



THE REPERCUSSIONS OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS IN LEBANON ON ITS FEMALE MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

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Résumé

Dans les années 1980, pendant la guerre civile, le Liban a fait appel à une main-d'œuvre asiatique et africaine pour remplacer les Libanais peu qualifiés qui hésitaient généralement à entreprendre un travail difficile et dégradant à leurs yeux mais également pour répondre à une pénurie due à l'émigration. La majorité de ces travailleurs migrants était essentiellement constituée femmes. À partir d'octobre 2019, le pays a sombré dans une grave crise économique et financière qui a abouti à une grave pénurie en devises étrangères. Cet article étudie l'impact de la crise sur les travailleurs émigrés, à savoir les travailleuses domestiques étrangères, d'octobre 2019 jusqu'à la fermeture de l'aéroport international libanais Rafik El-Hariri, le 18 mars 2020. Notre recherche s'appuie sur une analyse statistique de données officielles ainsi que sur l'analyse d'entretiens menés avec des personnes clés. L'article vise à faire la lumière sur l'importance des travailleuses migrantes, leur rôle dans les ménages libanais et leur vulnérabilité en temps de crise. Il présente également le destin d'une industrie autrefois florissante qui reposait sur le recrutement de travailleurs domestiques pour les ménages locaux.

Mots-clés

Liban – Migration de travail – Migration de remplacement – Travailleuses domestiques migrantes – Crise économique

Abstract

During the civil war in the 1980s, Lebanon immersed as a destination for Asian and African workforce. They emanated to work and replace the low-skilled Lebanese who generally shied away from undertaking labor work that was hard and degrading in their eyes, and to respond to the lack of manpower due to emigration. Most of these migrant laborers were female domestic workers. From October 2019, the country sank into a severe economic and financial crisis that resulted in serious shortage of foreign currencies. This article investigates the impact of the crisis on the emigrant laborers, namely

the female migrant domestic workers, from October 2019 till the closure of the Lebanese Rafik El-Hariri International Airport on 18 March 2020. The research relied on statistical analysis of official public data, as well as content analysis of interviews with key people relevant to the subject. It aims to shed light on the importance of female migrant workers, their roles in the Lebanese households, and their vulnerability during times of crisis. It also showcases the fate of a once thriving industry that relied on the recruitment of domestic workers in local households.

Keywords

Lebanon – Labor migration – Replacement migration – Female migrant domestic workers – Economic crisis.

Introduction

Lebanon, a small country in the western part of Asia overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, have been mostly known worldwide as a sending destination and the homeland of a global diaspora that spreads worldwide. Nevertheless, Lebanon has been known as well as a host country for refugees and asylum seekers (Assyrians, Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and in recent years Syrians). However, following the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon emerged as a receiving destination for labor migrant workers, both males and females.

These migrant labor workers replaced the non-skilled nationals in a phenomenon known as “replacement migration paradigm” (Tabar, 2010). They substituted the Lebanese who either migrated or steered away from work that required hard labor, or jobs that were deemed degrading in the social perception of the nationals. As a result, labor migrants from across different East Asian and African countries traveled to Lebanon to replace the absent or reluctant workers.

In the Lebanese households, female migrant domestic workers (FMDW), are considered key workers for thousands of Lebanese households. They partake a variety of essential duties from domestic conventional labor work to child or elderly care. They are nevertheless among the marginalized populations in Lebanon and their working conditions are governed by the highly criticized sponsorship agreement known as Kafala.

Beginning 2019, a state of economic recession governed the import dependent nation. It was primarily manifested by shortage in foreign currencies. Gross Domestic Product growth curved in negatively during the first and second quarters. By the eve of October 17th, 2019, civic protests erupted across the country. The unrest was followed few months later by the outbreak of the Corona Virus pandemic in Lebanon, thus catalyzing a full-fledged economic and financial crisis in Lebanon. The economic meltdown and financial crisis started to gradually take its toll on all the Lebanese inhabitants and their livelihood.

But how has such an economic crisis, in particular the financial crisis, affected its immigrant population, specifically its vulnerable female migrant domestic workers?

This problematic subsequently raise three research questions:

1. What will the impact of the crisis be on the domestic workers?
2. Will the crisis result in a notable return migration?
3. How will it affect the demand for recruiting female domestic workers?

1. Literature Review

To find answers to these questions, the relevant literature was reviewed, and field research was conducted. Theories related to labor migration, particularly

the rise of a feminized labor migratory pattern was screened. The emergence of a replacement migration pattern in an underdeveloped country such as Lebanon was also highlighted. Given the economic crisis Lebanon is witnessing, it was also important to highlight the economic models and fundamental aspects affecting the exchange rates.

1.1. Labor migration and the emergence of a feminized labor pattern

Arnold (2017) defined a migrant worker as a person who travels from one place to another for the main purpose of finding work. These labor jobs fall across a wide variety of the occupational spectrum, from skilled and highly income jobs to some of the most exploitive non-skilled ones.

Although human history is often characterized by migration and mobility, however migratory studies emerged in the zenith of the process of proletarianization and mass industrialization in the early twentieth century following the Euro-Atlantic mass migration and capitalist development (Arnold, 2017).

Nevertheless, recent advancement in transportation and telecommunication systems, especially, have assisted in diminishing the global and have gravely facilitated not only the movement of people, but that of commodities, ideas, and capitals, in what is nowadays referred to as “Globalization” (Tyner, 2002). These structural changes in the global economy have greatly influenced processes and patterns of transnational labor migration (Sassen, 1990).

In today’s globalized precarious world, migrants are at the core of the contemporary labor processes. These workers tend to be appealing to employers because they are very flexible and are less likely to organize labor unions. They are attractive to employers precisely and simply due to the fact they are migrants (Wills, Kavita, Yara & Herbert, 2010).

According to Tyner (2000) the processes and patterns of transnational labor market was impacted gravely by structural changes in the world economy. He identifies five reinforcing trends. One of which is that labor migration has gradually and increasingly become feminized.

However, in reflection of the prevalent gendered stereotypes of international division of labor migration, this increase in female migrants is observed to be concentrated in certain jobs and occupations, such as domestic work, health care and entertainment services (Cheng, 1996). A perfect example is the Philippines. It is the world’s largest sending country of government – sponsored contract labor migration, where over 55% of all the exported labor migrants are female (Tyner, 2000).

Women have long been active participants in international migration. During the 1960s, it was estimated that girls and women constituted by then nearly

47 percent of all international migrants. By the year 2000, they constituted 49 percent and they are more numerous in developed countries (Zlotnik, 1995).

The feminization of labor work commenced in the mid of seventies of the twentieth century, where beside the rural-urban mobility there was a dramatic increase in the international immigration of Asian women to the Middle Eastern oil rich countries, to America and to Europe, and to the more prosperous Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan. Women migrated for a variety of reasons. At the micro level they often migrate to gain financial security and to improve their socio-economic positions in a poor stratified society system. At the macro level, countries with declining and struggling economic growth, the export of female workers is a source of much needed long-term foreign exchange (Heyzer, 1989).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) (2018) estimates that 164 million people are migrant workers – a rise of 9 percent since 2013. Of those, 41.6 percent are women. This percentage was a decrease from the share of women from 44 percent in 2013 to 42 per cent, in favor of an increase in the male share. This could be influenced by a variety of factors including the gender and nationality discrimination facing women in the receiving countries and the higher prospect of women to migrate for reasons other than employment such as for family reunion. Legislations and policy discriminatory impacts and societal stigmatization, in addition to harassment and violence, leads to women deprivation not only to honest and decent work, but also results in low pay and income (ILO, 2018).

Moreover, there are significant differences in labor patterns between women and men in destination countries. For women, the jobs available are mostly an extension of what is labeled as “women’s care work” in the domestic household such as child-care and sick and elderly care.

Despite being challenging and hard at most, labor migration can also be empowering for women by increasing their self-esteem and economic independence (ILO, 2018).

1.2. Lebanese immigration and the replacement migration paradigm

Lebanon has a long history of migration that falls in parallel with its modern history as a nation. Since its inception and resulting from perennial political instability and lopsided economic development, Lebanon has been mostly known as a sending country (Tabar, 2010). This has resulted in the formation of a diaspora that is recognized worldwide and has been labeled as a “Trade Diaspora” (Cohen, 2008).

Nevertheless, Lebanon has also been a land of exile for many refugees and asylum seekers from several neighboring countries such as Armenia, Palestine,

Iraq and in recent years, the Syrians. However, since the end of the civil war in 1990 that ravished it for 15 years, Lebanon has gradually become a country with a “special migration pattern” (ESCWA, 2006). It experienced a progressive switch, whereby extensive brain drains occurred, and replacement migration resulted in flows of migrants from Asia, Africa, and neighboring countries. In Literature, this phenomenon is referred to as the “replacement migration paradigm”, moving after the war from emigration to a large arrival of immigrants (Tabar, 2010).

The United Nations (2000b) defined the “replacement migration” as “the international migration that would be needed to offset possible population shortages, i.e., declines in the size of population, the declines in the population of working age, as well as to offset the overall ageing of a population”.

The emergence of such a phenomenon is rooted back to several intertwined factors and circumstances. The civil war resulted in a substantial enforced and voluntary displacement of the Lebanese people. Relying on the different migration networks previously established by its diaspora, Tabar (2010) projected that around 40% of the population migrated during this war and Barakat and Chamussy (2012) estimated the number to be in the range of 800,000 people. This migration was characterized by the outflow of low-skilled emigrants (De Bel Air, 2017).

After the end of the war however, Lebanon became a destination for asylum seekers and refugees from the neighboring countries as the result of the Iraq invasion in 2003, and the Arab Spring events that commenced in Tunisia in 2010 (apart from the Palestinian refugees who fled to Lebanon long before 1990), as well as labor migrants from Arab countries (Egypt and Sudan), Eastern Asia and Africa (De Bel-Air, 2017).

These foreign labor emigrants pragmatically replaced the low-skilled immigrants who fled Lebanon during the war and occupied jobs that the residents weren't keen to undertake mostly ones that involved hard manual work (Sauszman, 2009).

In theory labor migration is strictly controlled. Foreign workers must be sponsored by a Lebanese resident, to receive a residency permit. The profession must be allowed for non-Lebanese, and the sponsor must apply for the work permit. However, in practice, this isn't the reality and a lot of the Arab workers (predominantly Syrians), manual workers and domestic workers (mostly females) operate illegally (De Bel-Air, 2017).

1.3. Economic models and fundamental factors affecting the currency exchange rate

A country's level of economic health is relatively determined through its Foreign Exchange rate. This rate is constantly monitored and analyzed as it reflects the country's stability.

Exchange rate is defined as “the ratio at which the principal unit of two currencies may be traded” (Merriam-Webster, 2021). This rate shifts and may gyrate depending on changing market forces of currencies’ supply and demand from a country to another.

There are several models that govern the fundamentals of changing foreign currencies. The earliest is the “Monetary Model”. This model believes that the current fundamental economic variables, which are the money supply inputs and output levels, determines the current exchange rate (Hopper, 1997).

Another model is the “Overshooting Model” developed by Dornbusch (1976). It implies that in the short run, the average price level is supposed to be fixed. This is to reflect the finding that several prices don’t change regularly in the real world.

The “Portfolio Balance Model” is another extension of the monetary model. Here, the exchange rate is determined by the supply of, and demand for foreign and domestic bonds, along with supply of, and demand for domestic and foreign money (Hopper, 1997).

Although models theorize the currency exchange changes, there are several leading factors influencing the exchange rate variations and explaining the reason behind its instability, sometimes leading to currency depreciation. The most dominant factors are the adopted monetary policy, the inflation rates, the interest rates, the country’s balance of payment, the debts incurred by a government, the trade policies and laws, the country’s political stability and government performance, recession, and speculation (Ross, 2021).

2. Lebanon: The Inflow of the Female Migrant Domestic Workers

According to the International Labor Organization Domestic Workers Convention (2011) (No. 189), a domestic worker is “any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship.” “Domestic work” is “work performed in or for a household or households.” It may involve a range of tasks, including cooking, cleaning the house, washing, and ironing the laundry, general housework, looking after children, the elderly, or persons with disabilities, as well as maintaining the garden, guarding the house premises, and driving the family car.

In Lebanon, before the civil war and according to Jreidini (2009), the domestic workers were mainly Lebanese girls and women who would be employed as maids in the household. Domestic workers were also employed from other Arab nationals such as the Syrians (1920s to 1950s), Palestinians often from the refugee camps during the 1950s and later Egyptians during the 1960s.

However, in the 80s, it became more and more shameful for the nationals to undertake such an occupation of serving in domestic households. Furthermore,

employing Arab nationals during times of regional and local political tension held risks deemed unnecessary by the household employers (Pande, 2013).

After the war ended and with the growth of the stigma associated with nationals undertaking domestic labor, and the growing inflow of the Female Migrant Domestic Workers (FMDW) into the oil prosperous neighboring Arab countries, more and more households started to recruit domestic workers through labor recruitment agencies. The fact that these foreign workers were cheaper and worked longer and harder made them favorable among employers for replacing local and Arab nationals (Jureidini, 2011).

According to the ILO (2020), there is roughly more than 250,000 FMDW, legal and illegal combines, that work in private households in Lebanon. They come from a variety of African and Asian countries. This number is high for a country with a population of 4.8 million residents¹, 80% Lebanese and 20% other nationalities (Central Administration of Statistics, 2019). These female workers constitute 77% of the overall labor migrant market in Lebanon, thus dominating it (Ministry of Labor, 2020).

For the past four consecutive years, the major sending countries are Ethiopia, Philippines, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka in descending order.

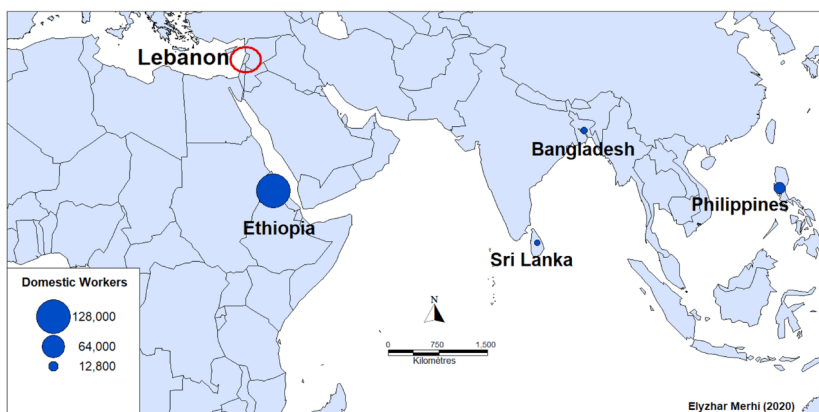


Fig. 1: Map of the four major sending countries of FMDW to Lebanon (Source: Authors)

As labor migration to the region detonated and flourished, an industry of private labor recruiters has emerged. There are currently 569 authorized recruitment agencies in Lebanon and these agencies are regulated by the Decision No. 1/168 issued by the Minister of Labor on 27 November 2015 (Amnesty, 2019). These agencies work towards matching migrant workers with employers and facilitate the migrant workers' movement across borders. Although it's not obligatory to hire the service of an employment agency, most families choose to do so due to the complex immigration procedures and the assurance of having a mediator

in case of any future problem with the labor worker. Moreover, these agencies facilitate the recruitment from countries who have imposed a travel ban of its citizens for domestic work in Lebanon such as the Philippines (since 2007) and Ethiopia (since 2008).

FMDW are driven to come and work in Lebanon by the financial gain. Their salaries are paid to them in US dollars. This money is sent back home via the money transfer companies, such as Western Union or Money Gram. These remittances have a great socio-economic impact on the sending nations and its development. Furthermore, they make a significant and crucial contribution to migrant workers families' well-being and stability (ILO, 2018).

On the other hand, FMDW provide a caregiving function that is critical for families in Lebanon. Employers in Lebanon are keen to recruit FMDW because of the lack of proper comprehensive public social services and welfare systems such as child-care centers and retirement or housing facilities for the elderly. The private sector services are at times way more expensive than recruiting and housing a FMDW. That's why Lebanese households choose to recruit and house migrant workers. Jureidini (2011) stated that almost 1 in 4 Lebanese households has a worker inhouse. "Demographic shifts and changes in gender roles and working patterns in Lebanon have brought about an increasing need for quality, accessible and affordable homecare" (ILO, 2016). The rapid decline in morbidity, fertility rates and mortality have particularly caused a high growth in the working-age population and increase in the aging people (65 years and above). Simultaneously, there is an overall rise in the women labor force participation, resulting in more families with both parents are working.



Photo 01: Three female migrant domestic workers from Ethiopia (Source: Authors)

To sum up, FMDWs play a critical role in supplementing and providing the needed care of many Lebanese households, especially those with young or infant children, or households with the sick, elderly and/or disabled.

2.1. The Kafala sponsorship agreement

In most Arab countries, including Lebanon, migrant workers are excluded from national labor legislation and are heavily dependent upon their employers based on a highly restrictive sponsorship system infamously known as Kafala. Under this

system, a domestic worker's immigration status is tied to an individual sponsor or employer throughout the period of the contract. No matter what the reason is, domestic workers are forbidden to enter the country, transfer employment nor leave the country without obtaining explicit written permission from their sponsor.

Consequently, Pande (2013) emphasizes that due to this Kafala, FMDW are unable to ask for the minimum wage, claim time off, weekly day-off or acquire compensation. Furthermore, they are legally barred from joining the Labor Unions. This system has added more vulnerability to the female household workers and rendered them even more susceptible to force labor, abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. It ties the legal status of the domestic workers solely to their employers, with slight accountability, and makes it very hard for the workers to amend or terminate their contracts. However, the Lebanese Ministry of Labor (MOL) sees this sponsorship agreement as protecting the rights of both the employees who chose to travel for work and the employers who chose to seek an assistance in a stranger and bring them into their homes (Al-Amine, personal communication, July 2020).

The infamous Kafala system has led to several sending countries such as Philippines, Nepal, and Ethiopia to impose travel bans to its citizens to Lebanon. However, this didn't halt the travel of its nationals, especially the Ethiopians and Filipinos, who still endeavored to come to Lebanon and make a living.

Human Rights watch is a member of a working group, submitted in July 2019 a draft plan to the Lebanese Labor Ministry. The plan urges the ministry to dismantle and abolish the Kafala sponsorship agreement and adopt a new standardized and unified contract that respects and protects the rights of migrant domestic workers.

3. Lebanon: The Economic Crisis and the October 17th, 2019, Nationwide Civic Protests

Lebanon has always been a country well known for its free-market economy and laissez-faire tradition. After the civil war ended in 1990, it endeavored to rebuild its torn financial and physical infrastructure. However, instead of focusing on establishing and developing the primary and secondary economy sectors, such as manufacturing, industry, fishing and agriculture, Lebanon instead relied heavily on the tertiary service sector, namely trade, tourism, and banking. Trade is by far the most important sector of the country, accounting for a third of the Gross Domestic Product, as the country relies heavily on imports.

In addition, Lebanon is a well-known tourism destination in the Middle East and Gulf region. It hosts a wide variety of historical and cultural sites, as well as five UNESCO World Heritage sites. It is also known for both its summer and winter resorts, and a vivid night life.

Furthermore, Lebanon established itself as a regional banking hub with 64 banks operating across the country. These banks have done extremely well following the end of the civil war, developing programs which were financed by large loans against very high interest rates. In the past decade and despite several focal incidents locally² and regionally³, they have remained well-capitalized and highly profitable, relying on their solid reputation and the deposits of the vast and prosperous Lebanese diaspora, whose remittances alone amounted to around 14 billion USD in 2019 (The World Bank, 2020). This resilience was partially due to the free-market policy and the adoption of several monetary policies, the most successful was considered the fixed exchange rate at 1507.5 Lebanese pound against one US Dollars (since 1997). This currency peg was done primarily to combat inflation and attract investors amid the reconstruction of the country following the end of the civil war and to give the local banks the trust and confidence to loan the central bank and thereby the government (Zebian T, personal communication, August 2020).

However, during the second half of the year 2019, the country started to witness a shortening of the dollar in the market (New York Times, 2019). This was in part a combination of an economic recession in the import-dependent nation and the increase of the government budget deficit. The government was highly relying on the reserve of its foreign exchange from central bank to maintain its currency peg (Zebian T, personal communication, August 2020).

On September 2nd, 2019, the Lebanese government assembled and declared an economic emergency following the downgrading of the country's credit rating from one of the three major credit rating agencies in the world. Austerity measure and serious reforms were promised by the Prime minister at the time Saad Hariri, to reduce the budget deficit and boost the failing economy (Daily Star, 2019).

As such and following a cabinet meeting on October 17, 2019, the government proposed reforms and announced a series of taxes. In one, it imposed a tariff increase on "WhatsApp" calls.

This evoked and ignited unprecedented protests and nationwide demonstrations which many labeled as a revolution. The protests broke through the entire country, demanding an end to corruption and called upon the departure of the entire ruling class as the country's economy was on the edge of collapse. Eventually and after 13



Photo 02: Protesters during the October 17th, 2019, nationwide civic protest (Source: Authors)

days of mass protest, the prime minister Saad Hariri announced the resignation of the cabinet on 29 October 2019 (Annahar, 2019).

Because of this resignation, and in the light of a brewing economic crisis, it became very hard to exchange Lebanese pounds to US dollars at the official rate through the certified currency exchange offices. In parallel, banks started to impose limitations to US dollars withdrawals and imposed informal capital control. As a result, a parallel black market for selling dollars emerged and started to flourish. By mid-February 2020, inflation rates surged to 10.7% as compared to 3.16 the previous year. The unofficial exchange rate reached 2,260 LBP for one US Dollar in the black market (Daily Star, 2020).

As a result, businesses were either forced to shut down or to reduce its running operations. It was estimated that in the short period between October 2019 and February 2020, one third of all companies let go of 60% of its workforce, and half of the companies surveyed, there was over 40% salary reduction. Furthermore, more than 220,000 Lebanese people lost their jobs (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

4. Research Hypothesis

In the light of the above literature and field study, we can formulate the following three hypotheses.

The first suggests that the economic crises and the dollar shortage will have a negative impact on the FMDW. The increase in inflation rates and unemployment, and more significantly the dollar shortage calamity will add to the financial burdens of the sponsors, forcing many to relinquish the services of their domestic workers.

The second indicates that the crisis will lead to a notable return migration.

The third hypothesis proposes that due to the crisis, the demand for recruiting female migrant workers in households will decline sharply.

5. Research Methodology

To test our hypotheses and answer the research questions, this paper relied on a deductive-systematic methodological approach and undertook the survey strategy to tackle the problematic, answer the research questions and reach reliable results. Surveys allows the collection of both primary and secondary data, and thus allows the crossing of different sources and material to ensure the reliability and relatability of the information to the study in hand.

The study took place over a duration of five months, from the start of the nationwide protests on the eve of October 17, 2019, till March 2020, when the government imposed total lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and closed the airport.

For the sake of this research, primary data was collected through two types of interviews.

Firstly, primary data was collected through two purposive non-random interviews with people who were key to our research. The interviews were of semi-structure nature with questions that allowed further probing. One interview allowed us to comprehend the history and current economic and financial situation of Lebanon, and the economic implications of the crisis on the female domestic labor force. While the second interview was pivotal in understanding the history and current situation of the FMDL recruitment process, working conditions, rights and liabilities and the future of a once very active service industry.

Table 1: Interview guide with key people relevant to the research

	Interviewee	Occupation	Date	Duration	Place	Theme
1	Mr. Tarek Zebian	Director of Research & Communication/ Capital Markets Authority ⁴	20 March 2020	30 minutes	Capital Market Authority Office/ Hamra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic drives behind the October protests - Currency Peg - Dollar shortage problem - Banks' capital control measures - Effect of the financial crisis on the FMDW & employers
2	Mr. Ali Mahdi EL-Amine	Head of the Syndicate of Owners of (FMDW) Recruitment Agencies in Lebanon (SORAL)	13 March 2020	30 minutes	SORAL Office/ Mcharafie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Processes & cost of hiring a FMDW - Salaries of FMDW - Effect of crisis on FMDW working conditions - The current & future of the recruitment agencies businesses - Kafala System

Another set of interviews was conducted with 23 domestic workers outside their respective embassies. The interviews were random purposive, and the questions were short, structured, and guided.

These interviews provided an insight into the lives of the FMDW in Lebanon, and how critical their jobs are for them, and for so many people who depend on them back home. It was vital in highlighting how the local currency's sharp depreciation affected so many households and forced so many female workers to either leave the country or try to relocate to employers who can afford to pay their salaries in foreign currency.

Table 2: Interview guide with female migrant domestic workers

	FMDW	Place	Duration	Questions
Ethiopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zelalem Gatuma • Adugna Deressa • Melshiw Molla Aragaw • Warqinesh Nagash Dabale • Tigist Debisa Sibamo • Aberash Ayano Debem • Mamina Bentiya Gelgelu • Belayinesh Demese • Teresa Waffula • Aberu Aserat Robi • Mulu Dita Dabi • Bri Megos Brhanu • Fatuma Amantu Tola 	Ethiopian Consulate in Beirut/ Boulevard Camile Chamoun-Hadath	5 minutes each	<p>How long have you been working in Lebanon?</p> <p>Do you plan to stay or leave? Why?</p> <p>What does your employer do for a living?</p> <p>How many people depend on you financially back home?</p>
Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lorejoy Espanyol • Anne Macutay Cabuslay • Sheila Ballester • Maritas Arcelone • Rosa Bayau • Conie Bautistan • Gloria Raluatine 	Philippines Embassy in Lebanon / Baabda	5 minutes each	
Sri Lanka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ranasingh Wimawalat • Kurugoduga Malawi 	Embassy of Sri Lanka in Lebanon & Syria/ Baabda	5 minutes each	
Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ramata Ali Jamiu 	Bangladesh Embassy in Lebanon/ Jnah Beirut	5 minutes each	

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Data from the two sets of interviews was content analyzed through examining patterns in communications in a deductible and systematic manner.

Secondary source of information are those reliable data and statistics that relate to the research in hand. This paper relied on a variety of trustworthy sources such as government ministries, International Labor Organizations, governmental statistical centers, local and international non-governmental labor institutions, newspapers, archives, published articles and financial institutions. Furthermore, official reliable statistics were obtained from the Lebanese Ministry of Labor and from the Central Administration of Statistics (CAS). CAS a governmental public administration within the presidency of the council of ministers which collects, organizes, and produces economic and social national statistics.

Two respective approaches were envisaged in this research paper. They are exploration and verification. The exploration consisted of researching the Literature for phenomenon involved in this paper. While the verification approach utilized the explanatory, analytical and synthetic methods in the Literature, field study and surveys to either validate or reject the study hypotheses. To realize these approaches a simple mixed method design was chosen. This research design combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques and analysis procedures.

6. Findings and Results

Thorough analysis of the collected data led to findings crucial for this research.

6.1. A mounting negative impact

The analysis of the statistics obtained from the Lebanese Ministry of Labor⁵, reveals a decline in the total numbers of the work permits, both new and renewals, issued to female migrant domestic workers during the year 2019, in comparison to the year before (Fig. 2).

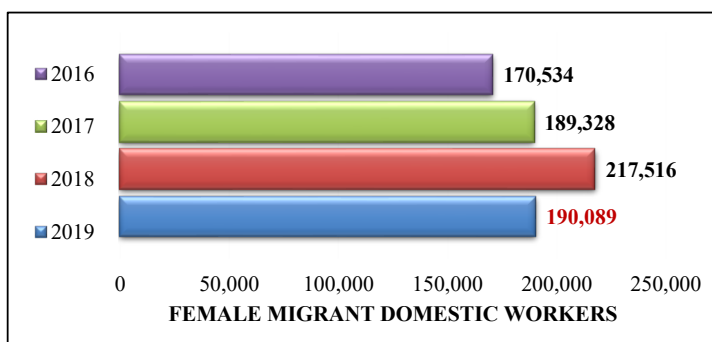


Fig. 2: Total number of FMDW (Source: MOL, 2020)

In depth statistical analysis per the four main sending countries, discloses that Ethiopia (which tops the senders with 67.66% of the total female domestic workers in Lebanon), has had a decline in the number of work-permits in comparison to the year before. So does Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Fig. 3).

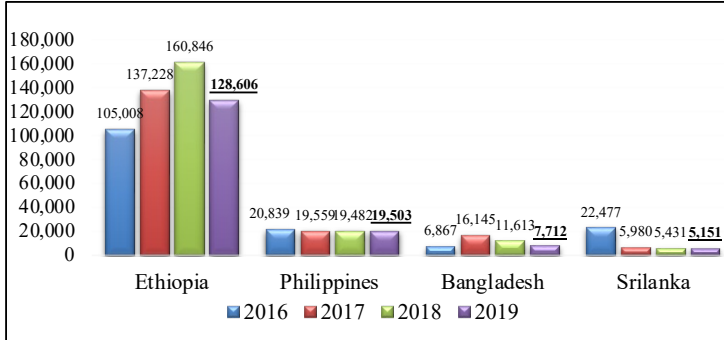


Fig. 3: FMDW work permits from the major sending countries (Source: MOL, 2020)

However, the financial crisis that started to brew early 2019, culminated after the October 17th civic protests and the sudden shortage of foreign currencies in the local market. With embassies declining interviews to comment on the above statistics and offer an insight to the conditions of their working residents, the study turned to key people and experts related to the topic.

Interviews revealed the rise of cases of Lebanese sponsors dropping their domestic workers at the respective embassies. Others were trying to relocate them to other households through FMDW recruitment agencies, as more and more Lebanese households were being impacted by the growing economic crisis. Content analysis of the interviews, in addition to the above statistical analysis indicated that a growing strong negative influence of the crisis on the female migrant domestic workers.

6.2. A notable return migration

Data was obtained from the Central Administration of Statistics agency (CAS) detailing the number of departures per major sending countries from Beirut Rafik Hariri International Airport to Ethiopia, Philippines, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

Statistical analysis compared the departures per target nationality for the first quarter of the years 2017, 2018, 2019 till the closure of airport on 18 March 2020.

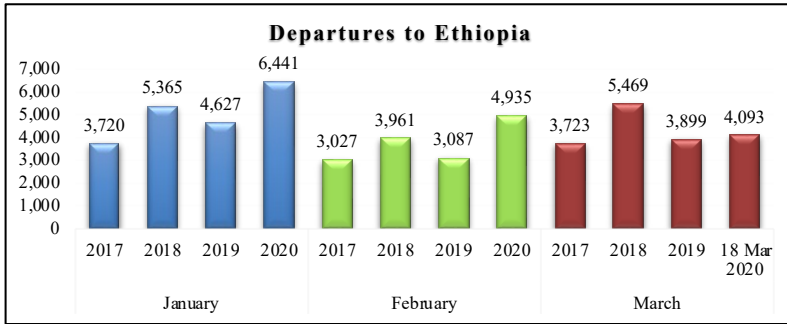


Fig. 4: Departures to Ethiopia for the first quarters of the years 2017, 2018, 2019 & 2020
(Source: CAS, 2020)

Fig. 4 chart reveals a relative increase in departures for the first quarter of the year 2020, in comparison to the previous years, for the Ethiopian nationals.

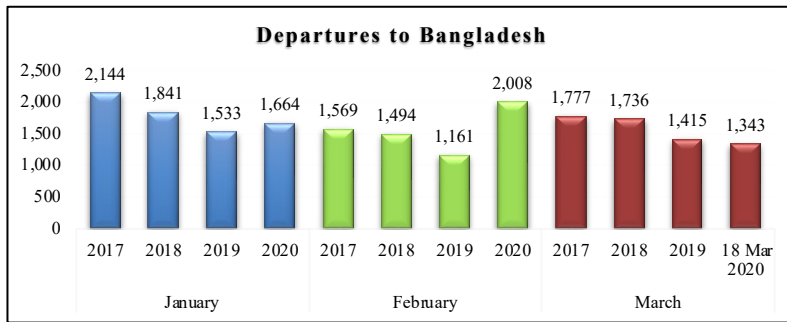


Fig. 5: Departures to Bangladesh for the first quarters of the years 2017, 2018, 2019 & 2020
(Source: CAS, 2020)

Statistical analysis of departures to Bangladesh also shows a relative increase of migrant workers parting back to their home country in the first quarter of the year 2020 (Fig. 5)

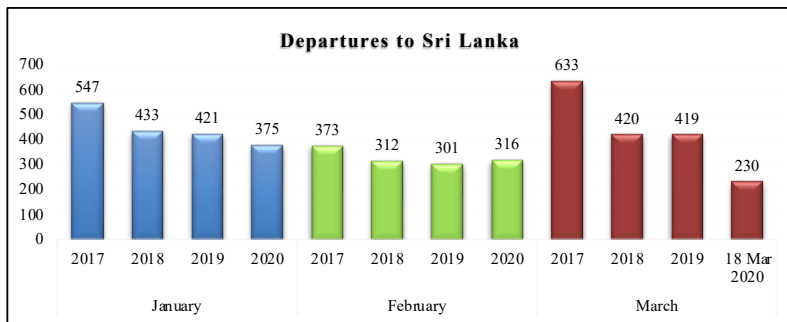


Fig. 6: Departures to Sri Lanka for the first quarters of the years 2017, 2018, 2019 & 2020
(Source: CAS, 2020)

As for Sri Lankan nationals, there is a relative increase in departures during February, however it should be taken into consideration that March departures were documented till the 18th only (Fig. 6).

Statistical Analysis of the above reveals that Ethiopia which accounts for 68% of the total number of female workers in Lebanon (MOL, 2020), along with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, have had a notable return migration in the first quarter of the year 2020, thus confirming the second hypothesis.

6.3. A piercing decline in demand

To answer the final research question, the study resorted to comparing the annual total number of preliminary work permit approvals. These are the legal firsthand paperwork applied by either the sponsors or the recruitment agencies. Once approved by the ministry, the approvals are sent to the workers in their countries. The workers can then use these pre-approvals to travel to Lebanon for work purposes only.

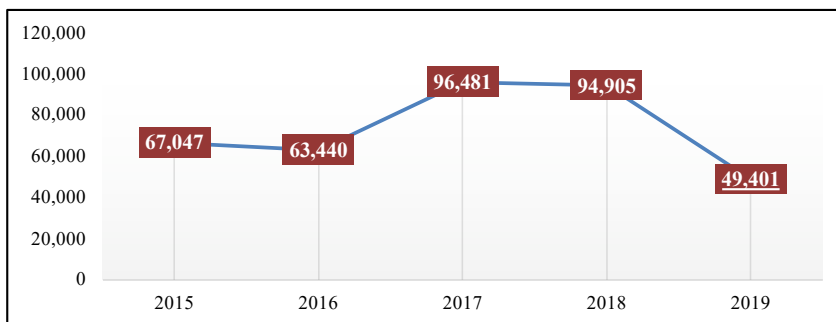


Fig. 7: Preliminary work permits approvals for all nationals (Source: MOL, 2020)

Evidently, Fig. 7 documents a sharp decline in the pre-approvals for recruiting migrant workers in Lebanon, in comparison to the previous 4 years. The migrant labor market is dominated by female domestic workers (MOL, 2020). In the year 2019, they constituted 77% of the migrant labor force (MOL, 2020).

Evidently, there is a sharp decline in the demand to recruit female domestic workers in the Lebanese households, amid the economic crisis and severe currency depreciation, which directly impacted the employers' ability to pay the salaries of their house workers in US Dollars.

7. Challenges and Limitations

In addition to the unrest and security concerns associated with the nationwide protest, Lebanon witnessed the first case of Covid-19 on 21 February 2020. This eventually led to a national lockdown and closure of Beirut Rafik Hariri International Airport less than a month later, on 18 March 2020.

The above safety and health concerns-imposed challenges in obtaining relevant information and data, especially from governmental sources where ministries were closed and the whole country was locked. A lot of interviewees declined to conduct interviews. Embassies of Philippines, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh declined as well to provide any information or undertake meetings.

Furthermore, while approaching the female workers to conduct a short interview with them, at their respective embassies, most of their escorted employers refused to allow the houseworkers to communicate or cooperate with the research. Those employers who permitted the interview, firmly requested to check the questions first and sometimes interfered or interrupted it.

Conclusion

The protests and civil unrest that erupted in the country mid October 2019 unleashed events that started to build up like a snowball. The brewing economic recession suddenly erupted into a full-fledged crisis. It manifested itself in high inflation, currency depreciation, severe foreign currency shortage, rising black markets, unorthodox bank capital controls on cash withdrawals, to name a few.

This calamity affected the Lebanese nationals gravely. But in a country whose thousands of households are dependent on female domestic workers in the absence of state structure, the crisis stretched to affect this vulnerable migrant population as well. Female workers from the main sending countries were arriving in lesser numbers during the year 2019 and much less pre-approvals were issued due to drastic decline in demand. This in turn impacted not only the migrant themselves but also the economy of their sending nations, who's in part relies on remittances.

With deteriorating demand, another vital sector in the service industry was also impacted. The fate of hundreds of specialized recruitment agencies is uncertain.

Furthermore, if the crisis persists for long, it could potentially lead to the elimination of the replacement migration phenomena in Lebanon. Due to the severe inflation and currency depreciation, families who earn their income in the local currency are obliged to relinquish the help of foreign workers. Lebanese will have to rely on their fellow nationals for household assistance and child or elderly care. This in turn can have a positive impact on the Lebanese economy through local employment, better balance of payment and less pressure on the foreign currency.

However, the crisis that led to a notable return migration before closing the airport on 18 March 2019, has witnessed two major events that added to its severity. First the COVID-19 pandemic that led to the airport closure, and the 4th of August 2020, Beirut port explosion leading to hundreds of fatalities, thousands

of casualties, and enormous destruction. As such, this paper needs to be further revised to investigate the combined impact of the economic crisis, pandemic, and explosion on this vulnerable section of the migrant population in Lebanon.

Notes

- ¹ This number excluded people living in non-residential units such as army barracks, refugee camps and settlement.
- ² The assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005, and the Israeli's attack on Lebanon during July 2006.
- ³ The "Arab Spring" events across the Arab World, starting in Tunisia in 2011 and leading to the neighboring Syrian civil war, which resulted in the flooding of over one million Syrian refugees to Lebanon.
- ⁴ Capital Markets Authority is an independent autonomous regulatory body established in 2011, chaired by the governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon.
- ⁵ Ministry of Labor (MOL) is the public institute that governs the Lebanese labor market. They issue and publish publicly the migrant workforce statistics on annual basis.



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