

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Breaking the Isolation: Access to Information and Media Among Migrant Domestic Workers in Jordan and Lebanon

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Introduction

Migrant domestic workers are a vital part of the workforce in Jordan and Lebanon but remain one of the most exploited and least protected groups of workers. Their working hours are long and unpredictable. Many face prolonged confinement indoors, as their employers do not allow them to leave the workplace or communicate with other migrants. Those facing abusive treatment often do not know what to do or where to turn for help. Many have limited knowledge of the Arabic language when they first arrive, which makes the process of obtaining reliable information even more difficult.

The Lebanese and Jordanian governments have taken steps to address the situation, for example setting up hotlines for migrants to report abuse and mandating that they be hired under employment contracts guaranteeing certain rights. But the effectiveness of such measures has been hampered by a lack of enforcement coupled with the fact that many domestic workers remain unaware of their rights or how to defend them.

Breaking the Isolation: Access to Information and Media Among Migrant Domestic Workers in Jordan and Lebanon describes the information needs of migrant domestic workers and the ways migrants communicate and access media and information. *Breaking the Isolation* also highlights how civil society organizations, working with governments, can strengthen these communications channels to reduce isolation and improve working conditions. It is the first study of its kind to be carried out in Jordan and Lebanon examining the potential for how various forms of media—including those associated with mobile phones—could be used more widely to reach out to workers on a large scale.

The study was motivated by the following questions:

- 1) What information about employment conditions and rights do migrant domestic workers need the most, and what information are they not receiving?
- 2) How, and to what extent, do migrant domestic workers communicate, receive information, and access media in their daily lives while employed abroad? How do various nationalities compare in sharing information and accessing media? Could strategies devised by some groups be implemented by others?
- 3) Which forms of media or communication are most easily accessible and effective for outreach and information delivery? How, where, and in what forms could information best be delivered?

The report works toward answering these questions by summarizing the findings of interviews, group discussions, informal observations, and a survey of 522 migrants carried out in Jordan and Lebanon in 2011. The research focused on Ethiopian, Nepalese, and Sri Lankan workers in Lebanon, and Filipino and Sri Lankan workers in Jordan.

Breaking the Isolation provides suggestions for ways NGOs, trade union representatives, government agencies, embassies, and other stakeholders can use various types of media for large-scale outreach and information dissemination. It also explores how migrants themselves can participate in media production as content providers, telling their stories and sharing experiences and opinions through community-based media.

The report is organized into four main parts: (1) an overview of the situation of migrant domestic workers in Jordan and Lebanon; (2) an analysis of migrants' key information needs, including

what they most need to know prior to departure and after beginning their employment; (3) a discussion of the ways migrants communicate and access media and information, as well as an analysis of what impedes them from getting the information they need; and (4) a synthesis of lessons learned and suggestions for expanding communication channels and using media outlets more effectively for information delivery, community building, and grassroots mobilization. The report's appendix provides a description of the research methodology.

Although *Breaking the Isolation* pertains specifically to Jordan and Lebanon, it should be a useful resource for groups working with migrants in other parts of the Arab region as well. It is the hope of everyone connected with this report that the information drawn from the research will be used in ways to help migrant domestic workers reduce their isolation and become stronger, more visible advocates for their rights.

Key Findings and Recommendations

I: Circumvention of Predeparture Training

Women migrating to Jordan and Lebanon do not always receive the full picture about the terms and conditions of their employment and the difficulties they may experience abroad. Crucial to protecting their rights is ensuring that workers know their rights and entitlements in the first place. Although mandatory predeparture training courses have been introduced for migrants departing to work as domestic workers from Ethiopia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, many migrants continue to arrive in Lebanon and Jordan without this training and with little practical information about who their employers will be, what rights they have in the destination country, and how and where they might seek redress if their rights are violated. Only 38 percent of survey participants reported having completed a formal predeparture training course or seminar given by a recruitment agency, government body, or NGO. Even among those who did take part in predeparture training, significant gaps were found in the level of awareness about legal rights and redress mechanisms. Migrants expressed a strong demand for more language training in predeparture programs, as well as for more information about the terms and conditions of their employment contracts and support services available to them in the destination country.

Governments and civil society organizations should work together to improve predeparture training and increase the number of migrants who receive needed information before they leave for work abroad. More effective training will reduce the number of migrants who resort to black market certificates to meet their predeparture requirements.

II: Employment without a Contract

Despite the fact that Jordan and Lebanon have both introduced unified employment contracts for domestic workers, significant numbers of domestic workers continue to be employed without contracts. Of the workers who participated in this research, only 48 percent said they had signed an employment contract for the job they were currently performing, while 39 percent had no valid contract for their work, and 7 percent said they were not sure or did not want to respond to the question. Of those who had signed employment contracts for the work they were doing, only 62 percent said they understood the terms of the contracts they signed.

Governments in countries where migrants work should make sure that recruitment agencies and employers follow the law requiring employment contracts and that employees understand the

terms and conditions of the contracts they sign. The contracts should be available in the language of the migrant as well as the language of the country where the migrant works. If the migrant possesses minimal literacy, an advocate should explain the contract terms to the migrant in her own language. The migrant should always receive a copy of the contract.

III. Lack of Knowledge about Legal Rights

Nineteen percent of those interviewed said they did not know that their employment contract guaranteed one day of rest per week. Many migrants who did know said they could not exercise this right in practice or decide when and how to spend their time off. One out of four could not leave their employers' home on their day off.

Recruitment agencies and employers routinely confiscate the passports of migrant domestic workers even though international and domestic laws provide individuals with the right to keep their passports. Thirty-seven percent of respondents were not aware they had this right.

The governments of Jordan and Lebanon negotiate low minimum salaries with the government of each country that provides its citizens as migrant domestic workers. As a result, workers of different nationalities receive varying wages for performing the same job. The majority of those participating in the study did not know the minimum salary to which they were entitled. Only a small proportion of study participants knew about the existence of organizations or individuals providing legal support or other services to migrant workers. Civil society organizations should make every effort to promote their services more widely and inform all migrant domestic workers of their legal rights, including a day off each week, retention of their passports, and a minimum salary. They should advocate for guaranteeing, in the employment contract, the right to take the weekly day off outside the employers' home.

IV: Inequalities in Access to Media and Information

Access to information is constrained at the most basic level by the conditions under which migrant domestic workers are employed. Some migrants face extreme isolation due to employers' restrictions on their freedom of movement outside the household and ability to socialize with other migrants. On the other end of the spectrum, some migrants with more freedom are skilled users of Facebook, Skype, and other digital communication channels. Freedom of movement and the ability to communicate and access media are closely linked. The right of the worker to a regular day off is crucial in the ability to access all forms of communication and technology. However, even those workers whose mobility is restricted by their employers find creative ways to communicate with fellow migrants, for example, through open windows, across balconies, or while performing various tasks and errands.

Given the differences in migrants' access to various media and communication channels, no single strategy will be effective in reaching all migrant domestic workers. A multipronged, creative, and, above all, migrant-centered approach is needed. Since migrants themselves are a vital source of information for fellow migrants, they should be thought of not simply as passive recipients but as active participants in information dissemination strategies. Civil society organizations should involve migrants in the planning, creation, and distribution of information both before and after departure.

V: Mobile Phones as a Key Communication Channel

Mobile phones are the single most important communication tool for migrant domestic workers. The availability of cheap handsets and prepaid phone cards has been instrumental in opening up new opportunities for domestic workers to connect with the world beyond the confines of their employers' homes. Out of all the domestic workers who participated in this research, 82 percent reported that they owned and used their own mobile phone. Rates of usage were substantially higher among domestic workers who lived separately from their employers, at 95 percent in comparison to 73 percent among live-in domestic workers.

Employment contracts for migrant domestic workers should have clear provisions guaranteeing workers the right to communicate with the outside world, specifically through mobile phones. Civil society organizations should campaign for the addition of such provisions to the standard employment contract.

VI: Radio as an Underutilized Medium

Although Internet and social media use is expanding rapidly, many migrant domestic workers still turn to traditional media, such as radio and television, for information and entertainment. Radio is a particularly appealing medium both in light of its affordability and accessibility to migrant workers due to their wide-ranging levels of literacy. Sixty-two percent of respondents in Jordan and 45 percent in Lebanon reported that they owned or had regular access to a radio. Among migrants who use their own mobile phones, 72 percent of respondents in Jordan and 58 percent in Lebanon said their phones were radio enabled. Many of these women said they listened to the radio regularly in their home countries and continued doing so after migrating. Migrants expressed great enthusiasm for radio programming in their own languages in destination countries. Many said that if such programs were broadcast in Jordan or Lebanon, they would not hesitate to purchase radios to listen to them. When asked when would be the most convenient time to hear such programs, the majority responded that their preferred listening time would be in the late evening after 8 pm, once they had finished their work for the day, or on Friday or Sunday, when they were most likely to have a break from work.

Radio has a great deal of untapped potential as a way of providing information and news to migrants as well as engaging them as active producers of media content. The lack of specialized radio programming for migrant communities in Jordan and Lebanon may be linked to regulatory constraints as well as concerns about commercial viability. One strategy that could be explored by civil society organizations is to approach existing radio stations and propose adding programming catering to specific migrant communities. These programs could be scheduled during nonpeak hours, primarily late in the evening, when migrants would be most able to listen to them. Advertising revenue could be sought from businesses offering services to migrants, such as money transfer and cargo companies. Consistent programming during the same time slots every week would be an important way to build listenership.