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**BUILDING
BARGAINING POWER:
HOW DOMESTIC
WORKERS IN LEBANON
MADE A COURAGEOUS
STEP TO
FORM A UNION**



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BUILDING BARGAINING POWER:
**HOW DOMESTIC WORKERS
IN LEBANON MADE A COURAGEOUS
STEP TO FORM A UNION**

International Labour Organization
Regional office for Arab States



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MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

UNITED!



In January 2015,
200 women and men from
Ethiopia, Nepal, the Philippines,
Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and beyond
founded a Union for domestic workers
in Lebanon. The Founding Congress
was both a moving and historical
occasion: this was the birth of
the first Union for domestic workers
in the Arab region, paving the way
for similar initiatives in
other countries in the
Middle East.

*I was very excited.
It was something like being
taken by a current. This was
our coming out. People were saying
'Wow, we didn't realize these
domestic workers could speak!'*

R. M. - Cameroun

*When I saw so many
official people at the Congress,
I felt that I achieved a little bit
of what I dreamt of. I cried. I felt we
showed everyone that we are humans
too, regardless of skin colour.*

M. M.- Ethiopia



GETTING ORGANIZED:
WHY THE NEED FOR A UNION?

FACTS

More than 250,000 migrant domestic workers live and work in Lebanon. Ethiopians and Bengalis are the majority. Domestic workers from Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Nepal follow.

People have to understand that domestic work is also work! We are workers and we need to have our rights.

J. G. - Philippines



Domestic workers are excluded from the labour law, hence their rights as workers are not recognized. Their presence in Lebanon is linked to a time bound residence and work permit provided by the sponsor (kafil) who is responsible for the work permit and residency of the migrant worker.

Bound by the sponsorship (Kafala) system, these migrant women often find themselves vulnerable, isolated, and in an extremely fragile position to bargain for their rights. The Kafala is a system that enables an environment conducive to forced labour and exploitation, and in which the negotiating power is in favour of the employer.



NEEDS

During the past 10 years, numerous initiatives led by domestic workers at community level and supported by civil society groups and international organizations have motivated groups of domestic workers to get together and formulate their common needs and aspirations.

Despite our differences, we felt we are all the same, we have the same problems. We want to open our mouths and say 'this is what we want'. I want to be a worker - I want to make myself and my country proud.

M. K. - Sri Lanka

It is out of the need to think and act collectively that the idea of forming a domestic workers' Union came about in 2012.

Before this we were afraid to speak of our problems - We wouldn't take the risk. Now I feel I have gained the power to speak.

R. L. - Nepal

Domestic workers who were already involved in community organizing initiatives and who participated in an initiative of participatory action research on community organizing, saw the Union as a means to become visible as workers and to voice demands towards better working conditions in Lebanon.



STEPS PRECEEDING THE UNION

Steps preceding the Union found inspiration in the **Domestic Workers Convention (ILO C.189)** that was globally adopted in 2011.

Article 3

Each Member shall, in relation to domestic workers, take the measures set out in this Convention to respect, promote and realize the fundamental principles and rights at work, namely:

- (a) freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- (b) the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- (c) the effective abolition of child labour; and
- (d) the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

The Convention was undeniably the catalyst in activating the fight for the rights of domestic workers, and the recognition of domestic work as work.

It was followed by the international campaign “12 by 12” launched by the International Trade Union Confederation with the aim to promote the ratification of the Convention.

In October 2013, 200 domestic workers from 42 countries around the world gathered in Uruguay to launch the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). A migrant domestic worker representing Lebanon also participated and brought back the experience and knowledge to her sisters.

STAGES TOWARDS THE FOUNDING
CONGRESS: **BUILDING SOLIDARITY,
BUILDING A BASE**

ORGANIZING DOMESTIC WORKERS

The wave of enthusiasm brought by the ILO Convention on Domestic Work (No.189) created the grounds for discussions around the possibility of organizing domestic workers.

For us as FENASOL, we consider the issue of migrant workers integral, and historically it is something that we have been working on. We consider this a duty for us as unionists.

Castro Abdullah,
President of FENASOL

Groups of domestic workers in Lebanon understood the paradigm shift promoted by the Convention and became more exposed to the international discourse on the rights of domestic workers globally through networks, participation in conferences, and training provided by national civil society and global movements.

Meanwhile, ideas around the creation of a Union started to circulate within the labour movement in Lebanon. Different tactics were pondered. It was deemed more effective not to have an isolated union of domestic workers but to include domestic workers in national unions. From a legal point of view the latter option was more feasible. The National Federation of workers and employees trade unions in Lebanon (FENASOL) welcomed the idea.



EARLY DIFFICULTIES

In 2012, an initial core founding group of 40-50 migrant domestic workers started to meet weekly to identify needs, collect ideas and strategize. They began to discuss the notion of the Union among their compatriots inviting them to become active. Indeed, constraints emerged very soon:

*After I attended
2 or 3 meetings, I knew
I had to join. The women coming
here from Nepal need this. What we are
doing is working for future generations,
not for ourselves. The women who come
here after us must find freedom,
rights and a good salary.*

R. L.- Nepal

A Safe Place:

The domestic worker needed a safe place to meet and discuss.

The headquarters of FENASOL was chosen as the ideal location, as this exposed the domestic workers to the experience of other workers and to the spirit and values of trade unions.



Working as a team:

Bringing together women from different nationalities, level of education, and languages required efforts towards channelling their views towards a common idea of a Union. Intensive training and capacity building supported by civil society and ILO provided an opportunity to create common values around the idea of a Union. Training sessions focused on understanding what a trade union is, what

democratic procedures to uphold, and how to work as a team despite the differences in background and culture. Interpretation at times was necessary, English, French and Arabic were the languages used to work together.

*We are different,
that's true, different nationalities,
but we speak the same language
and that language is domestic work...
yes there were problems like the
language barrier... but we can always
use a translator to translate from
Arabic to English or French...
it's important to be together.*

R. M. - Cameron

*I first came here because
I didn't have residency papers and
I wanted help with that. Then I realized
that this was what I was looking for - this
union can make our dreams of freedom
come true! It became more than just residency
papers. These papers would give me one or
two years of living in Lebanon, but working
for freedom means building something for
those who will come in the future.*

This is more important.

M. M. - Ethiopia

From services to solidarity:

At first, migrant domestic workers came to the meetings expecting services such as health insurance. New to the idea of union work, they did not realize at first that this was an opportunity to demand their rights for themselves. A worker identity was being born, one they could all gather around.



Increasing membership and communication strategies:

The strength of a Union lies in numbers. After the core founding group completed the first phase of training and strategized on priorities, it was up to them to spread the word and recruit others. Given time limitations of many domestic workers to go out, and taking into consideration that many domestic workers in Lebanon are difficult to reach as they are

confined in the homes of their employers, domestic workers had to be creative.

- They designed a brochure with information about the Union and translated it themselves to all the different languages. They organized themselves to reach domestic workers that are denied a day-off by waiting for them as they went to throw out the trash, or walk the employer's dog.
- They placed brochures in supermarkets, and

asked the shopkeepers to give them out to any domestic workers shopping there. They participated in all sorts of meetings to advertise for the Union and attract more members. They asked Lebanese supporters to help them in mobilizing more people through their circles of friends and co-workers. It helped to have Lebanese

people there, as it gave newcomers confidence in the project.

- Social media helped a lot to reach out, as domestic workers connect through Facebook and Whatsapp. In a short period of time, the response was overwhelming.

Union membership reached 400 women.

I went to the church and asked to speak to the person in charge, then I gathered the women under a tree and I handed out the flyers and told them about the union. When you are having problems and fighting with people, it helps to sit with others and talk about it. You relax and feel better. When we come here and speak at FENASOL it helps us. I like bringing women here, it makes me happy!

S. R. - Madagascar

TIMELINE

Legal Restrictions:

Domestic work continues to be unrecognized in Lebanon where the Lebanese Labour Code, enacted in 1946, specifically excludes domestic workers, denying them protections afforded to other workers. Nevertheless, Lebanon ratified the ILO Convention, 1949 (No. 98) on the right to Organize and Collective Bargaining, and article 92 of the Lebanese Labour Code, that enables some migrant workers to join

unions and associations while explicitly denying them the right to elect and be elected as representatives of unions. Based on that FENASOL has supported domestic workers in organizing themselves under its umbrella where membership is open to all domestic workers regardless of their nationality.

I was always close to union work, and I believe the law can be changed with hard work, and rights are rights, no matter what nationality.

Kawthar Akeel
Lebanese domestic worker,
FENASOL member

2011

Adoption of the International Convention on Domestic Work C.189

2012

Participatory Action Research with Migrant Communities in Lebanon

2013

Community organizing activities, initial seeds of the idea of a Union

2014

Intensive training of the core founding group

2015

Founding Congress, establishment of governance committees and training

2016

Strengthening of capacities

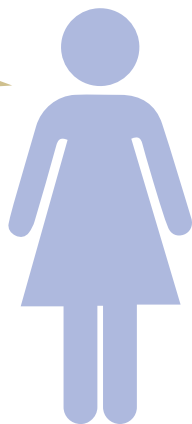
A MEMORABLE DAY:
**THE FOUNDING CONGRESS
AND BEYOND**

THE FOUNDING CONGRESS

Despite the encountered difficulties, domestic workers were determined to go ahead. After more than two years of collective work, the domestic workers felt strong and announced the establishment of the Union with the Founding Congress. This was the 25th of January 2015.

It's a long process, many will get pessimistic and tired. Many times the member ask me 'So Jemma, what now? Nothing is happening!' My answer is, Don't surrender! We stumble down then we join hands and move forward again.

J. G. - Philippines



During the Founding Congress, domestic workers elected their governance bodies which included: the General Council tasked to represent domestic workers from different nationalities and backgrounds. The General Council elected an Executive Bureau which appointed a President, a Vice President and a General Secretary. As per national legislation, the President was Lebanese.

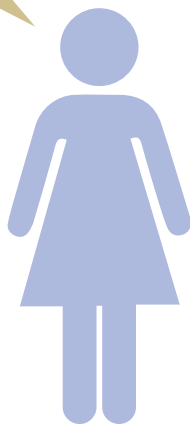
Other competencies were distributed across different thematic tasks such as media, capacity building, finance, external relations... and also across different nationalities. Interim bylaws for the first 2 years were developed, translated in seven languages and adopted during the Congress. Domestic workers committed to a symbolic membership fee of USD 10 to support some collective activities.

THE FUTURE

It was an emotional day which raised high expectations among the domestic workers. Yet this was just the beginning.

Coming together and fighting for our rights will never be easy, and we may lose our jobs, we may want to give up, but looking back at the history of my country (South Africa) and when I dared to speak out, I know we can do it. We need to stand together and support the domestic workers in Lebanon, and they will win.

Myrtle Witboois - IDWF



After almost a year from the Founding Congress, domestic workers are now struggling with building the Union. They have developed a strategy and an action plan. A lot of work needs to be done to strengthen the Union internal communication systems, democratic decisions process, leadership and independence. Allies and supporters who have accompanied the domestic workers during this journey of self-determination continue to stand by their side.

The future success of the Union lies in nurturing the Union with exposure to the global trend of unionizing domestic workers.

Support from the International Trade Union Confederation and International Domestic Workers Federation in fostering networks and alliances is key as it will provide domestic workers in Lebanon with courage, vision, and a method for expanding their work in the future.

ILO projects¹ and national NGOs such as KAFA and the Anti-Racism Movement, Migrant Community Centre are also supporting the Union to become stronger.

The Congress was impressive, the women were well prepared, they were in charge, and they were running the show. They showed the courage to stand up. That was enormous. But the Congress is the first step of much more to come. It is important for the women to take leadership and ownership. Where the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) can really help is to make sure they have alliances outside Lebanon, a more formal alliance with Unions from Europe, Africa and Asia. They need to feel supported, and to exchange ideas with others.

Marieke Koning - ITUC



⁽¹⁾ A number of ILO projects have contributed and continue to contribute to the birth and consolidation of the Union. These include: PROWD, MAGNET, Global Action Programme on Migrant Domestic Workers, The Workers' Literacy Project, Work in Freedom with support from different donor agencies, in order: Swiss Development Cooperation, European Commission, United States Department of State and Department for International Development of the U.K. Government.





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