab region to highlight multidimensional relationalities within and across their national group.

We conclude with a final word about the PAR methodology utilized in this study. Given the prohibitive policy context in Lebanon, particularly under the current economic and political circumstances, the PAR study with WMDWs highlighted maintaining social networks is a prerequisite to micro-level organizing and women's agency to ensure the protection of women themselves and other members of their community. The significance of a PAR study is that it equipped the women – both, as co-researchers and participants – with the resources to narrate their experiences in their own words. This has provided them with the drive to strengthen their communities through social networking and to support future collective organizing efforts.

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