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Title: "Places of sociability among female Malagasy migrant domestic workers in Beirut, Lebanon".

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Abstract

The places of sociability among female migrant domestic workers in Lebanon are highly shaped by the conditions of employment. Under the current system -called *kafala* or "sponsorship"-, their freedom of movement is severely limited due to a variety of factors, such as the permission to circulate allowed –or not- by the employers, their migratory status, and the cultural and social separation between nationals and foreigners in the country.
This paper, based on extensive fieldwork, will examine the ways in which female migrant domestic workers from Madagascar living in Beirut establish relationships with their own nationals and others, all within the limits of a particular system that controls their everyday lives in the country.

Key words: *kafala* system, migrant domestic workers, sociability, Madagascar, Lebanon.

I. Introduction

The feminization of migration is a current worldwide phenomenon that reaches industrialized as well as developing countries. Among the Middle East region, this is witnessed by the massive presence of women working mainly in the domestic sector (Chammartin 2002, Varia 2010).

In Lebanon –a country of 4 million people - there are an estimated 200.000 migrant domestic workers that come from Sri Lanka, Philippines, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Nepal, Madagascar and Bangladesh, among others (Kerbage & Esim 2011).

The existing method of employment of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Lebanon is called the *kafala* or "sponsorship system". Under the current legislation, a MDW can legally enter Lebanon to work only through the invitation of a sponsor (*kafeel*) who provides the migrant worker with a contract of a certain period of time and who will be responsible for her[1] stay in the country until the moment of departure.

The *kafala* system has been in force in many countries of the Middle East and the Gulf area since the 1950's as a way to regulate the entrance of migrant domestic workers in their territory (Migrant Forum Asia 2012). As such, it establishes a legal bound between the MDW and the employer that lasts during the whole time the worker stays in the country, and where the sponsor is required to assume full economic and legal responsibility for the worker during the contract period, which is normally done for a minimum of three years. The *kafala* system stipulates working and living conditions and also the legal aspects involved in the process, determining, for example, the sponsor's obligation to provide food and accommodation while in return the MDW is expected to perform all household domestic chores.

In practice, the *kafala* is an imbalanced organization that entitles the sponsor an almost absolute power and control over the MDWs, since it creates a legal bound between them that render the worker vulnerable and dependent, and where generally the sponsor is not held accountable in case of mistreatment (Jureidini 2011:9). It is not unusual for a migrant domestic worker to suffer from economic, psychological and even sexual abuse without any kind of support from the local authorities or

[1] The vast majority of MDWs employed in Lebanese households are female, but the *kafala* system applies to all migrant domestic workers.

prosecution of the perpetrators (Houry 2010:2). In recent years, there has been an increasing condemnation of the *kafala,* but this did not translate in concrete actions set up by the authorities in order to subvert its consequences.

Many studies have pointed out the appalling conditions migrant domestic workers use to endure while working under this system, which has been compared to modern day slavery (Hamill 2010:5). For example, a migrant housemaid cannot quit her workplace, and she is not allowed to change of employer without first obtaining a written consent from the sponsor, nor can she leave the country without receiving an "exit visa" from the *kafeel* -thus denying her the right of freedom of movement- among other things.

In case the worker quits the household for any reason, the sponsor must report her to the police, and from that moment on she is considered an absconder and is subject of criminal prosecution (Jureidini 2002:5). Usually, runaways do not get any form of justice even in cases where there is an obvious violation of rights. Slow judiciary processes take place and in the meantime they are not allowed to work because of their illegal situation, which in turn renders them even more vulnerable (Bajracharya 2011). Some NGOs and religious organizations take care of MDWs living in irregular situations, providing legal counselling and trying to help them to go back to their country of origin, although many workers end up in detention centres for long periods of time awaiting for their expulsion from Lebanon.

It has been signalled that the *kafala* system mainly fails to provide for the protection of rights and welfare of migrant domestic workers while fostering conditions for exploitation and abuse (Varia 2010:9). Most countries where the *kafala* exists seldom penalize employers if they confiscate passports or working permits, or if they withhold wages indefinitely. There is also a general tolerance of the unregulated action of the

recruitment agencies that usually make profits in detriment of the workers, mostly due to the lack of legal enforcement and actual prosecution of criminals.

The Lebanese kafala system and its impact on migrant domestic workers

The usual procedure to follow in order to hire a migrant domestic worker in Lebanon is to apply at a recruitment agency and to pay the correspondent fees that can vary between USD 1.200 and USD 2.600, depending on the nationality of the person[2]. These fees serve to cover the cost of airfare, the payment for the initial three-month residency visa, and the recruitment agency commission. The employer must also pay for the residency and work permits, as well as the notary fees and the mandatory insurance, which total around USD 600. It is customary that when the sponsor receives the worker at the airport, the officer of General Security hands her passport directly to the sponsor, although this is against the law. In the majority of cases, a migrant domestic worker is seldom in possession of her own passport until the moment she leaves the country.

All the money versed in the process of hiring a maid, creates what many consider a sense of "ownership" from the sponsor towards the worker. Many studies report this phenomenon of treating the employee as personal property or as an investment that has to be recuperated, for example, by the means of confiscating the passport or not paying the salary for long periods of time.

Since the Lebanese Labor Code doesn't consider domestic work within its sphere (in fact, its article 7.1 clearly excludes it), all migrant domestic workers are left out from any kind of labor rights, let alone the right to unionize in order to make specific

[2] For example, fees associated with hiring a domestic worker from the Philippines may be estimated in USD 2.600, while those for hiring someone from Bangladesh or Madagascar are around USD 1.200. (Cfr. Houry 2010:16).

demands. They are not protected either from a minimum wage requirement, which leaves the sponsor the liberty to pay discretionally[3].

The sum of all these facts has resulted in a large list of countries prohibiting their nationals to work as housemaids in Lebanon. Currently Philippines, Madagascar and Ethiopia have imposed bans that try to avoid the arrival of women to work as domestic help, but in reality this measure has not been very effective (Dahdah 2010:272).

There have been some conflicting views from the part of the local government. As recent as in November 2010, the Lebanese delegation at the United Nations Human Rights Council refused to consider any reform or review of the "sponsorship system" categorically (Hamill 2010:20), while in January 2012, the former Lebanese Minister of Labour Charbel Nahas declared unacceptable that people continue to hire foreign labour whose rights they violate, and declared himself against the confinement of domestic workers, arguing for a standard contract of work for foreign domestic workers[4]. Along with this line, the Ministry of Labour edited a booklet destined to MDWs to be used as a guide with important information regarding working conditions, rights and responsibilities in the new country -always within the limits of the established *kafala* system-, that included addresses of Embassies, NGOs and governmental telephone numbers where to call in case of need.

The "Unified Work Contract for Male and Female Domestic Workers" introduced in the year 2009 made a noticeable progress in regards of MDWs rights, since it demands the signature of a contract by both the worker and the employer in front of a notary when the worker arrives into Lebanon. Historically, a paper was signed in Arabic only

[3] The salary paid to a MDW varies between USD 150 and USD 350 a month depending on the nationality of the worker and her personal skills.

[4] http://www.migrant-rights.org/research/lebanese-minister-of-labor-promises-to-abolish-sponsorhip-kafala-system-to-subject-domestic-work-to-labor-laws/

between the employer and the recruitment agency, thus leaving the migrant in absolute ignorance of the terms of her working conditions (Bajracharya 2011).

The new compulsory standard contract establishes, among other things, that housemaids must work only at the place of residence of the sponsor, and that the employer must also guarantee medical care and the provision of a medical insurance, along with a paid leave in case of sickness. It also signals that the MDW is entitled to terminate the contract if the sponsor forces her to work without her consent, in case of no payment of the wages for three consecutive months, and in the event of harassment or sexual abuse, the latter proved by medical examination. In all the cases where a migrant domestic worker has the right to end the contract, the sponsor must provide a return ticket to her country of origin (Kafa 2010:10).

Even though the existence of such contract signed by both parts is a significant advance, lack of control is still a problem, added to the fact that the paper is not necessarily expressed in a language known by the MDW since the contract is, as mentioned above, normally written in Arabic.

One of the main points of the contract that is grossly disrespected has to do with the working hours. The normative stipulates an average of 10 inconsecutive working hours a day at most, with at least 8 continuous hours of rest at night and a weekly rest of 24 continuous hours. It is frequently assessed that overworking is one of the main reasons why migrant domestic workers desert the household. Recent statistics on employers also revealed that 31% locked their employee in the house, and 80% did not allow their employee to leave the house on her day off (Kafa 2012:3).

Limits of movement and sociability among MDWs

The context in which female migrant domestic workers live in Lebanon is almost completely shaped by the *kafala* system, which determines the way the worker will access, or not, to the public sphere. If the employer does not allow it, the housemaid won't leave the home, and since there is no breaking of the law, the worker must accept that decision. It is not uncommon for employers to deny a weekly day off, which can be easily noticeable at any given Sunday when malls, restaurants and supermarkets across Lebanon are full of Lebanese families accompanied by their maids.

Even when employers do agree to give permission to leave one day per week, the majority of migrant domestic workers have a time frame of roughly 6 hours outside the house, since they are expected to prepare breakfast for the family before leaving and be back in time to prepare dinner.

Among those who do not live with their employers –because they have run away-, the illegality of their situation also puts a limit to their movement. It is very risky for those who do not have a valid working permit to wander the streets, since at any given moment the police can intervene and proceed to arrest them. During weekdays, there is random checking inside buses or collective taxis to detect illegal workers. This type of control relaxes during weekends, especially Sundays, where migrant domestic workers use to go out in large numbers.

The most common places visited by housemaids on Sundays are churches and public spaces around them. In Beirut, there are also certain neighbourhoods almost exclusively frequented by MDWs on weekends such as Hamra, Dowra, Badaro and Antelias. These districts concentrate a majority of migrant worker's presence, which in the last decade has contributed to a change in the urban setting due to the establishment of "ethnic" shops that cater their demands (Moors et al. 2009, Dorai

2012). Most foreign workers profits the day off to send money back to their countries, and also to do some shopping for their families, especially clothes and other items.

The type of sociability among housemaids is almost always marked by ethnicity, when clusters of women of the same nationality use to gather at specific places every weekend. This can be viewed more clearly in the practice of religion, where some Christian churches have a service usually frequented by women of the same country.

In the last four years there has been an important phenomenon of outstanding impact among the migrant worker community in Lebanon, which has been the launching of the Union of Migrant Domestic Workers, the first of its kind in the Arab World, backed by the National Federation of Unions of Lebanese Workers[5] and the ILO.

This Union has proved to be a platform from where MDWs demand rights and recognition, and which has attracted a large number of participants of all nationalities who gather frequently to discuss the problems they face in regards to the *kafala* system. Every year, the parade organised to celebrate Worker's Day in the month of May attracts more and more people.

Malagasy migrant domestic workers in Lebanon

In Lebanon, there are around 4.000 women from Madagascar working in the domestic sector. The exact number is unknown since there are no official records, and the imposed ban by the Malagasy government mentioned above makes any kind of accurate estimation very difficult to tackle.

According to the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Madagascar, there are less than 3.000 women from Madagascar living in Lebanon, and the majority of them are

[5] From the french "Fédération Nationale Des Syndicats d'Employés et Ouvriers au Liban" (FENASOL).

registered at the Consulate (personal conversation). In comparison to other nationalities, this is a rather small number (contrasted, for example, to 15.000 women from Sri Lanka, 25.000 from Philippines, or 35.000 from Ethiopia)[6], but their participation at the level of political association is remarkably high. The Union of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon count with a delegate from Madagascar and a great number of Malagasy women are active members.

In the next section, we will illustrate our work by presenting three different places of sociability where women from Madagascar build their social networks and interact among other people within the context and the limits imposed by the *kafala* system.

What we will portray in this paper is based on almost two years of fieldwork among migrant domestic workers in Lebanon who posses legal or illegal status; hence every name has been changed in order to protect their identities and personal information. Also, it is worth noticing that most of the women depicted here can enjoy at least one day off every week or every two weeks. Having access to workers who cannot leave their employer's homes is a very difficult task, which should be the subject of further research.

II. Places of sociability among Malagasy domestic workers

The church near Hamra

[6] Cfr. Frantz 2014: 10.

Every Sunday at Hamra[7] is a lively experience. Hundreds of people invade the streets and give this exceptional neighbourhood another twist. The weekly hassle gives way to a different kind of colourful agitation, full of movement, noises and laughter. It is the day of the week where the lucky ones can enjoy a few hours away from the routine of the household chores. Most of the shops are filled with foreign women looking everywhere, touching every single item and maybe even purchasing something. The streets surrounding the churches are the most populated, and the Western Union's counters are usually collapsed with people. Street vendors offer movies and CD's spoken in Tagalog, Tamil, Malagasy and Ethiopian. Many dress according to their tradition, plenty of colours from head to toe among the ladies from Africa, Rastafarian hats worn by Ethiopians, and beautiful sarees sported by Sri Lankans. There are also those who wander the streets in five-inches heels and very short dresses.

In the space of one block, you can distinguish five different languages as you walk by. Collective taxis honk non-stop, searching for passengers that, for the amount of two dollars, will travel the traditional route between Hamra and Dowra, another big meeting point for migrant domestic workers.

Christian churches are among the most important places of sociability for Malagasy domestic workers, in particular the evangelical and catholic rites that use the French language. Since the Republic of Madagascar is a former French colony, the country holds both Malagasy and French as official languages. The vast majority of these women speak a rather fluent French, although they always resort to the Malagasy language to communicate between them. Across Beirut, there are a few of such churches frequented by a majority of women who take active part in the service.

[7] Hamra is a neighbourhood located in West Beirut, popular among tourists and locals. It counts plenty of shops, restaurants, schools, churches, mosques, and Universities, and has always been a symbol of cosmopolite Lebanon.

In the proximities of Hamra, an evangelical church is about to begin its Sunday service. Onja, 43 years old, is seated by the piano. She practices some tunes, which will be sung during the two-hour meeting: *"Come here Mariela, you know how to play. Teach us some songs in Spanish"*. After a few months, the ice between us has broken, and even though the welcoming was not as cold as I expected, now I am part of the group. The women know who I am and what I do, and once they got assured that I was not Lebanese, nor from the government, they began to trust me. Being not Lebanese has allowed them to freely speak about their "madams", the conventional way to refer to their female employers.

This particular church near Hamra is distinctive to many others because its service is conducted by and for migrant domestic workers. After having worked in Lebanon for almost 20 years, Mimi is proud of her ministry. From Monday to Saturday she cleans a house, but her Sundays are devoted to bring the Gospel to the herd. Every single day, though, she is in touch with every woman of the church. New technology allows those who have a cell phone with Internet access to find encouragement and support through Whatsapp and Facebook. This is even a mean to reach those who cannot leave the household. Back in the day when she arrived, Mimi was not allowed to leave the house either, so she knows first hand what it is to be cut from the outside world. After some years and a lot of effort, she could change of employer and set her conditions. She has a strong character, so she got what she wanted: *"But not everyone is like me, I tell you. They allow to be treated as children; they let their 'madam' to forbid them to go (nodding with her head). This is not right; they have to go out once a week. But when the employer starts treating them as children, telling all the time 'do this, do that', they stop thinking by themselves and start accepting. Listen to me, they are grown-ups, they have children of their own, but they end up thinking like little children. This is not good at all"*.

Mimi celebrates the service both in Malagasy and English, since there are women from other nationalities as well. After the service is over, there is a supper where everyone brings something to eat and drink, and where the ladies sing and play the piano and the guitar together. Seldom there are men at the service, and those who go use to be westerners who support the ministry by preaching occasionally, always invited by Mimi. Most of the women arrive around noon –some of them from another church where they go in the morning- and leave by 6 pm.

One of the favourite activities of the ladies is to take pictures with their phones. Since this is the day where everyone can wear whatever they want, most come up dressed with their best attires. Those pictures will later adorn their Facebook pages. One of the traits to work under the *kafala* system is that the average period a MDW is away from their families is of at least three years. Even those who are legally working can spend up to four or five years without returning to their countries. The problem is deeper for those with illegal status, since they literally ignore when –and if- they will ever return to Madagascar.

The majority of women portrayed in this research are mothers, who have left their children at the care of their relatives and who find in social media the way to stay in touch with them. It is very interesting to observe the use of such virtual networks and to contrast what is shown through Facebook with their everyday reality. Just as have been said about it, sometimes "the lives people create online may not be what they seem to be"[8].

Every Sunday at church, Mimi spends a good amount of time talking to the Malagasy ladies, providing counsel and even intervening to solve problems of people she hears about, mostly regarding working conditions. She has gained a lot of experience in

[8] Cfr. http://www.rightthisminute.com/video/short-film-gives-dark-portrayal-how-online-personas-can-distort-reality

helping domestic workers, from issues of communication between “madam” and maid, to visiting the jails where illegal migrants are held awaiting judiciary process. She is known throughout the community as someone who can help, and the church functions both as a place of worship and as a network of mutual support.

The church has existed for the last five years, with a steady membership of around thirty women. Here, just as in another church nearby also frequented by Malagasy, there are quite a few women related by kinship. In several cases, once a woman comes to Lebanon to work, she tries to persuade a sister or a cousin to come as well. This forms a special bond among them, which somehow strengthens the source of emotional support.

For those who are alone, the church is the place to find the so needed sisterhood, and the online network is a constant provision of consolation in adversity. Every day, very early in the morning, the women from the church send their prayers through the telephone, and the reaffirmations arrive throughout the day and especially at night.

The little corner at Dowra

Even though a vast number of Malagasy women use the space of the church to develop places of sociability, there are other very popular locations along the city where relationships are built. One of them is found in the neighbourhood of Dowra, located at the north of Beirut. This municipality, together with Bourj Hammoud and Nabaa, counts more than 150000 inhabitants, mostly of Christian Armenian origin. It has always been a working class neighbourhood, which in the last fifteen years has been receiving a large number or “newly emigrated people” who are changing the urban setting of the place (Hily 2011: 4). Hundreds of migrant domestic workers with illegal migratory status have moved to these neighbourhoods to live, renting small apartments usually shared with other migrants, under questionable sanitary conditions.

On weekends, Dowra is visited by plenty of migrant domestic workers who take over the streets using them as a space of social gathering, also clearly divided by ethnicity. Dowra has a few churches, but the people that go to the neighbourhood arrive mainly to stay outside on the streets.

Despite the presence of the police, perhaps in a more visible way than at other places, there is almost no ID control. The circulation is constant throughout the day, and there is –compared to Hamra for example- a more pronounced presence of male population, particularly Syrians and Egyptians.

In Dowra it is more frequent for men to try to talk to women, which arouses different reactions. There are migrant women who plainly reject any kind of interaction, but there are also those who engage in conversation. One of the main reasons why Lebanese employers forbid their maids to go outside the house is based on the fear that they might establish a sentimental relationship with foreign men. Since the domestic worker is part of the household, employers are against the idea that these women could go outside. Leila, a thirty-something Lebanese employer was explicit about this: *"they maybe bring home some disease, you know. You never know where she goes, or what can she talk about and with whom. I prefer that she stays with us, and we take her outside when we go to a restaurant. That way she also helps me with the kids, you know"*[9].

The places of sociability in Dowra take place, as we mentioned above, mainly on the streets. In the absence of green spaces –almost everywhere throughout Beirut- people use the available space on the sidewalks to improvise seated areas. When a group of Malagasy women gather at some corner, they sit together and chat for long periods of

[9] Cfr. Smith, Monica (2010) *Erasure of Sexuality and Desire: State Morality and Sri Lankan Migrants in Beirut, Lebanon*. The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, vol. 11: 3-4, pp.379-393.

time. Some may get up and go, others would come and occupy the place, and the rotation will continue for a while. There are also a few "department stores" where migrant domestic workers find good bargains in clothing and accessories, and where they can somehow escape from the heat during the many months of hot weather, although the lack of air-conditioning makes that task difficult.

Sunday after Sunday, many Malagasy women arrive to Dowra after the church service held somewhere else in the city. The ones that work as live-in maids usually eat something they bring from the house, or go to visit other nationals who rent an apartment nearby. They normally gather in groups of five or seven, and when they meet at somebody's house they like to spend the day watching DVDs with Malagasy music and dance. They also dedicate a large amount of time to talk about their 'madams' and even mocking them. They also replicate the habit of taking plenty of pictures that will later be posted online, and to admire each other's fashion styles. Many migrant domestic workers must wear some kind of uniform in their jobs, so when Sunday arrives they dress up with the best clothing and make up they can have (Pande 2012: 394).

The circulation between Hamra and Dowra on weekends is rather common, and many Malagassy women use to cover both neighbourhoods every Sunday. They use to arrive to the churches at Hamra first, and from there they travel to Dowra, where they spend the rest of the day until returning home. Usually, they keep a certain circle of friends with whom they socialize almost exclusively every week, even though they know plenty about women from other groups.

The Union makes us strong

Since the year 2012, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has been working together with Fenasol (the Lebanese Union of Workers) in order to establish the first

Union of Migrant Domestic Workers of Lebanon, which saw the light in the month of January 2015. It was a great event that attracted a lot of media attention, mostly because of the novelty of the experience but also because of the massive presence of participants. Even if the Lebanese government is firmly opposed to such Union, there has been no proscription of the movement, or any kind of legal retaliation against their leaders.

During the months that followed the first meetings that established the plan to form the Union, the involvement of migrant domestic workers grew exponentially. From a few women participating at first, nowadays the affiliation to the syndicate is well over 600 active members. Many take part in the activities but refuse to formally join the Union by fears of retaliation given their illegal migratory status.

The Union provides an outstanding platform where migrant domestic workers find support regarding their employment conditions, and where they can see that the problems they face and share are directly rooted in the *kafala* system: *"My sister, you are invited to join the Union so you can defend your rights (...) We are all sisters in misery. We aim to have a better life and dignity without injustice"* (extract from the flyer of the Fenasol).

The Malagasy community is well represented at the Union, since it counts with around 50 active members to date. Salama, 45 years-old, is the delegate of the group, and she dedicates her Sundays to fight for the rights of her sisters. She knows exactly what the fight is for: she has been in Lebanon for 17 years, but during the first ten years she was not allowed to leave the house. Her employer saw no reason why she should go out, so Salama obediently stayed inside. When she reached the eleventh year of work, she firmly demanded to have one day off, so at first she could only leave once a month, which gradually turned into every Sunday away from the house for a few hours. Salama is a very calm but determined person. She knows that she has to fight

every inch of her freedom. At the launching of the Union, she spoke on the microphone as the delegate of the Malagasy community, urging others to join and to claim their rights.

The Union is located at a low-income class neighbourhood of Beirut, in a semi-derelict building that nonetheless has proved to be a powerful podium for plenty of migrant domestic workers determined to change the game. It has created a sense consciousness among them that inspired many to dream with a different future, one in which the conditions of work are less and less similar to slavery and more into the lines of decent human employment.

Most of the Malagasy women participating at the Union have a very clear idea of what they want to achieve, and have used whatever was in their power to spread the message to other housemaids. Tsara, for example, asked the permission of the Reverend at her church to speak to the congregation about the upcoming launching of the Union: *"it is not a party. We are not going there to take pictures. We have to be professionals, punctual and organised. We are announcing the creation of the Union, so we have to form a common front. We have to have a united message, that way everybody will speak the same and nobody will get confused"*.

At the beginning, Tsara was a rather shy participant, who with time gained more and more confidence. In the end, she turned out to be a great leader of the Union, firmly communicating her ideas and encouraging other nationals to join. Hers is a story of overcoming difficulties, although she faces the hardest of all: Tsara has an illegal migratory status, so she belongs to the group of those who live suspended in an irresolute limbo where nothing seems certain except the possibility to end in prison if the police finds her. The *kafala* system determines that any migrant domestic worker who lacks a legal working permit must go to prison while their migratory status gets corrected, and it is not until then than the person can leave the country.

One of the main reasons that the Union is fighting for is the abolition of the *kafala* system and the inclusion of domestic work within the Code of Labour. Many migrant domestic workers have never heard about the system they were in, and now they are beginning to believe that change is at the reach of their hands. To lots of Malagasy women, the involvement and political participation at the Union has provided a new perspective about the agency they have, and the propagation of this idea of empowerment is very strong and exciting. Tsara still works at the same house after 17 years, sleeping in a tiny room with no external window. She knows that she may not see the outcome of her fight, but she still dedicates her scarce free time to change the future for the next generation of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon.

Conclusion

The present paper was based on extensive fieldwork among women from Madagascar working as domestic help in Lebanese households. We have analysed the ways these women develop personal relationships between them and with others while adopting distinctive places of sociability allowed by the context in which they live in, that is, under the restrictive background of the *kafala* system, which severely limit their freedom of movement.

Migrant domestic workers use social gatherings everywhere they can, mainly to share common experiences and to provide each other with advise and support. Malagasy women are no exception to this, as they tend to establish a wide network of relationships within their community. Many of them, when aware of some national in distress, try to seek for help to the extent of their possibilities. In the cases we have seen, places like churches, certain neighbourhoods and political assemblies function as

prominent spaces where foreign housemaids build sociability and establish connections.

To many migrant domestic workers, these places of sociability have made an absolute difference in their lives, providing them with a net of support that somehow help to overcome the handicaps they face as the weakest links in a particular employment system that puts them in a very vulnerable position.

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