

**Contemporary Slavery and Racial Discrimination:
Civil Society Support to Survivors during the Global Pandemic**

**Webinar on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery
2 December 2020, 12:00 – 13:30**

Statement: Ms. Rahaf Dandash (Case Worker, Anti-Racism Movement, Lebanon)

[MODERATOR: As a case worker in a civil society organization assisting victims of domestic servitude, what have you seen are their main needs and access to services? What strategies has your organization, the Anti-Racism Movement, employed to assist survivors to recover from this human rights violation?]

So as Tsigereda clearly explained, the situation in Lebanon is hellish for thousands of domestic workers. There are more than 250,000 migrant workers from Africa and Southeastern Asia.

For years, domestic workers have been excluded from labor law, facing all forms of abuses and racism with no protection from the Ministry of Labor, the police or the judicial system.

Through the work of the Anti-Racism Movement, we actively aim to shift the position of women migrant domestic workers from recipients of services to leaders and agents of social change in Lebanon. So beyond providing mere aids, we worked on sustaining safe spaces for migrant domestic workers through the Migrant Community Centers that have been operating for the past 10 years.

The goal of these centers is to provide a safe space for women workers to come and use it in whatever way that allows them to build their capacity, and to have access to the resources they don't have access to outside because of structural racism. The centers are a hub for community organizing and one example is the one presented by Tsigereda. When Egna Legna started coming together, we offered capacity and community building workshops, mentorship and coaching sessions. We supported them in applying for funding and in developing the proposal, the budget and action plan and offered MCC as a space for their meetings and workshops as needed. We also helped them connect with other feminist organizations, NGOs and networks needed for their activism.

But lack of access to resources for self-organizing is only one of the many obstacles under racism and the sponsorship system. Another major obstacle in Lebanon is the inability of migrant domestic workers to seek justice. For a migrant worker to access justice for whatever form of abuse she has faced, she needs money, lawyers, sheltering, protections, and mental health support. And all domestic workers have no access to any of this on their own. They simply cannot afford this

when they are paid 100\$ a month or not being paid at all, not to mention the institutionalized racism that already delays and can even hinder any attempt for accountability.

ARM, and through our cases team, supports migrant workers, and especially women migrant domestic workers, in cases of labor exploitation, violence, abuse, trafficking, forced labor, detention, medical needs and racial and gendered harassment. We pay attention to the specific vulnerabilities women migrant domestic workers experience due to their perceived gender, race, and class.

What has been clear over the years is that many migrant domestic workers are victims of human trafficking and forced labor. They come here deceived about the nature and the condition of their work. They are targeted by recruitment agencies and brokers in their home countries and are told that they can come work in an office or a restaurant or even continue their studies. They pay high fees for the agencies before they travel and hence become in debt before even arriving to Lebanon. Some of them are 15 and 16 years old but come with fake passports. Moreover, they are not offered any protection from the agencies here in Lebanon. On the contrary, many agents threaten and intimidate workers to continue working at abusive employers; they force them to work for free for several houses; they lock them in the agency office till they match with an employer; and they force them to stay and work at a different employer even when the worker's wish is clearly to travel back home.

At ARM, we received several cases of abuse, violence, and harassment in the recruitment agencies. We are also still receiving hundreds of various cases with a clear increase in cases of unpaid wages as many domestic workers are being forced to work for free with the unwillingness of employers to pay their salaries or tickets with the current economic crisis.

With the UN voluntary trust fund on contemporary forms of slavery, we were able to start a new initiative that builds on our already existing work. Through this project supported by the Fund, we are supporting around 33 women with cases of forced labor and human trafficking that our lawyer is handling till today. Legal representations for these women require the preparations for court hearings; visits and procedures to relevant ministries; filing complaints at the Lebanese General Security, the ministry of labor, or police stations; as well as more serious mediations with employers and recruitment agencies. We also offer these women the psychological support from individual to group therapy sessions, and our caseworkers are following up with them closely and connecting them if not already in contact with existing local communities.

With the corona pandemic and the economic crisis, we had to respond immediately to people having no access to food after losing their jobs. So we shifted our resources to start a solidarity project to distribute food boxes for hundreds of migrant workers. The project is still ongoing but we know we won't be able to do this for a long while. We are also advocating to push embassies and the government of the home countries as well as the Lebanese government to evacuate migrant

workers as soon as possible as thousands want to go back home, and no amount of fundraising will be enough to respond to the current needs. We are coordinating with organizations and activists in the home countries to support women with reintegration. We are fundraising to support women going back home by paying tickets, PCR tests, transportation, penalty fees, medications and any other needs that come along. But us and other groups will be able to support maybe one thousand, two thousands, maybe five thousands workers if a miracle happens and we collect millions of dollars but what about the other 250 thousands workers stuck here?

Thank you.