



ROOM WITHOUT A VIEW



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A Room Without a View

The documentary reveals the dire reality of foreign domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon. The film offers an intimate insight into the private lives of employers, agents and maids. Laws create a legal structure of inequality and power imbalance that encourages corruption and abuse. Sexism and the patriarchal system discriminate against Lebanese women in turn perpetuates abuse against foreign domestic workers. Exposing a modern form of slavery, the film reflects on the role of women and domestic worker in capitalist societies.

Lebanon

Lebanon is a country in the Middle East. According to the CIA World Factbook, it is the smallest country in continental Asia.¹ It is bordered by Syria to the north and the east, Israel to the south and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Lebanon is known for being the site for some of the oldest civilizations in the world. It became part of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1500s and stayed under Ottoman rule for hundreds of years. In 1918, following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, France gained control of the area that was to become present-day Lebanon. Lebanon became an independent nation in 1943.

The population of Lebanon is about 5.2 million people.² It is one of the most densely populated countries in the Mediterranean area. The majority of its people live near the coast, and many of them near Lebanon's capital city, Beirut. According to the CIA World Factbook, 95 percent of the people in Lebanon are Arab, and 4 percent are Armenian. The official language of Lebanon is Arabic.³ Almost 70 percent of the population is Muslim, and about 30 percent is Christian. There is also a small percentage of Druze. The World Factbook notes that these percentages do not account for the religious affiliations of the country's refugee population, which is sizeable.⁴ Lebanon has a high rate of literacy.

The *Kafala* System

Most people who work in Lebanon are protected by the various labor laws that the country has established. For instance, there is a minimum wage, limits on working hours, and laws about when overtime pay is required. However, none of these labor laws apply to Lebanon's migrant domestic workers. These workers are regulated by the *kafala* system instead.

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/lebanon>

² <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/lebanon>

³ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/lebanon>

⁴ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/lebanon>

In addition to Lebanon, the *kafala* system is used in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan. It became increasingly popular in these nations during the 1950s, when large numbers of foreign workers were needed for short-term projects. In Lebanon, *kafala* became popular as a way for families to find domestic help when they were unable to find it in Lebanon or bordering countries.⁵

Under the *kafala* system, migrant domestic workers are allowed to enter Lebanon under the sponsorship of individual citizens. A sponsor is usually also the employer of the worker that they sponsor. Most sponsors find migrant workers through private recruitment companies. A sponsor covers the travel expenses and accommodations of the worker that he or she sponsors, and also has the power to extend or terminate the sponsorship. Workers cannot leave or change their place of employment without the permission of the sponsor. Doing so can result in arrest and deportation. If a worker does not agree to the working conditions set by an employer, he or she risks losing his or her visa.

In Arabic, the word “*kafala*” means “to take care of,” and this is the original intent of the system; that the sponsor—or “*kafeel*”—takes care of the worker.⁶ However, it is widely argued that the *kafala* system makes abuse easy because the legal residency of the migrant worker is so strictly tied to his or her employer.

Abuses Under the *Kafala* System

In theory, workers who come to Lebanon under the *kafala* system are guaranteed a number of rights and protections, however in reality, these rights are often ignored by employers. In 2009, Lebanon’s Ministry of Labor introduced the unified standard contract, which lays out the rights and obligations of domestic workers. Amnesty International details some of those rights. It says, “The contract prevents the employer from forcing the worker to work outside the home; restricts the maximum number of working hours to 10 a day, with at least eight continuous hours of rest at night; entitles the worker to a 24-hour weekly rest period, paid sick leave and six days of annual leave; requires the employer to pay the full salary at the end of each month with receipts of payment signed by both parties, to purchase health insurance for the worker and to allow her to receive calls and to cover the cost of one phone call to her parents per month.”⁷ However, Amnesty International reports that in practice, these rights are often denied workers. The organization says that numerous interviews with domestic workers has revealed that they are often forced to work more than ten hours a day, do not receive eight hours of sleep or one day a week off, and are not paid at the end of each month.

⁵ <https://hir.harvard.edu/modern-day-slavery-the-kafala-system-in-lebanon/>

⁶ <https://hir.harvard.edu/modern-day-slavery-the-kafala-system-in-lebanon/>

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/04/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-their-house-is-our-prison>

Human Rights Watch reports that it has documented numerous abuses under the *kafala* system, including physical and sexual abuse, workers being forcibly confined, workers being forced to work excessive hours, and nonpayment of workers. It adds that under the COVID-19 pandemic, conditions have become even worse for many workers, explaining, “Many have reported that incidents of abuse increased during the lockdown while others have said that their employers slashed their salaries – if they paid them at all. Since May [2020], employers have abandoned hundreds of workers outside their consulates or embassies, often without money, passports, or their belongings, and without return tickets for workers who are unable to afford expensive repatriation flights to their home countries.”⁸

Attempts at Reform

Critics of the *kafala* system—including human rights organizations and migrant worker groups—have been trying to abolish it for years, however they have been unsuccessful. In recent years, there have been some reforms in nations that use the *kafala* system. For instance, in 2020, Qatar got rid of restrictions on workers changing jobs without the permission of their employers.⁹ However, other attempts at reform have faced strong opposition. For example, in 2020, Lebanon’s Labor Ministry adopted a new unified standard contract, which would give migrant workers increased protections, including the right to end their contracts without getting employer permission. However, that same year, the implementation of the new contract was suspended by the country’s highest court.

It is estimated that Lebanon has approximately 250,000 migrant domestic workers. The majority of them are women, and most come from Africa and South Asia.

Glossary

- **Beirut:** Beirut is the capital of Lebanon.
- **domestic worker:** A domestic worker is a person who works in a private home.
- **Ethiopia:** A country in eastern Africa.
- **human trafficking:** The United Nations defines human trafficking as, “The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.”¹⁰
- **kafeel:** In the *kafala* system, an employer, or sponsor as also known as a “*kafeel*.”
- **Kenya:** A country located in eastern Africa.
- **migrant worker:** A person who migrates from one country to another in the pursuit of work, usually without the intention of permanently staying in that country.
- **Philippines:** The Republic of the Philippines is a country in Southeast Asia

⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/27/lebanon-abolish-kafala-sponsorship-system>

⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/qatar-announcement-kafala-reforms/>

¹⁰ <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html>

Additional Resources

- *Amnesty International* (2019). “End *Kafala*: Justice for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon.”
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/04/lebanon-migrant-domestic-workers-their-house-is-our-prison/>
- *Human Rights Watch* (July 27, 2020). “Lebanon: Abolish *Kafala* (Sponsorship) System.”
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- Sumayya Kassamali (July 13, 2021). “Understanding Race and Migrant Domestic Labor in Lebanon,” *Middle East Research and Information Project*.
<https://merip.org/2021/07/understanding-race-and-migrant-domestic-labor-in-lebanon/>
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<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system>
- David Wood and Jacob Boswall (March 23, 2021). “Why Lebanon Can’t Kick Its Addiction to Indentured Labor,” *Foreign Policy*.
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For inquiries, please contact:
EPF Media
(323) 301-3663; info@epfmedia.com

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