



# TRAUMATIZED FOR LIFE

BREAKING THE SILENCE ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORK

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## CONTENT WARNING

This graphic novel explores sensitive and distressing themes of sexual violence. It contains explicit descriptions and imagery that may be deeply disturbing and trigger emotional distress. Due to the nature of the content, this graphic novel is intended for mature audiences aged 18 and above.

Please exercise self-care and discretion when deciding whether to proceed.

## DISCLAIMER

This graphic novel is based on the true stories of real women migrant domestic workers who have experienced sexual violence in Lebanon. Their names and identifying details have been changed to protect their privacy and safety. They have given their consent to have their stories shared in this format, with the hope of raising awareness and inspiring action.

# STORY 1

The first time I was assaulted in Lebanon was four years ago. I was working under a contract in Antelias whilst living with my employers. I was overworked with no breaks and I was never paid my wage. I had no access to a phone. Sometimes, they would verbally insult me.

One day, my employer and legal sponsor harassed me while I was working in the kitchen. When he tried to rape me, I hit him and escaped. I did not return to the house. I sought shelter and comfort with my Ethiopian friends. They took me in and escorted me to the Ethiopian consulate thrice, but it was closed.

The second incident happened after I got off work, a little over a year ago. It was late and I was in a hurry. I took a taxi and told him where I wanted to go and got into his car. He drove me somewhere remote, in the middle of a forest. That's the last thing I remember. I woke up tied to a bed with rope. This man kept raping me for a week before he disposed of me on the side of a road.

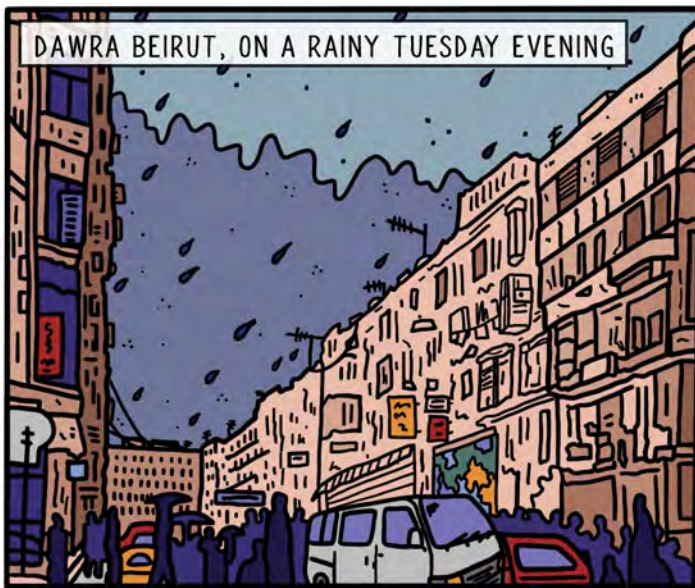
I didn't have the strength to report the first incident. I didn't think anyone would believe me. After I was raped, I mustered the courage to confide in the woman who brought me to Lebanon.

I received treatment at the hospital, but my health kept worsening and I still suffer from infections in my reproductive organs. I also found out I was pregnant. My friend wanted me to have an abortion, but I could not go through with it because of health complications. I gave birth through an operation that worsened my back pain. I also have a very bad headache. It gets bad enough that my head sometimes begins to feel numb and empty, so I hit it against the wall.

After I was raped, I have attempted to kill myself multiple times. I barely slept. I was depressed. I isolated myself; I did not want to be with people. I also had a low appetite. I spoke with a psychological counselor for some time.

One time, I ran into him, and my trauma resurfaced and intensified. Since then, he has been stalking me. I have had to change my residence five or six times. I can't get out of my house because I am scared. I only go out to go to the hospital.

I have been advised to press charges against him, but I do not have legal papers. I am more worried that if I press charges against him, I will be put in prison and deported.







ANOTHER PROSTITUTE...

BETTER TAKE HER TO A HOSPITAL, SHE'S CAUSING A SCENE.



WE'RE SORRY, SIR.

WE CANNOT TREAT THIS GIRL WITHOUT HER LEGAL DOCUMENTS.



NO NEED TO REPORT THIS INCIDENT. IT'LL BE TOO MUCH PAPERWORK.



DO I DRIVE HER BACK?



JUST MAKE SURE SHE LEAVES THE HOSPITAL.



LOOKS LIKE SHE ESCAPED FROM A PSYCH WARD.

HOW MUCH FOR ONE NIGHT?



SHE SEEMS DISEASED. BETTER NOT RISK IT.



HAHAHAHA

HOW MUCH??

## STORY 2

I was dealing with family problems at the time. I was an extremely stressed out child who ended up leaving elementary school and I never went back. My friend was working in Lebanon at the time, and convinced me to join her there. She figured that since I was no longer in school, it was best for me to seek work in Lebanon and help out with expenses. I thought coming to work in Lebanon would help better my life, but I was wrong. I am currently suffering financially. I live with a group of fellow domestic workers as I cannot afford rent. I worked from place to place for several families. Some of these families would make me work at their house for two months and then let me go without paying me, saying things like they cannot afford to pay me because of the crisis. They used the fact that I am undocumented to deny me payment. I am in my twenties and undocumented. My employer has also reported me as a thief to the police. So, even if I wanted to go to the embassy and ask to be repatriated, I cannot do that. I have to hire a lawyer and deal with the lawsuit first.

I've been in Lebanon for four years now. My contract job was meant to last for two years, but I left after a year and six months.

I worked for a family of two, a divorced father with his son. On my first day of work, my employer, the father, made some improper moves toward me. He started touching me inappropriately. I told my sister, who worked for his friend at the time, about his actions. She told me that was his "normal" and that he was probably just being silly and joking.

However, the harassment continued to happen daily. Whenever I came in contact with him, he touched, grabbed, or tried to sleep with me. In addition, whenever I refused him, he would beat me violently and throw things at me. He would throw ashtrays, plates, etc. In addition, he constantly cursed me. He would come home drunk late at night and start yelling at me: "You whore, you animal, come suck my dick and take your money". I used to sleep in his son's bedroom because I was mainly hired to care for him. His son and I would lock ourselves for hours in the room when his father brought women into the house. His son would sometimes witness his father's abuse and mistreatment of me, scaring him and leading him to hide behind me while crying. The harassment and abuse did not end there. My employer also raped me. He raped me whenever he wanted to. He even raped me once in front of his own son. He would wear his condom, rape me, and leave as if it was nothing. My body became constantly bruised from all the rape and abuse. I could not take it anymore. It appeared as if death was better than the life I was living. I decided to escape.

I could not escape during the day and leave the son alone at the house, so I planned to escape at night. After leaving, what happened kept haunting me. I would abruptly wake up from my sleep startled and frightened. For a long time, I wanted to die. I did not want this life anymore. I went to see a therapist with the help of my sister and I am currently feeling better. My physical health also suffered. I had an ear injury from all the beating. It's now healed. I currently work as a freelancer and live with a group of domestic workers.







IT HAS GIVEN ME A LOT OF STRESS AND ANXIETY. SOMETIMES, WHEN I AM ALONE, I SCREAM.

I NEEDED TO ISOLATE MYSELF AS MY MENTAL HEALTH TOOK A HORRIBLE TURN. TO THIS DAY, I PREFER TO BE ALONE. I DO NOT WANT TO ENGAGE WITH OTHERS.



I STARTED GETTING BETTER AFTER I BEGAN HAVING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS.

I FOUND AN APARTMENT AND I WAS WORKING CONTRACT JOBS IN BEIRUT.



I JUST GO TO WORK CONTRACT JOBS AND COME BACK HOME.

I HAVE TROUBLE SLEEPING TILL THIS DAY.

I HAVE TO TAKE SLEEPING PILLS.

## STORY 3

It happened a few years ago. It was around 9 at night in Dora when I got into the car. I thought it was a taxi. The driver was talking to me, but I had my earphones on. I told him where I wanted to go. He started driving in a different direction and refused to stop. He then threatened me with a knife. I gave him my purse. I tried to fight him and escape. At one point, I had one foot outside of the car door. I was also screaming. People were around and I thought they would help, but I don't think they saw me.

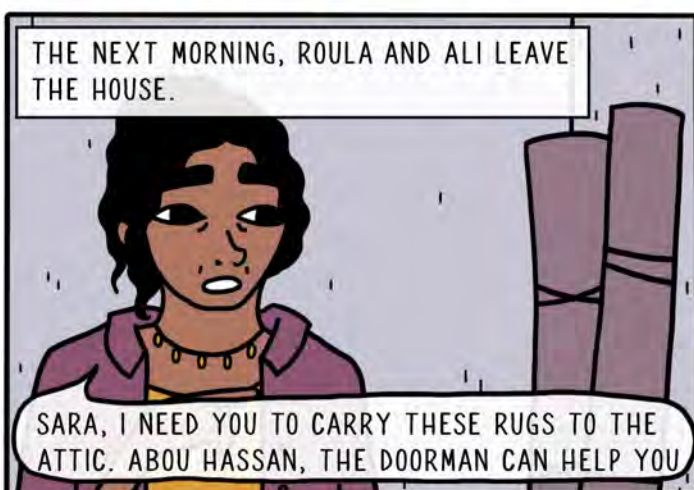
He hit me. After that, I lost consciousness. The last thing I remember was being hit. When I regained my consciousness, I found myself in a forest. It was past midnight when I woke up. I was completely naked. A Lebanese man told me what time it was. I spoke to him in English. I could not understand what he was saying when the driver was talking to me. He hit me really hard on the head and that knocked me out. He also robbed me. He took everything I had on me, including jewelry, my phone, and money. Strangers helped me get home.

I did not possess any legal documents at the time. The man who assaulted me was captured on camera. I told my manager at work what happened to me. I was not the same person after I was assaulted. I could not do my job properly. My manager was the one who sought after a street camera recording. Although we had the evidence to report him to law enforcement, I could not take the risk because there was the possibility of being deported or jailed.

I went to the hospital to make sure that I was not pregnant and to take STI and STD tests. Thankfully, I did not get pregnant or get an infection. For about three years, I was extremely depressed. I was not the same person. I still experience irregular menstrual cycles and I take medicine to help with that.

To this day, I don't get into taxis alone. I also avoid getting into taxis with younger men. I still live in fear.





SARA IS THEN LEFT ALONE WITH ABOU HASSAN.





OH NO... LET ME CALL HER.

HI MADAM ROULA,  
AFAF THE NEIGHBOUR HERE



I MADE SURE YOUR APARTMENT  
IS LOCKED AND I'LL KEEP HER  
HERE UNTIL YOU COME BACK.

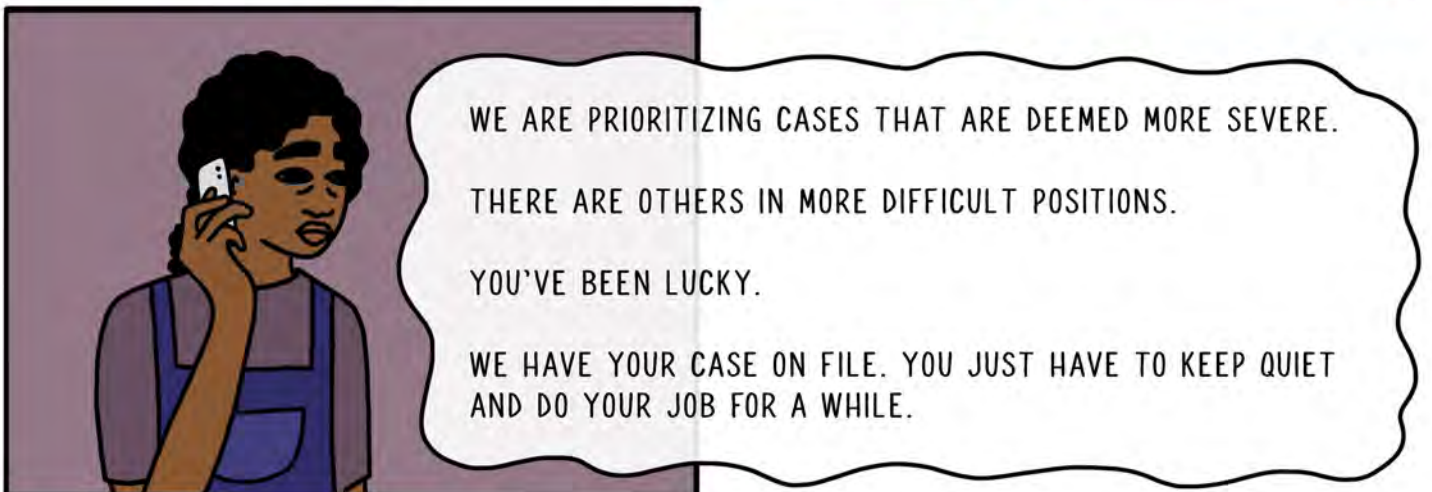


THANK YOU, BUT SHE SHOULD  
GO BACK HOME TO FINISH HER WORK.

IF YOU DO NOT WANT HER, WHY NOT  
RETURN HER? WHY ARE YOU ABUSING  
HER INSTEAD?

I PAID GOOD MONEY TO GET HER. SHE MUST DO  
EVERYTHING I TELL HER TO. I DO NOT CARE IF SHE IS  
STARVING OR SICK, WHAT MATTERS TO ME IS THAT SHE  
DOES HER JOB .





## STORY 4

I'm one of three sisters. When I was living in Ethiopia, my parents decided to arrange my marriage. Our relationship did not last long. We had a child together. I decided to come to Lebanon to work and support my family. I wanted to pay for my sisters' education and pay for my mom's medical treatment. I unfortunately have to stay in Lebanon. It is currently the only way to support my family. My mother died while I was here, and I could not see her due to being undocumented.

I've been living in Lebanon for 9 years. I left my contract job after a short six months because my employer mistreated me.

She restricted my food, denied me rest time, and did not pay me consistently. When she could no longer pay me and started struggling financially. After I left, I became undocumented. I asked my employer to terminate my sponsorship when I found a new potential sponsor. She first demanded 3000\$ to end my sponsorship, even though nine years had passed since then. To this day, she still refuses to terminate it.

I currently live in Beirut and work as a freelancer. Recently, I was going to Jounieh to meet a migrant worker friend

who was traveling. I took a taxi and sat in the back. The driver was staring at me through the rearview mirror. He then proceeded to ask me personal questions, such as "Are you married?". He would then make sexual reproaches, saying things like "We Lebanese love black bodies. You people with black bodies are so delicious. When I saw you get into the car, I became sexually aroused." I was disgusted by his remarks and ignored him. I usually leave the house to accompany my new employer and have little to no interactions with people here, so I did not know how to deal with that situation. It was midday. The driver suddenly stopped the car, got out of his seat, and opened the back door. I immediately opened my door and got out of the vehicle. He grabbed me and tried to push me back into the car, and I started screaming for help. As soon as I started screaming, he feared being exposed and immediately ran back to the car and drove away.

After this incident, I made sure to never take public transportation alone. If there is no one to come along with me, I walk to my destination. I didn't report this incident to anyone. At the time, I was terrified. I kept on screaming and only wanted him to go away. I could not believe it when he finally drove away.



I RAN AWAY BECAUSE I WAS OVERWORKED.



I WAS GIVEN NO BREAKS AND I WAS GETTING ABUSED DAILY.





I CAN'T AFFORD TO FLY YOU BACK. YOU STILL HAVE TO WORK FOR ME FOR ANOTHER TWO YEARS.

BUT MADAM, I ONLY HAVE TO WORK FOR ONE MORE YEAR ACCORDING TO OUR CONTRACT...

IF YOU INSIST ON FLYING BACK TO ETHIOPIA, I WILL SELL YOU TO ANOTHER FAMILY. STOP STALLING AND GET BACK TO WORK.

THIS SOUNDS DEHUMANIZING AND RACIST. IT IS OUTRIGHT SLAVERY. WHAT DID YOU DO?



I RAN AWAY... BUT IT DIDN'T SOLVE MY PROBLEMS.



I FACED DIFFERENT FORMS OF HARASSMENT.

I HAD TO TAKE TAXIS TO GET TO WORK... THIS ONE DRIVER WAS RELENTLESS.



HE PUT HIS HAND OVER MY PELVIS



AND WOULD MASTURBATE WITH MY HAND OVER HIS PENIS.

I WOULD SOMETIMES SAY NO ASSERTIVELY WHEN THIS HAPPENS

BUT I WOULD RISK BEING DROPPED OFF IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE WHICH IN SOME CASES IS EVEN MORE DANGEROUS THAN ENDURING THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT.



IT WAS A DAILY STRUGGLE.

THERE ARE SOME MEN WHO OFFER TO GIVE YOU A RIDE JUST TO TRY TO ASSAULT YOU.



I WOULD GET ASSAULTED OUT ON THE STREETS TOO WHILE RUNNING ERRANDS.

THIS ONE TIME,  
IT WAS REALLY DARK  
WHEN I GOT OFF WORK



AND A MAN OFFERED  
TO GIVE ME A RIDE.

WHEN I GOT INTO THE CAR, HE SHOWED ME  
SOME RANDOM ILLEGIBLE PAPER IN ARABIC



NO. TAKE YOUR  
HANDS OFF OF  
ME AND PARK  
THE CAR OR  
I'LL SCREAM!!

I MADE HIM PULL OVER AND GOT OUT OF  
THE CAR. THIS DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK.



THIS ALL TOOK PLACE IN THE CAPITAL  
CITY? WHAT TIME WAS IT?

YES, I WAS IN BEIRUT... IT WAS  
AT NIGHT AND I WAS TRYING TO  
CATCH A TAXI AFTER WORK. .



WERE YOU SITTING IN THE FRONT  
PASSENGER SEAT?



TAXI DRIVERS OFTEN DON'T ALLOW  
YOU TO SIT IN THE BACK SEAT.



THERE WAS A MAN SITTING IN THE  
BACK. I GOT INTO THE FRONT AND  
SAT NEXT TO THE DRIVER



THE TWO MEN REFUSED TO TAKE ME  
TO WHERE I WANTED TO GO. THEY  
STARTED DRIVING TOWARD SAIDA.

I ROLLED DOWN THE WINDOW AND  
STARTED SCREAMING VERY LOUDLY.

THEY DROPPED ME OFF, BUT THEY  
DROVE AWAY WITH MY THINGS. THIS  
HAPPENED FIVE YEARS AGO.



I STOPPED TAKING TAXIS UNLESS  
I SPOTTED ANOTHER FEMALE  
PASSENGER INSIDE.

DID YOU KNOW ANY OF THE MEN WHO  
SEXUALLY HARASSED YOU FROM BEFORE?

NOT AT ALL. I  
TRY TO FORGET  
BECAUSE I CAN'T  
DO ANYTHING  
ABOUT IT. IT  
KEEPS HAUNTING  
ME TO THIS DAY.

## STORY 5

I was harassed by my employer inside the house. I could no longer cope, so I decided to leave. The day I escaped my employer's house, I rushed out and took a cab. I feared my employer would catch me in the act. My employer's house was in Beirut. I asked the driver at first to take me to Nabatieh. I had nothing on me, no money, nothing. I used my broken Arabic to communicate with the driver, explaining I had just run away from my employer's house and asking him to drive me to safety. He agreed to help me and said he would take me somewhere safe where I could meet other migrant domestic workers. He took advantage of my vulnerable position and started harassing me sexually on our way. He grabbed me and tried to kiss me. He aggressively pulled my body as I tried to fight and push him off me. I was physically injured, trying to push him off. I kept yelling at him to stop, but he kept responding: "Why won't you have sex with me? What is the issue? This is totally normal" He then started to brutally attack me. He beat me so hard that my teeth fell off.

After all the abuse, he had the guts to ask me to work at his house for his wife and said he would give me 1 million Lebanese pounds as a salary. I was still trapped inside the car. I was lost, confused, and terrified. I did not know what to do or how to react. He didn't even give me a chance to process what had happened moments ago. I had just left my employer's house and had no idea where I was or how to get around Lebanon. I rejected his request and yelled at him until he eventually let me out of the car. So, I stepped out and started to walk with no sense of direction. I cannot tell anyone about this. People will blame me for taking the ride alone with him. I do not think anyone would believe me. To this day, I still remember his words. I cannot stand hearing anyone using them.



THEY WOULD RESPOND:

THIS IS ALSO PART OF YOUR JOB, AND YOU HAVE TO DO IT, YOU HAVE NO CHOICE".

ONE TIME, AS I WAS BREWING SOME COFFEE FOR THEM, ONE OF THEM CAME UP BEHIND ME AND STARTED LICKING MY EAR.



I ACCIDENTALLY SPILLED THE COFFEE WHILE TRYING TO ESCAPE HIM.



I RAN TO THE FRONT DOOR



TOLD THEM I WAS REPORTING THEIR BROTHER TO THE POLICE



AND IMMEDIATELY OPENED THE DOOR AND LEFT THEIR HOUSE.



THE RECRUITMENT AGENT RUSHED AFTER ME

AND CLAIMED THAT HIS BROTHER DID WHAT HE DID BECAUSE HE "LOVED ME".

HE THEN ASKED ME TO CONTINUE CARING FOR HIS MOTHER AND MOVE ON. I REFUSED,



AND INSISTED THAT I WANTED TO LEAVE AND THAT MY DECISION WAS FINAL. I ALSO ASKED HIM TO RETURN ME TO MY HOME COUNTRY.

HE ANGRILY DEMANDED I REPAY HIM MY RECRUITMENT COSTS OF 2000\$ BEFORE HE COULD SEND ME BACK.

HE THEN TOOK ME TO THE AGENCY'S OFFICE IN JAL-EL-DIB.



HE SAID HE WOULD ASSIGN ME TO WORK AT A DIFFERENT HOUSEHOLD.





## STORY 6

I graduated high school. I am currently in my thirties. My family was not extremely poor, but I wanted a better life, so I came to Lebanon. I wanted to work and provide for my family. I was working for a family of two, a husband and wife. The wife was absent most of the time, whereas he was mostly at home, so it was just him and I at the house most of the time. He was constantly chasing me around the house. He repeatedly groped my body while I was working. He would touch my breasts as I would bend down to wipe the floor or clean. He often tried to sleep with me. After three months, I could no longer cope and decided to leave.

I didn't feel like I could tell anyone about this. I was afraid of my employer. I was scared he would hurt me if I told his wife. I also did not think she would believe me because, whenever she was around, he would not approach me or even look at me. I also did not know any Arabic, so it was hard for me to communicate with her.

I started working as a freelancer and rented a place with another domestic worker. One day, I was heading to a client's house in Dekwaneh and took a cab. All I had on me was my purse, phone, and 50,000 LBP. I did not know the route to Dekwaneh as it was my first time going there. My client contacted the driver over the phone to give him directions. The driver took me to Zahle instead and stopped the car in the middle of an empty road. There he began harassing me sexually, and I started crying. Upon seeing me crying, he opened my purse and reacted angrily to the fact that I only had 50,000 LBP. He angrily took my phone, the 50,000 LBP, threw me out of the car, and drove away. I wish he stole all my stuff but did not leave me alone on that road. I now wish he had taken me back with him to Beirut. I stayed there on that road, not knowing where to go or what to do. No cars were passing by, and it was getting late. Finally, a truck passed, and the driver stopped and approached me. He offered to give me a ride the next day to Beirut, and I accepted as I had no choice.

I am suffering from financial stress and insecurity at the moment.

# SEXUAL HARASSMENT HANDBOOK

# SEXUAL HARASSMENT

## WHAT IS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)?

An umbrella term for any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will and based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females.

This violence can be:

- **PHYSICAL**: any act of physical violence that causes harm to the body of the individual and is not sexual.
- **ECONOMIC (denial of resources, opportunities, or services)**: any form of violence that impacts the individuals' capacity to support themselves.
- **PSYCHOLOGICAL/EMOTIONAL**: the infliction of mental or emotional pain or injury.
- **SEXUAL**: acts that range from verbal harassment to forced penetration. Sexual violence also includes other forms of force ranging from social pressure and intimidation to physical force. Sexual violence includes, but is not limited to:
  - Rape within marital or dating relationships;
  - Rape by strangers or acquaintances;
  - Systematic rape, sexual slavery, and other types of violence that are especially common in armed conflicts (e.g., forced impregnation);
  - Sexual abuse of mentally or physically challenged individuals;
  - Rape and sexual abuse of children; and
  - 'Traditional' forms of sexual violence, such as forced marriage or cohabitation and wife inheritance.
  - Unwelcome sexual advances or harassment (at school, work, etc.)<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

The World Health Organization defines sexual violence as "[...] any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act by violence or coercion, act to traffic a person, or act directed against a person's sexuality, regardless of the relationship to the victim."<sup>2</sup>

According to the WHO, it is widespread, and is considered to be one of the most traumatic, pervasive, and most common human rights violations.<sup>3</sup>

**Sexual harassment can be physical, verbal, or non-verbal:**

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<sup>1</sup> WHO (2012). *Understanding and addressing violence against women: Intimate partner violence* (No. WHO/RHR/12.36). World Health Organization.. p1.

<sup>2</sup> WHO (2002), *World report on violence and health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002), Chapter 6, pp. 149.

<sup>3</sup> ICRC (2013), *Advancement of women: ICRC statement to the United Nations, 2013*. icrc. 16-10-2013.

## VERBAL

- o Referring to an adult as a girl, hunk, doll, babe, or honey
- o Whistling at someone, cat calls
- o Making sexual comments about a person's body
- o Making sexual comments or innuendos
- o Turning work discussions to sexual topics
- o Telling sexual jokes or stories
- o Asking about sexual fantasies, preferences, or history
- o Asking personal questions about social or sexual life
- o Making kissing sounds, howling, and smacking lips
- o Making sexual comments about a person's clothing, anatomy, or looks
- o Repeatedly asking out a person who is not interested
- o Telling lies or spreading rumors about a person's personal sex life

## NON-VERBAL

- o Looking a person up and down
- o Staring at someone
- o Blocking a person's path
- o Following the person
- o Displaying sexually suggestive visuals
- o Making sexual gestures with hands or through body movements
- o Making facial expressions such as winking, throwing kisses, or licking lips

## PHYSICAL

- o Giving a massage around the neck or shoulders
- o Touching the person's clothing, hair, or body
- o Hugging, kissing, patting, or stroking
- o Touching or rubbing oneself sexually around another person
- o Standing close or brushing up against another person

## WHEN DOES SEXUAL HARASSMENT HAPPEN?

Sexual harassment can happen at any time or place. Still, individuals may face a higher risk in the following situations:

- o In societies that support male superiority and sexual entitlement
- o In societies that maintain women's inferiority and sexual submissiveness
- o Where there are weak laws and policies related to sexual violence and gender equity
- o In male-dominated spaces
- o In physically isolated workplaces
- o When there are power imbalances
- o In employment structures where there is a lack of a clear channel for reporting harassment
- o When there is repeated failure to take adequate action to stop the harassment, or even worse, retaliation against the survivor when they reported incidents and sought help

## KAFALA INTERACTIONS WITH SEXUAL HARASSMENT.

### WHAT IS THE KAFALA SYSTEM?

The Kafala system primarily involves a sponsor with the legal responsibility for a MDW during a contracted period, making the MDW's status in the country and overall livelihood dependent upon the sponsor. The system comprises several administrative regulations, customary practices, and legal requirements which temporarily bind the worker to the recruiter. Once in Lebanon, the MDW is assigned an employer. A worker may not change employer or break the terms of the contract unless the employer signs a 'release waiver'. A MDW's status in the country becomes irregular/illegal if they leave without their sponsor's consent and the official release from the authorities.

## LAW 205 AND THE EXCLUSION OF THE MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKING COMMUNITY.

In December 2020, the Lebanese Parliament passed Law 205 against sexual harassment, which could see perpetrators spend up to four years in prison and pay fines up to fifty times the minimum wage. The law also protects the victims and witnesses who testify against the accused.<sup>4</sup> And while the law was applauded as a step forward for sexual harassment victims, **it excludes an important part of the community – migrant domestic workers.** The law falls short of international standards by neglecting to complement this law with labor law reforms, monitoring, and civil remedies.<sup>5</sup>

Deep and structural power imbalances in the country between different societal groups continue to largely contribute to sexual harassment, discriminatory practices, isolation, and precarious legal status. **These challenges not only put forth additional barriers to reporting abuse but also exclude migrant domestic workers isolated in private homes and tied to their employers through the Kafala (sponsorship) system,** as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugee women who either lack legal residency or who do not have the required work permits.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT RESEARCH FINDINGS.

Egna Legna's research, which involved interviews with 913 domestic workers, indicates that **68% of MDWs had survived at least one incident of sexual harassment** during their employment or stay in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup>

- o 70% were harassed by the male employer,
- o 40% by relatives or employers' friends carried out abuses.
- o 25-30% stated that female employers carried out the abuse or another individual living in the household.
- o 65% of victims who spoke openly about their experience were harassed by taxi drivers, and 15% by police officers.

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<sup>4</sup> CeSSRA (2020), Parliament passes Law No. 205 to criminalize sexual harassment and for the rehabilitation of its victims, Retrieved at: <https://civilsociety-centre.org/actions/parliament-passes-law-no-205-criminalize-sexual-harassment-and-rehabilitation-its-victims>

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021), Lebanon: Sexual Harassment Law Missing Key Protections, Human Rights Watch MENA, Retrieved at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/05/03/2021/lebanon-sexual-harassment-law-missing-key-protections>

<sup>6</sup> For more details, see: Diab, J. L., Yimer, B., Birhanu, T., Kitoko, A., Gidey, A., & Ankrah, F. (2023). The gender dimensions of sexual violence against migrant domestic workers in post2019- Lebanon. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.1091957>

## ACTIONS TAKEN AGAINST PERPETRATORS.

When asked about their immediate reaction to the harassment, more than **95% of respondents insisted that they told the perpetrator to stop**. Beyond this course of action, **less than 25% reported the perpetrator to the police**, went to their respective consulates or embassies for help, went to migrant workers' groups/associations/religious groups for help, complained to the employment agency, complained to the employer's family, complaining to the employer's neighbor/friend, complaining to their own family/friend, or escaping. **No tangible actions were taken toward the perpetrator in any of these cases**. Instead, 65% of survivors of such incidents were 'advised to be cautious.' Others reported that their stories were dismissed, not believed, or they were simply advised to 'run away' if they could.

## LINKS BETWEEN DOCUMENTATION STATUS, WORKING ENVIRONMENT, AND HARASSMENT.

**Respondents who had their documents confiscated or were undocumented resorted to authorities or reported abuse less**. This is generally linked to a fear of being detained, fined, or forcibly returned to their home country. Alongside the sexual harassment, these respondents reported that they experienced other forms of violation in the workplace. More than 65% reported unpaid wages/overtime, and 55% of respondents reported being required to perform tasks outside their contractual obligations. Power dynamics between MDWs and their employers permit control over MDWs' bodies, mental health, and agency.

**Undocumented MDWs are left powerless in reporting sexual abuse** and, therefore, found at the mercy of the aggressor. Documented MDWs who do press charges against aggressors often unwillingly retract their claims out of fear, do not access justice in any form, are turned away by authorities, and are also turned away by their embassies.

## IMPLICATIONS ON PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH.

Respondents highlighted many negative implications on their mental and physical health as a result of sexual harassment and other forms of violation in the workplace (that often took place simultaneously). More than 75% of respondents highlighted working in a 'stressful' environment – mainly when sexual harassment occurred. Negative mental health implications also included (but were not limited to):

- o Thoughts about self-harm;
- o Anxiety;
- o Substance abuse;
- o Sleep disorders;
- o Depression;
- o Eating disorders;
- o Withdrawal from society/isolation;
- o Suicidal thoughts/tendencies, and
- o An overall sense of 'constantly living in fear.'

The most common physical health implication reported by the sample was exhaustion (75%), followed by 55% who reported various forms of bodily injuries, including bruises, cuts, tears to their vaginal areas, bleeding, and in rare cases, a more severe injury such as a sprained arm, wrist, or ankle. Other respondents reported experiencing:

- o Irregular menstruation;
- o Pregnancy;
- o Insomnia;
- o Sickness;
- o Sexually transmitted infection (STI), and
- o Other forms of physical implications such as eating disorders, weight loss, and intense migraines.

## OVERCOMING TRAUMA AND REFERRALS.

**At least 65% of respondents insisted that the accountability of the abuser would assist them in overcoming the trauma they experienced** due to the sexual harassment they endured. Between 15-20% informed the study of their coping mechanisms, such as ‘not opening messages from abusive senders,’ ‘distracting themselves with work,’ meditation, and prayer. Notably, 85% of respondents insisted they did not wish to be referred to a doctor or mental health expert. **The low percentage of women who want to seek out help from a medical or mental health professional is directly linked to their widespread fear of consequences if they speak out** and their fear that a Lebanese professional would side with the Lebanese perpetrator. Moreover, when undocumented or unable to access their legal documentation, these women remain reluctant to bring attention to themselves as they navigate their daily lives ‘below the radar.’

## A CULTURE OF IMPUNITY WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE HOUSEHOLD.

Inaction, specifically from the female employer aware of the harassment, is understood by the MDWS as a means of patriarchy, fear of damage to the family reputation, negligence, or even compliance to the male employer’s sexual urges. **The absence of accountability adds to a cycle of continuous sexual abuse.** This has not only led to a sense of helplessness among MDWs who have survived sexual assault but also led to them not reporting incidents entirely.

## A CULTURE OF IMPUNITY WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE HOUSEHOLD.

Informants’ responses outlined a general form of indifference or discontent when asked about sexual harassment inside and outside the workplace. The responses often indicate that this is a recurrent circumstance expected as part of their work in Lebanon and the various forms of racism they endure. Daily aggressions and sexual harassment are largely normalized. For many, a MDW in Lebanon cannot escape sexual harassment – and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) becomes part of the position, its isolated nature, and the ‘unconventional circumstances’ that the job entails.

This graphic novel is a collaborative project between Egna Legna Besidet and the women who shared their stories of sexual violence as migrant domestic workers. We are grateful to the artists and editors who contributed their skills and expertise to this work, and to the advocates and activists who made it possible.

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