

The secret networks saving Lebanon's migrant maids from abuse

Friday 10 August 2018, by [HALL Richard](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2018).

The country's domestic workers often endure beatings or sexual violence by their employers - which they cannot report for fear of deportation - but help is at hand

When Angela ran away from her employer – a man who had raped her and kept her imprisoned in his home – she had nowhere to go.

She didn't dare contact the police, because she knew that escaped migrant domestic workers in Beirut were often returned to their abusers. She had no money and no passport.

"I just stood there in the street. I had no idea what to do," says the 48-year-old, who was born in the Philippines.

Suddenly remembering that someone had given her the phone number of a church group that could help, she made the call.

"I told them: 'I am out!' and they came right to where I was," she says. "They brought me clothes, soap, shampoo, things like that. They even gave me money."

Stories like Angela's are repeated daily across [Lebanon](#), where domestic workers regularly endure physical and sexual abuse in their place of employment.

Because of the archaic [kafala sponsorship system](#) through which migrant workers are recruited, their legal status in the country is tied to their employer. This means they risk detention and deportation when they leave, forcing them to seek support through an unofficial – but growing – network of helpers.

This underground support web consists of churches, migrant community groups, friendly local people and other domestic workers. Every month they help dozens of women find shelter, work and, if necessary, a way home.

"We have so many coming here," says Edith, a member of the church group that helped Angela.

On her desk in a small office at the church are two pieces of paper with written testimony from two Filipinas who have run away and sought sanctuary. In the next room, the group says a prayer for the women; one has tears streaming down her face.

"We listen to them first. They have been through a lot," she says. "Then we advise them, help them financially, help them get medical treatment and introduce them to a lawyer."

Information about the places that can help is passed by word of mouth between migrant workers. Those who have escaped abusive employers help more recent runaways. Phone numbers and

addresses are shared between them to be used in case of emergency.

On the other side of town to the church, an Ethiopian community group is performing a similar job.

"We are seeing around five women running away every day," says Aida, one of the group's leaders. "And that is just who we are taking in.

"We see all kinds of abuse. Some are escaping sexual abuse, physical abuse, sometimes they have not been paid for three years, five years. No one is feeding them. Some arrive pregnant after being raped by their employer," she adds.

Even when they leave their employer, they are not really free

Zeina Mezher, ILO

Helping these women involves great risk. The organisations that do so operate in secret, fearful that they will be targeted by the authorities if their assistance comes to light. Everyone who speaks to the Guardian asks for only one name to be used.

Migrant workers who have spoken out in the past have [faced deportation](#). In July, a Kenyan woman who was assaulted in broad daylight in an incident caught on video was [deported](#) before her case was resolved.

"The police told us that we cannot interfere," says Edith. "One of our volunteers has been targeted because she was helping domestic workers."

As a result, a culture of silence exists around the abuse of migrant workers. A huge number of cases go unreported because victims fear repercussions.

An estimated [200,000 documented migrant domestic workers](#) live in Lebanon. Activists say there may be just as many living undocumented in the country. Most come from Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Kenya to work as live-in maids.

Rights groups blame the high levels of abuse on the kafala system.

This system meant Angela broke the law the moment she ran away.

"Even when they leave their employer, they are not really free," says Zeina Mezher, from the International Labour Organization in Lebanon.

"They are trapped in a system of irregularity. They cannot move freely because they are scared of being detained and deported. They cannot exit the country because of their status or because their passports have been confiscated. They often lack any financial stability.

"Depending on their luck, they can either find a support structure or they risk another form of exploitation."

The lack of options makes Lebanon's underground support network an essential lifeline. But it can only do so much.

"Sometimes we get messages from people who are still trapped in the homes where they work," says Edith.

“But we can’t help them. We can’t get to them.”

Richard Hall

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