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The American University in Cairo

Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

Organizing the Unorganized:

Migrant Domestic Workers Labor Union Organizing in Lebanon

A Thesis Submitted by Farah Kobaissy

Submitted to the Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

May 2015

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Mater of Arts in Gender and Women's Slides in the Middle East/ North Africa
Gendered Political Economies specialization

Under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

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Nabil Fahmy, Ambassador _____
Dean of GAPP

To comrade Bassem Chit (1979-2014)

Your friendship, your unflinching commitment to revolutionary change and class liberation will always inspire and be part of me.

This thesis is dedicated to your memory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I have incurred endless debts to many people who supported me throughout the journey of completing this thesis. I owe this work primarily to the members of the executive board of the trade-union for domestic workers in Lebanon who provided the context for the research. I can never be grateful enough for their generosity with their time and resources. I am deeply grateful to Mala, Lily, Gemma, Rose, Suzanne and Maryam whose courage and steadfastness inspired me to write and to finish the thesis. Their friendship continues to be one of the greatest outcomes of this research. I dedicate it to them and I hope that my insights, as humble as they are, will contribute to their struggle for social and gender justice in a country, Lebanon that insists on forbidding its people their aspiration to a better life.

I am also deeply indebted to Martina Rieker my academic supervisor, to Hanan Sabea and Ray Jureidini, the readers of my research, for their continued guidance and insightful comments on the evolving forms of this thesis. Martina's tireless academic, political and personal commitment towards her students, her unwavering support to us, her endless teasing and sense of humor, constituted part and parcel of my journey and made the MA years a time of true learning and maturing. I am honored to have the chance to be her student. Hanan's commitment to anthropological knowledge, her constant attempts to push us beyond our limits and to encourage us to question our assumed knowledge at deeper levels will always be appreciated. Many people in the academy have also guided me through the journey of formulating this research and preparing for it. Their own work and their engagement with my research is affirming. I would like to thank Jennifer Yvette Terrel, Arunima Gopinath and Mallarika Sinha Roy.

This research would not have been completed without the nurturing group of friends and colleagues at the Center for Gender and Women's Studies at the American University in Cairo, who read earlier drafts of this thesis, shared their ideas and academic critiques throughout the writing phase. This often happened in a friendly environment that acted as a community of support, where we shared food and affect. I owe these hours of writing, crying, laughing and support to Kenza Youssefi, Menna Mourad, Sabrina Lilleby, and Sara Verderi. It is such an honor to have them as friends and colleagues.

The research would also not have been possible without the support of friends and family. Special thanks are owed to Maya Elhelou and Mostafa Mohie whose continuous encouragement, comments and discussions inspired many of the ideas presented here. To Nabil Abdo, Nidal Ayoub, Hisham Ashkar, Ghassan Makarem, Farah Salka and Nadine Moawad, whose love, activism and restless commitment to social change were and will always be a source of inspiration. I am indebted to them in terms of friendship and much needed care during the crucial writing stages. I also thank Nadine, Ghassan and Hisham for helping editing parts of the thesis. To Aslam Khan who tried his best, despite the distance, to continuously feed my soul with much needed love. And finally to my mother Olfat and my father 'Haidarof', who have always provided encouragement for my education and choices in life however they seemed 'awkward'. This thesis is dedicated to their labor.

ABSTRACT

In January 2015, the union for domestic workers, predominantly migrants, was launched. Working within secluded houses, domestic workers may be relatively invisible, but numbering nearly 200 thousands, they represent one of the largest sectors of Lebanon's working class. Unionizing domestic workers opens up the discussion on the possibility of organizing those who are perceived as unorganizable. Hence, this research looks into the ways in which domestic workers in Lebanon are collectively struggling to transform the economic and social conditions of paid domestic work through labor union organizing. Chapter 1 discusses the processes through which domestic workers have been produced as an 'exceptional' labor category through media, activists' and academic discourses. Chapter 2 situates the labor union organizing for domestic workers within the larger scene of the labor union movement in Lebanon suggesting that under the current neoliberal order, labor unions cannot continue to ignore these 'excessive' laboring bodies that are increasingly informal, migrants and women. Chapter 3 examines the process of unionizing the domestic workers highlighting the potentialities, as well as the obstacles confronting this process. It also looks into the multiple power relations that shape their union through axes of class, gender, race and nationality, suggesting that the 'domestic worker' is not a singular category rather it is inflicted with gendered, racial and national divisions. The nature and the location of the work, the gender of the workers, as well as their race and national origins, are all contingent on the ways in which the workers are produced within the labor union context. Chapter 4 analyzes the contribution of women's rights

organizations in rendering visible cases of abuse against migrant domestic workers. It argues that the 'death' of class politics made women's rights organizations address migrant domestic workers issues as a separate labor category, further contributing to their production as an 'exception' under neoliberalism. Finally, chapter 5 opens up the discussion on the prospects of labor organizing in a national framework and under the contemporary laboring regime which is increasingly feminized, internationalized and informalized.

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CHAPTER 1

Beyond the Weapons of the Weak: Domestic Workers Union in Lebanon

*We are here today celebrating equality for all
Migrants and nationals join together as one
So domestic workers stop dying
It's time to rejoice and strive [...]
Heal Beirut
Make it a better place
For you and me
And the entire workers' race
There are migrants dying
Do you care for their living?
Make it a better place
For you and for me*

(Extract from a song written and sung by the domestic workers' unionists during the launching of their union on January 25, 2015.)

Sunday May 4, 2015, on the occasion of the International Workers' Day, hundreds of migrant domestic workers and their allies in Lebanon, took the streets claiming that their union be formally recognized by the Lebanese government. The union has been denounced by the Labor Minister as "illegal", arguing that it will only "generate problems" instead of solving them. The minister suggested that the "protection" for domestic workers is best guaranteed through "new laws", not through union organizing (Naharnet, 2015), in other words, rights are unequivocally the 'governor's' grant, not to be claimed for or bargained. He added: "protection takes place through procedures, not through the introduction of the domestic workers into political and class games." (Al-akhbar; 2015) The minister's last statement blatantly expresses the state of fear from

workers organizing, migrants in particular, who through their attempt are putting a foot out of the 'zone of exception' into the political and the social space of the nation.

Various sources estimate the number of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon between 150 and 200 thousands in an overall workforce of 1.45 million (Tayah, 2012:9). In a country where state provisions for childcare and care for the elderly are absent, the burden falls on the nuclear family, and women in particular, to cope with the organization of care and domestic work. Cheap and precarious migrant domestic labor represents a low cost alternative to the Lebanese care deficit. It is estimated that one in every 4 families in Lebanon employs a migrant domestic worker (Jureidini, 2011:23).

As the number of migrant domestic workers gradually grew in the 1990s, along with the increase of reported cases of abuse in the 2000s, civil society groups began to take initiative to highlight and address these violations. Women's rights and human rights organizations (both local and international) came to supplement church-led charity organizations that had been working since the 1980s on offering safe spaces for migrants, including domestic workers, offering charity, communal ceremonies, prayers and providing migrant workers with legal and social assistance (Moors et al; 2009). Tayah (2012) distinguishes two time periods for these interventions: the first is the era dominated by churches and faith-based associations (1980-2005); the second is the period following the 2006 establishment of the "National Steering Committee on Migrant Domestic Workers" (which includes the International Labor Organization (ILO), human rights organizations, the Placement Agencies' Syndicate and the Ministry of Labor). NGOs' actions towards the migrant domestic workers are simultaneous and at some instances, intersect with the actions of faith base organizations. However, post

2006 marked a more substantive role for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and brought in new dimensions to the struggle for domestic workers' rights. However, the primary approach remained dominated by humanitarian focus on cases of violence, trafficking, and deaths at the expense of labor organizing. As a result, "migrant domestic workers are first and foremost portrayed as victims duped by agents and exploited and mistreated by employers" (Moors et al, op.cit; pp: 192-3). This dominant approach, besides propagating the plight of domestic workers, failed to address the unequal power relations between workers and employers. Kerbage (2014) argues that throughout the second era, workers remained to a large extent excluded from carrying their demands and addressing the authorities in their name without intermediaries. Workers were also excluded from negotiations with state authorities, embassies, and recruitment and placement agencies. Despite the fact that the work of these NGOs succeeded in pressuring the Lebanese state to take action on small areas of reform such as the unified standard contract¹ in 2009 and the draft law² for domestic workers in 2011, these steps and measures preserved the *kafala* system and further institutionalized the exclusion of domestic workers (Esim & Kerbage; 2011).

Motaparthi (2015) defines the *kafala* as a "system of control" and as a way for governments to delegate responsibility for migrants to private citizens or companies.

¹ The unified standard contract is a model contract which migrant workers need to comply before work permits are issued by the Ministry of Labor. It stipulates a minimum of rights for migrant domestic workers such as the right to adequate food and clothing. Other terms of the contract include guarantees to a weekly day of rest and annual holidays. It limits the number of working hours per day to ten hours. It gives the workers the right to quit their workplace if they are abused and it obliges the employers to arrange health insurance for the workers.

² In February 2011, Labor Minister Boutros Harb proposed a draft law to regulate the work of migrant domestic workers that would keep the current sponsorship "kafala" system in place, but his draft law was abandoned as a change in government took place.

She argues that the system gives sponsors a set of legal abilities to control workers "without the employer's permission, workers cannot change jobs, quit jobs, or leave the country. If a worker leaves a job without permission, the employer has the power to cancel his or her residence visa, automatically turning the worker into an illegal resident in the country. Workers whose employers cancel their residency visas often have to leave the country through deportation proceedings, and many have to spend time behind bars" (Motaparthy, 2015). Their fragile conditions are further exacerbated with the discrimination they face as poor migrant women who work in a profession that lacks social and formal recognition.

The noticeable distinction over the last decade is that the needs and interests of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon have overwhelmingly been the concern of NGOs rather than trade unions. Recently, this started to shift when the National Federation of Workers and Employees' Trade Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL) began to organize domestic workers, predominantly migrants with a few Lebanese nationals, marking the third era in the struggle for domestic workers' rights. Yet, this new era is far from disentangling itself from the previous one. On the contrary, the trade union for domestic workers was formed based on cooperation between FENASOL, the International Labor Organization (ILO), Kafa (Enough Violence, a women's rights organization), Insan (human rights organization) and the Migrant Community Center (MCC, a center run by the Anti-Racism Movement in Beirut).

1.1. Contextualizing the Domestic Workers' Union

2015 marked a shift in the history of organizing migrant workers in Lebanon. It witnessed the birth of the first trade union for domestic workers under the umbrella of FENASOL. The Federation's initiative to organize domestic workers was compelled and supported by the ILO Bureau of Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) in Beirut. A report published by ILO in 2012 recommended that:

“NGOs are expected to engage workers' unions in the planning and implementation of relevant programs and activities if only to emphasize the "worker" in domestic workers. When unions become thoroughly informed about the working and living conditions of domestic workers, their commitment to domestic workers' issues during tripartite dialogues on migrant workers becomes more significant.” (Tayah, 2012:56)

In fact, the ILO global agenda on domestic workers, following the adoption of the ILO Convention 189 in 2011 on domestic work, emphasized the need for local trade union federations to act as partners to organize domestic workers and ultimately push towards a tripartite negotiation between state, workers, and employers / placement agencies. This coincided with local dynamics among trade unions in Lebanon, as well as regional uprising which all played a role in the benefit of domestic workers.

In 2012, FENASOL, which is tied to the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), took the decision to withdraw its membership from the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL), a national body that suffers from an ineffective and corrupt bureaucracy, as well as extremely poor workers' membership and participation, as I will discuss in Chapter 2. Following this move, FENASOL, which itself was not free from similar structural problems as the CGTL, needed and wanted to assert itself as an

alternative model to the latter and compete over the status of workers' representation in Lebanon. The withdrawal came as a reaction to CGTL's leadership alliance with the employers, conceding to a minimum wage less than that proposed by the ex-Minister of Labor, Charbel Nahas, and refusing that the universal health coverage proposed by Nahas to be financed from taxing real estate profit and financial speculation. The CGTL notoriously made history in demanding a minimum wage scale less than what a labor minister had proposed. FENASOL's withdrawal was criticized by many labor activists and journalists as too little too late (Zbeeb, 2012) and that its leadership, together with the leadership of the Communist Party, should have taken this decision years ago in order to stop the continuous process of weakening the trade union movement in Lebanon since the 1990s (Zbeeb, 2012). The LCP leadership justified this delay based on the belief that they could have a stronger say within the CGTL. Also both leaderships (LCP and FENASOL) long defended the unity of the trade union movement even when the trade union lost its representation of workers and even when this unity meant uniting with the corrupt leadership of the CGTL. However, in 2012, FENASOL finally found it was impossible to continue with this 'unholy marriage' with the Confederation.

The decision to withdraw also came within a national context of intensified labor mobilization within the informal, formal, public and private sectors. Spinneys (a supermarket chain) workers were fighting a unionization battle, contract workers of the Lebanese Electric Company, Hariri hospitals, Lebanese University, and Casino du Liban were on strike for fixed employment. Teachers in private and public schools, along with public employees were fighting a long battle for wage increase with strikes and protests reaching the tens of thousands. The common denominator among these labor struggles,

beside the common experience of precarity, was their lack of formal union organization which made their actions weak and unable to fully attain the demands. Hence, CGTL's inefficiency and corruption, as well as the intensification of labor protests reopened the public discussion on the need for a democratic, independent and representative labor movement in Lebanon. But this discussion was not only local it was also taking place at the regional level within the revolutionary context of 2011 in the Arab world. Workers formed independent trade union federations as alternatives to the state-led federations in Egypt and Yemen and union organizing played a leading role in the popular uprisings against dictatorships in Tunisia and Bahrain.

In response to these local and regional developments, the CGTL issued a statement on December 20, 2012 accusing "anyone who wants to establish an independent trade union of seeking to atomize, dismember, and divide the trade unions and abandon the workers in order to serve the Zionist project calling for constructive chaos" (Zbeeb, 2012). ACTRAV, the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities, had been working to assist the formation of independent trade union federations or support ones already existing. The case of Lebanon was in the middle, in the sense that there was no real independent trade union federation but the FENASOL leadership was willing to form one, particularly if this meant technical and financial support from the ILO and other international trade union organizations. In light of their accusation of being at the service of the Zionists, ACTRAV members, mostly left-leaning Lebanese labor activists, became more determined to support and work with FENASOL as an exclusive partner in Lebanon. As a result, FENASOL decided on three main priorities:

- 1) To pressure the Lebanese parliament into adopting the 1948 ILO Convention no. 87 on freedom of association and protection of the right to organize. This move was envisaged to liberate union action from administrative control of the Ministry of Labor and to allow public employees to create their own trade unions. Under the current Lebanese law, public employees are prevented from forming and joining trade unions and striking or taking any kind of collective action.
- 2) To change the internal structure of FENASOL into a democratic and inclusive organization of workers from all nationalities.
- 3) To organize workers in the informal sector.

Interestingly, FENASOL leadership focused on organizing migrant domestic workers, while other informal sector workers continue to be sidelined from the Federation outreach and organizational agenda. I will further discuss this direction in Chapter 3.

Thus, within the context of local, regional and global events and the intersection of opposing and colluding national and international actors' agendas, the trade union for domestic workers was established on January 25, 2015. The unionization of domestic workers brought focus to the labor dimension of migrant domestic workers' experiences, which had previously been sidelined in academic and activist discourse that had framed domestic workers primarily as victims of "modern-day slavery."

1.2. Beyond the Weapons of the Weak

In a recent discussion with my mother about my research on domestic workers in Lebanon, she said: "these workers are treated like slaves, in the full sense of the word." To support her argument, she added: "go to Google and you will see pictures of them being abused. You will read stories of them being denied food, denied rest and vacations, overworked, sexually harassed and killed." My working mother is not an activist and has never employed a live-in domestic worker, but her knowledge about the plight of domestic workers in the country were mainly drawn from media reports, television shows, and newspaper articles that proliferated in the last few years highlighting cases of abused domestic workers. This coverage gave her a critical lens about the ways in which some of our relatives treated their live-in domestic workers, a treatment that she described as amounting to "racism".

The media's growing interest in the subject, as highlighted above, was the consequence of the work undertaken by NGOs. However, the focus of these NGOs on women migrant domestic workers in isolation from migrant workers, and workers in general, framed the domestic workers as an exceptional category, whose working experiences differ from those of the working class. The overworked body of a Syrian construction worker, for instance, does not receive the same attention that the migrant domestic worker's abused body receives. And while the *kafala* system for migrant domestic workers is highlighted on the ground that it allows the abuse of the worker by the employer, the same system which is also applicable for other migrant workers and

which also binds them to their employer, does not get the same attention. When earlier in 2015 the Minister of Labor issued a decree extending the *kafala* system to the Syrian workers in Lebanon, who were previously exempted from the sponsor, none of the NGOs opposing the *kafala* system for migrant domestic workers protested, nor did FENASOL. One of the responses I received regarding this silence is that the Syrian workers in Lebanon constitute a 'political issue' rather than a 'purely' labor issue. Hence, for the NGOs it's safe to speak about domestic workers' exploitation within familiar depoliticized human rights framework since it averts the 'dirty' field of politics. Thus, boundaries are being drawn between the labor issues and the political as separate spheres.

Going back to my discussion with my mother, she was very reluctant towards my proposition to look at the shared experience of labor exploitation of the domestic workers and other workers; she said: "it's the responsibility of the trade-unions to speak up on behalf of the Syrian workers. It's not the responsibility of the NGOs." When I asked for further clarification regarding this 'division of labor' between the trade-unions and the NGOs, she added: "the domestic workers are disrespected and abused. This is why the NGOs should talk about them." In the distinction she made between the role of the NGOs and the role of the trade-unions, she made a distinction between what she considers as 'workers' who should be defended by labor unions on the one side; and on the other side, the 'victims of abuse' who should be defended by NGOs. In other words the domestic workers are not considered workers; they are recognized only in their identity as abused women. This framework is similar to the one being employed by many NGOs working for the rights of domestic workers. And this, I argue deepens the

state of exception of domestic workers when the discourse mobilized only concentrates on incidents of extreme abuse and addresses the state to "decrease the vulnerability of the migrant domestic workers" (Hamill, 2011: 6) rather than pushing for the full guarantee of the migrant domestic workers' labor rights. The discourse on extreme victimhood and slavery-like working conditions of domestic workers has also been the angle through which many academic writings discussed the issue of domestic workers.

My interest in looking at the ways in which scholars have portrayed domestic workers is driven by the understanding that research does not only reflect the ways the world is, but also shapes the world in which we live through the act of knowledge production (Graham, 2000), hence research is a performative practice defined by Butler (1993) as "the reiterative and citational practice through which discourse produces the effects that it names." (1993:2) As de Regt (2010) notes, many of the studies that deal with domestic workers in the Middle East often focus on the abuse and exploitation, making a plea for the regulation of women's legal status and pointing to oppression and inequality. I argue that the discourse on cases of extreme abuse contributes to the development of a hierarchy of violence, whereby some forms of abuse can be tolerated and others not.

Furthermore, some prominent academic work on migrant domestic workers, have framed domestic work in Lebanon and in the Gulf in terms of slavery-like practices (Jureidini & Moukharbel, 2004) The modern day slavery argument is used to highlight trafficking of the domestic workers, which is linked to the use of force or deception within the migration process and to describe the effects of the *kafala*. The discourse on trafficking constructs the domestic workers as victims; and gives legitimacy to states'

anti-trafficking measures that encompass draconian anti-migration laws and stringent policing of migrants, which ironically increase trafficking and labor exploitation of undocumented migrants. (Andrijasevic, 2007) Scholars have highlighted the ways in which anti-trafficking policies and discourses tend to eclipse other forms of abuse within migration and dismiss the rights of the workers to labor entitlements and rights including the right to organize (Mahdavi, 2011). However, one needs to ask which category of labor is discursively produced as 'slaves' and which not? Why some categories are made visible under this category and not others? And why migrant domestic workers are produced as the emblematic example of neo-slavery and the Syrian construction workers in Beirut are not? What I mean is that there's a lack in comparative studies that discern the commonalities among domestic workers and other subordinated groups, urban and rural under neoliberal security states. Some scholars have criticized the slavery discourse, underlining the fact that under neoliberalism the boundary is blurred between the 'free' and 'unfree' wage labor and between forced labor and extremely poor working conditions (Davidson, 2006; Millar, 2014). Other scholars have argued that the victim discourse produces a category of labor that disciplines workers, as Pande (2012) puts it:

“The demand for the extension of human rights to MDWs on the basis of their overarching vulnerability delimits the political potential of workers to resist exploitation and abuses, form alliances, and fight for their own rights. Such third party demands, made on humanitarian grounds, conceal and diminish powerful struggles organized by the workers themselves.” (2012: 385)

The idea here is that migrant domestic workers are perceived solely as objects of biopower of the state, neoliberal market and migratory regimes. This construction neglects the everyday array of mechanisms employed by these workers to cope, to negotiate and even resist their precarious condition. In fact, in reaction to the victimhood framework, some scholars undertook research inspired by James Scott (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* to analyze covert forms of subversions on individual and local level. Scholarships for instance have highlighted the everyday resistance, like foot dragging and mockery deployed by women in their negotiations with their employers. Moukarbel, (2009) explores the ways in which emotional ties with the family members are used by the servant as means to defy the control exercised by the employers. Pande (2012) highlights the “meso-levels” of resistance undertaken by migrant domestics which cannot be classified as either private and individual or as organized collective action. These acts involve strategic dyads forged across balconies by the most restricted live-in workers and small informal communities formed by migrant domestic workers. The focus of this literature on the individual level of resistance is due to the fact that the collective organizing continues to be a difficult task because of the nature of the work, where women working in dispersed workplaces have few avenues for interaction with each other.

Hence, by exploring the trade-union for female and male domestic workers in Lebanon, I hope to move beyond "the weapons of the weak" and contribute to the literature on migrant domestic workers collective organizing. However, I want to make it clear that for me there's no form of resistance that is more legitimate or more important than another. It's not an inherent contradiction between the everyday and the

organized forms of resistance that gives the social processes their salience (Gutmann, 1993). Instead, one needs to ask, what makes actors under what circumstances follow one or the other form of resistance and the relation between them. These forms regarding domestic workers, as we will see, occur together and transform themselves into each other. Finally, I argue that the union for domestic workers which alternatively mobilizes their subjectivities as workers contributes to the recovering of the salience of class in the new economy and to the recognition of domestic work as work like any other. In this regard, the class analysis disrupts the narrative of victimization and offers support for the constitution of new subject positions for migrant domestic workers outside the static constraints of the victim identity.

1.3. Research Questions

My interest in the question of domestic workers grew out of my broader interest in the question of labor and labor organizing in Lebanon and in the region. This interest was that of a socialist and a feminist activist who believes that the working class has a centrality in the struggle for justice. The ways in which workers, even the most precarious and marginal found force in collective and organized struggles always had grabbed my attention. From the strike of Tax Collectors for equal pay in Egypt in 2008, to the Future Pipe factory workers' plant occupation in North Lebanon in 2010, to the union for domestic workers in 2015; and in between, tens of workers' agitations that I have been following. In all of these events that were emanating from the experience of distress and injustice, workers male and female, through their action, were creating a

world of possibilities, of shared strength, solidarity and affection. This is also what I witnessed during the launching of the trade-union for domestic workers and later during my interviews with them. Their narratives are full of accounts of daily attacks on their integrity and dignity, but they also bear witness to incredible strength and courage and hope they have in social change.

I have been involved in the very first stage of the union in 2013, when I was invited by ILO, as member of the Anti-Racism Movement, to facilitate a Q&A session with Ethiopian workers about their shared experience of domestic work. This session was one of many sessions that were taking place at FENASOL, with domestic workers from different nationalities within the Participatory Action Research (PAR) that ILO designed in close cooperation with domestic workers. This research was the base of what later on will be the union. My involvement was interrupted when I went to Cairo to join the Gender and Women Studies as a MA student. After one year and half I returned to Lebanon to find that the women who took part in the research, became unionists and they are preparing for the launching of their trade-union. One of the things that grabbed my attention was the transformation that happened on the level of their discourse, from the very personalized experience of abuse during the PAR, to the discourse on their collective experience as domestic workers engulfed with more assertive reclamation of rights as workers. The engagement of these women in labor union organizing, within a Lebanese federation of trade-unions made me pose a series of questions:

1. On the level of trade-union movement in Lebanon I ask: how the precarious, informal and migrant workers were effaced from the trade-union agenda? What kind of challenges do informalization,

feminization and internationalization of labor pose for the trade-unions? What is it about this celebratory moment of organizing domestic workers but that excludes at the same time other categories of informal and migrant workers? And how does the endless production of difference, where nationality constitutes the base for articulating different sets of rights, profit capital? And finally how is the dynamic between women migrants and male nationals in the trade-union for domestic workers, played out?

2. On the level of the women rights organizations I ask: how did the women movement in Lebanon engage with the question of domestic work? What is the framework through which some organizations deal with migrant domestic workers? What are the limitations of their politics regarding domestic workers? And how does the engagement of the women rights organizations differ from the trade-union's engagement?
3. On the level of the militant domestic workers I ask: Who are these women and what allows them to become active trade-union militants? What motivates these women to organize and to break the fear and danger surrounding their 'illegal' action? What does the union mean to them? And how they are forging their collective workers' identity?

1.4. Theoretical framework

This research examines how domestic workers in Lebanon are collectively struggling to transform the economic and social conditions of paid domestic work through labor union organizing. How they are striving to assert their right to a dignifying existence by redefining their working conditions and the processes that shape their labor and give it meaning. And it also examines the effects that their action can engender on doing labor and feminist politics.

In talking about domestic workers we are talking about women, predominantly migrants and workers. Their experience as workers is entangled with other elements that are contributing to their subject positioning. In fact, migrant domestic workers experience three folded exploitations as migrants, as women and as workers. The social lack of recognition to domestic worker is due to the fact that it is considered as extension of women's natural role. However, this lack of recognition was coupled with an intensified degradation of the occupation through its association with race and nationality (Jureidini; 2009). Rodriguez (2010) argues that "while this labor is constitutive for the production of value, this value is largely not recognized in society because the cultural predication of this labor connotes it as "non -productive" and its labor force is devalued through its prescription as feminized and racialized labor" (Rodriguez, 2010:8). Indeed, the relative positioning of migrant domestic workers is one that is shaped by their relations to capital, gender and race. I employ class as an analytical tool to analyze the labor union for domestic workers in relation to the labor

union movement and women's rights movement in Lebanon. Class, however, is understood as a process rather than a fixed structure to which one belongs (Gramham, 2000). It is understood as a relation that is open to constant transformations. This understanding of class helps enlightening the ways in which it articulates with other aspects of social existence as in the case of migrant domestic workers and allows us to see the constant change in the composition of the working class and labor relations with the development of capitalism. How can we then understand class and labor organizing in the neoliberal age of precarity and informality of labor?

Paid domestic workers attest to the ways in which capital expansion has brought new laboring categories under capitalist relations. On another level, broader structural changes in capitalism have weakened the link between capital and labor, thereby displacing the classic industrial working class of the Fordist model with a more fragmented and atomized multitude whose relationship to work and production is more tenuous. The growing precarity was also coupled with a growing informality. The post-Fordist transformations under the neoliberal shift, i.e. flexibilisation of production systems and its implications on labor informalization, have not only led to the growing number of the 'reserve army of labor', but more importantly to the weakening of their collective bargaining power. These political economic transformations have fundamentally segmented the traditional working class through the processes of casualization and contractualisation.

These complex decompositions of the traditional working class illustrate the challenges that labor unions encounter under the new regime. Still, the membership losses of trade unions could also be attributed to their general reluctance to step out of

their 'comfort zones', centered on formal, workplace-based, male-dominated workers (Kabeer et al, 2013). Their common inability to include the emerging 'classes of labor' has animated a debate on their potential revitalization. Although many trade unions have incorporated 'renewal projects' to respond to these recent challenges and increasingly address the issues of the 'unorganized', these projects tend to "defend, rather than rethink, the traditional labor movement" (Chang, 2012: 45). In other words, these projects are still considered as 'additional work for the labor movement' rather than deep 'reorientation' (Chang, 2009: 177). New epicenters of labor struggles have, paradoxically, occurred with the expanding circuits of capitalist production and its modalities of accumulation. In this sense, the processes of fragmentation and segmentation of 'traditional labor', which partially intended to 'dilute' contradictions and weaken labor bargaining power, have shaped the recent mobilizations of the working class. Hence, the migrant domestic workers, which constitute one secluded category of labor, started to organize. Their organizing can be understood as a struggle to transform the class processes that shape their labor as domestic workers and to challenge racial and gender association with such work. In other words, they are struggling to break free from what some scholars have termed slavery-like conditions. Their union aims to transform paid domestic labor, to displace negative stereotypes and to confront the dominant ideologies of race, class and gender. With their assertiveness, a new subjectivity associated with the model of the militant unionist is being forged.

This understanding of the complex construction of subjectivities of domestic workers is not always recognized by labor unions who historically mobilized over formal class model (the industrial/formal male worker), and that are known for their

nationalist and exclusionary practices toward migrants. Hence, the domestic workers were not perceived by the unions historically as workers worth organizing. On the contrary they were invisible or at best, considered marginal temporary workers in a devalued labor process and hence their labor dimension was sidelined. It's kind of ironic that this category of labor, among other informal workers, that was historically shunned by the trade-unions is today seen as the one on which the future (and present) survival of the trade-union movement is based. At this level, there's a need for the trade-unions to adopt alternative discourse and strategies to deal with a growing feminized, internationalized and informalized labor force. In this regard, I embrace Papadopoulos and Stephenson (2008) call for a new form of unionism that operates on a transnational and trans-sectorial levels and which questions the predominant workforce identity as male and native.

Women rights organization on their part, and which also historically prioritized the 'Lebanese woman' in their agenda, started a decade ago to develop programs on domestic workers. However, these organizations dealt with one aspect of the experience of domestic workers: as women victims of violence. In this framework, not only the labor dimension of domestic workers was sidelined, but also the deployed violence framework went un-problematized: do all women suffer from the same kind of violence? What about the violence that is exercised by women employers against the women domestic workers? What about the social hierarchies that structure the encounter between these two categories of women? As Gibson-Graham argues, the household represents a "social site in which a wide variety of class, gender, racial, sexual and other practices intersect" (in Rodriguez, 2010: 10). However, in the framework of the women

rights organizations it's only the gender aspect that is stressed. This gender identification works to subsume and conceal differences of race and class.

1.5. Fieldwork and Methodology

My field work took place between December 2014 and February 2015. It consisted of 15 one-on-one interviews, informal meetings, small group discussions with migrant domestic workers' union and non-union members and participatory observations which took place at FENASOL's headquarter and other workers' gatherings such as the union congress. I conducted 7 in-depth interviews with the members of executive board of the union for domestic workers of diverse backgrounds, including workers from Lebanon, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Cameroon and Madagascar; Economists; Lebanese trade-unionists from FENASOL and the CGTL; women's rights activists from KAFA, and finally ILO members of ACTRAV.

While I was previously involved in the preliminary stages of the union for domestic workers, my positioning vis-à-vis those with whom I interacted in the course of this research was not always defined strictly by this relationship. My interactions with various Lebanese union activists in particular, were all closely tied to my previous work with the Lebanese Labor Watch (a center for the defense of workers' rights). As such, upon meeting them, I always made the point to explain the academic objective of my work and that it is not linked to any NGOs' work. This careful reminder of my academic objective proved to be important as a strategy to have access to FENASOL's headquarter, but not to the extent of allowing me to attend the meetings of the union for domestic

workers' board. The objections to my frequent requests to attend these meetings were mediated by the NGOs-FENSAOL's unspoken sensitivities over migrant domestic workers' organizing and representation. Despite the fact that the union was born out of the cooperation between some NGOs, FENASOL and the ILO the relations were nonetheless characterized by tension. I was told by some of my interlocutors that some NGOs consider themselves to be the 'godfathers' of migrant domestic workers; since in their account long years of engagement with them, more expertise and knowledge in dealing with domestic workers; while the labor unions are new comers to this field and they lack expertise in dealing with migrant women. FENASOL's leadership, on its side, considers that the 'natural' place of the domestic workers, as workers, is in the labor unions. The leadership considers that the NGOs' involvement was very fruitful in advancing the cause of domestic workers however they lack expertise, ability and desire to collectively organize the workers. Hence the tension is the result of the competition over representation of domestic workers which is driven by donors' funding that rendered the migrant domestic workers a valuable asset to be fought over among groups such as NGOs and unions. It also highlights the ways in which the different actors position them as workers, as women and as migrants. For instance, in the union context they are mainly considered workers, for Kafa they are migrant women. Thus my previous work with some NGOs was to a certain extent conflated with my new 'hat' as researcher in the view of FENASOL's leadership and influenced the ways I was perceived by the leadership.

My interactions with migrant domestic workers' union members mostly took place outside FENASOL's headquarter. We met in different cafes and restaurants in

Beirut. The workers were aware of my work on workers' rights or at the very least my relation and previous engagement with the Anti-Racism Movement and the feminist organization Nasawiya which are involved in migrant workers' community organizing. This element, contrary to the case of FENASOL's leadership, facilitated my interactions with the migrant domestic workers who identified me as a Lebanese ally. As Sangster (1994) suggests, ones' past and current political ideology shape the construction of the interviews and the narrative form. For example, the shared political and ethical commitments represented an affinity through which the workers felt comfortable sharing with me their opinions and feelings and soliciting on some occasions my personal opinion regarding issues related to their union. I was aware of the working of my privilege throughout my fieldwork as a researcher vis-à-vis my interlocutors. In fact, I was struggling with an ethical dilemma related to the researcher's authority and ability to easily access the most intimate aspect of the lives of less privileged people. As Stacey (1991) notes: "fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave."(1991:23) In fact, simply by our virtue of researchers we occupy a position of authority that allows us to interpret and to control the research product outcomes. While I share Sangster's view that it is impossible to create "an ideal feminist methodology that negates power differences" (1994:12) I still believe that there is a way to reduce the gap of researcher/interviewee's power differences and rendering research a more democratic endeavor. This remedy is influenced by Enslin (1994) who lays down the ground for an alternative praxis of ethnography (feminist ethnography in particular), whereby practice and theory are put under constant critical assessment through direct

involvement of the researcher in his/her community under study. This engagement has the potential of transforming research and rendering the researcher politically accountable before his/her interlocutors.

In my interviews with domestic workers I was particularly interested to gather their personal narratives, their history of organizing, their motivations to join the union, their relation to the NGOs, and their perception of labor union activism. The majority of the women interviewed constitutes the most active militants in the newly formed union. They have been in Lebanon between 7 and 30 years. They are freelancers, while they are still governed by the *kafala*, they have established relations of trust with their *kafil* which allowed them to have greater mobility. Most of them have history in community organizing before the union and some of them have university degrees, one at least was a school teacher before migrating to Lebanon. The women spoke either French or English, and in both cases we were able to communicate without the need of an external help of a translator. Their narratives made me realize that there's no one category of domestic workers and that domestic work is differently lived and experienced based on employment conditions (freelance, live in), their nationality, their age, their education and languages proficiency. These different experiences also shaped the women workers' activism and trade-union militancy.

CHAPTER 2

Workers without Trade-Unions, Trade-Unions without Workers

2.1. The Working Class is Dead, Long Live the Working Class

"There is no working class anymore in Lebanon", says Ahmad, a 63 years old university professor who has been a labor agitator in the Ghandour Candy Company in the early 1970s and who was affiliated to the Communist Action Organization. The Ghandour factory once employed over 1300 workers and is still entrenched in the collective memory of the Left as a pre-civil war leading site for labor activism following the major 1972 strike that ended with police killing of two workers, Fatma Khawaja and Yusuf Attar. In the post- civil war era, the factory was split into two smaller factories, following a dispute among the heirs. Today, one of the two factories employs 80 Lebanese and migrant workers on a contract basis and the other, which was relocated to Saudi Arabia, employs around 200 hundred workers. What has become with the Ghandour factory workers is somehow representative of the transformations that occurred at the level of the labor force in Lebanon and which pushed some to lament to 'death' of the working class.

The myth of the demise of the working class is widely accepted in the Lebanese society and propagated irrespectively by its secular and sectarian elite from all political spectrums, on the Left and on the Right. The myth goes on to say that people living

within this geographical space of 10452 km², constitute sectarian communities exclusively and not social classes. I say it's a myth and I am convinced that it acts to conceal social disparities within the society, as Traboulsi successfully argues: "the denial of the existence of class comes as no surprise. Every social system exercises its own special logic when it comes to concealing manifestations of privilege, inequality and exploitation between its members." (Traboulsi, 2014:6) Against the idea that 'class is dead', I argue that there's a need for a theory and praxis of class politics that do not only capture the formal factory workers as representatives of the working class, and who remain until today the object of leftist nostalgia. In this sense, I treat class as dynamic social relations that are not fixed, nor always easy to identify. Rather, I perceive class relations as shaped largely by the changes in relations of production under neoliberalism.

In fact, the neoliberal turn since the 1970s has dramatically reconfigured the working class. With it, profound changes have occurred on the level of relations of productions, labor practices and organization. The working class has come under big pressure resulting in limiting its political power (Hardt, 1996). The fragmentation of production processes and the pursuit of a flexible labor market strategies, have replaced the concentrated and stable labor force with a "disaggregated, dispersed, largely informal and increasingly female labor force." (Kabeer et al, 2013:4) Thus, entire laboring categories which once enjoyed certain stability, have found themselves in precarious employment conditions. Moreover, the flexible and diffuse flow of capital corresponded with a constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization of labor. Structural adjustments programs, economic and political crises as well as international

trade agreements have had devastating consequences on the global south, driving labor to migrate legally, but often illegally in search for better life opportunities in the North and in sites of capital investments such as Singapore, Beijing, and Rio and to resource extraction industries in Africa. However, while the South-North labor migration has occupied a central place in the scholarship, South-South migration is understudied despite that it is equally significant (de Regt, 2010; Ong, 2006). Rodriguez (2007) argues that coloniality of power continues until today to mark the patterns of contemporary transnational migration. That entails the hierarchal classification, gendered and racial differentiation of populations from the South in the labor market who occupy the most 'undesirable' jobs. Driven by the logic of capital accumulation a process of devaluation of labor takes place and is reflected in their exploitation as racialized and feminized labor.

Under these circumstances, traditional trade-unions that are based on the Fordist model of organizing are facing serious challenges. The contemporary conditions of the working class require new means of organizing, new ways of forging alliances to advance workers' political power, creative strategies of resistance or what Foucault calls "counter-conducts" (cited in Lazzarato, 2009: 114). This alliance must transcend the segmentation of professions, qualifications, nationality, race, ethnicity and gender that are exacerbated and promoted by the dominant classes. However, the fact remains that the trade-unions in Lebanon and globally, perpetuate national ethnocentric analysis of labor and continue to organize following the Fordist model of the formal man breadwinner worker. Vast categories of labor, such as informal migrant women, are overlooked by trade-union movements. On many instances they are scapegoated for

economic crises, jobs scarcity and unemployment. In Lebanon and elsewhere, under neoliberalism, the situation can be summarized in one sentence: there are workers without trade-unions, and trade-unions without workers.

This chapter aims to situate the union for domestic workers within the context of the labor union 'movement' in Lebanon. Working within private spaces, domestic workers may be relatively invisible. But numbering nearly 200 thousands, they represent one of the changing faces of labor relations under neoliberalism and thus constitute one of the largest sectors of Lebanon's working class. Unionizing domestic workers opens up the discussion on the possibility of organizing those who are perceived as unorganizable. But also suggests that under the current neoliberal order labor unions cannot continue to ignore these 'excessive' laboring bodies who are increasingly informal, migrants and women.

2.2. Neoliberalism and Precarious Labor

The founding ideology of the Lebanese state that is still in place until this day is that for the country 'to function', it needs a little bit of state to guarantee the status of the sectarian communities as mediators with the individual citizens and a great deal of 'laissez-faire' economy. On this level, the Lebanese constitution, adopted in 1926, is one of the rare constitutions that specify the economic system of the country. It states: "the economic system is free and ensures private initiative and the right of private property" (article 6). This doesn't mean that the state does not intervene in the economy. On the contrary, "this intervention for social redistribution of the wealth

comes not from the upper social classes in favor of the ones down, but from down in favor of the upper social classes" says Fawwaz Traboulsi at a lecture, he adds:

"Examples are numerous: the tax system that favors the rich, the subsidies that the Lebanese government provides for the private sector including private schools and hospitals; not to speak of the fact that the structure of the Lebanese economy favors: first, the banking sector. Second, the real estate sector and third, the import trade; What I mean is that in Lebanon and elsewhere under neoliberalism, and against the common belief, the state does intervene a lot in the economy but in the interest of the wealthy. The peculiarity however, that the Lebanese state was initially a liberal economic state since independence. What happened is that we moved from liberalism of the pre-war period, to neoliberalism of the post war period." (Traboulsi, lecture, 2015)

The 1990s post-civil war Lebanese economy experienced a pronounced free-market neoliberalisation coupled with labor deregulation (Picard, 2013). The rent economic model that was enforced demanded a low paid foreign working force that does not constitute a burden on capital. At the same time it encouraged, since before the civil war, the Lebanese labor force to migrate to the neighboring gulf countries witnessing a boom in oil prices, guaranteeing a continuous flow of financial remittances (Personal interview, Zbeeb, January 2015). Tabar (2010) highlights the ways in which families in Lebanon became largely dependent on remittances constituting 88 percent of household savings, and 22 percent of household income. He argues that this money is what makes the society endure the lack of proper social and welfare services (Tabar, 2010:17). A rent economy has been put in place to serve a surrounding economy floating in oil money. While the service, financial and banking sectors were extending, the share of agriculture and industry was shrinking in the economy. Tabar argues that

the economically hegemonic class in Lebanon "which is communally and traditionally fragmented, has refused to develop its agrarian and industrial sectors. Instead, it concentrated on the tertiary sector, placing emphasis on trading, tourism, banking and finance. This trend has been reinforced since 1990 as a result of the commitment of successive governments to neo-liberal economic policies, leading to a limited labor market characterized by low pay." (2010:6) Parallel to that, an informal economy has been growing consistently, that the International Monetary Fund (FMI) estimated it to 30 percent of the GDP (The Daily Star, 2011). A structural deformation in the economy took place following the civil war with the domination of medium and small enterprises. A survey conducted in 2003 found that 97 percent of these enterprises employ less than ten workers, and 46.8 percent employ between 2-4 workers, while enterprises with only one employee account for almost 45 percent of the enterprises (Hamdan, 2003).

The situation has not been better for the workers. Millar (2014) underlines the shared experience of precarity common to labor under neoliberalism characterized by a continuous state of anxiety, desperation and risk that mark the growing temporary and the irregularly employed. Indeed, in Lebanon, a broad segment of the workers were turned into precarious contract workers that live day by day, with no minimum security. Half of the workers residing in Lebanon are not covered by any healthcare provisions; and despite popular demands, the government until today refuses to discuss a project for a universal health care. In addition, three quarters of the labor force is not covered by a pension plan, more do they have any form of unemployment benefits. The rate of salaried work in formal sectors has declined considerably to reach 29 percent of the labor force (Zbeeb, 2012). The public sector and state administrations are filled with

thousands of day and contract workers (Lebanese Labor Watch, 2013). Hence, neoliberal economic policies conscripted the majority of the workers residing in Lebanon to precarious living conditions in the service of a minority benefiting from it.

Following these developments, the post-war environment constituted a big challenge for the trade-union movement. However, the movement was not able to constitute a force that could produce effective change in the economy, or at least to restore balance to the unequal power relations between increasingly impoverished segments of the population and the governing coalition (business elite, traditional elite, and warlords who ascended to power following the Ta'if agreement that put an end to the civil war [1975-1990]). To the contrary, the trade-unions, and at their center the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) -the officially recognized sole representative of workers in Lebanon- came out of the war weak, less militant, more porous to sectarian divisions and political parties' control, more conservative, less democratic and less radical than ever, as Zbeeb (2012) puts it: the current leadership (of the CGTL) has played a deliberate role in thwarting any serious challenge to the imbalance of power between workers and employers in Lebanon. Ever since an alliance of warlords and big money assumed control of the Lebanese state under Syrian tutelage, the CGTL has become a key tool for taming society."

2.3. Trade-Unions without Workers

In the post-war years, the government needed to silence the trade-union movement in order to implement its neoliberal policies with the least opposition

possible. At that time in mid-nineties the CGTL was led by a militant left leaning leadership that opposed government policies creating a high public debt, a large trade and budgetary deficits and growing impoverishment of workers and wage earners (Baroudi, 1998). One of the trade-unions' main demands was wage increases for public and private sectors to compensate workers for the loss in purchasing power resulting from inflation in 1992. One of the main strategies used by the Ministry of Labor to curb the militancy of the movement was by granting permissions (licenses) for 'yellow' trade-unions federations set up and controlled by political parties and state officials and to push for their inclusion in the CGTL executive council to prevent the election of anti-government candidates to the leadership of the confederation and to control its decision making process and strategies. In fact, the Labor Code allows for a group of three or more trade-unions to form a federation. The latter can have two representatives in the executive council of the CGTL, regardless of its membership size. Thus, the Trade-Union for Workers in the Paper Products Factories, which has 142 members, has two representatives, similar to the Trade Union of Banks' Employees which has 10 thousand members.

Hence by 'spawning' 'yellow' trade-unions, the government succeeded in hijacking the CGTL. This policy dates from before the war era, however it was more pronounced in the 1990s as the government was stronger and determined to implement its neoliberal project. Baroudi (1998) writes: "upon coming to power, Hariri³ adopted a

³ Rafik Hariri, was a businessman of a big influence. He headed 5 cabinets as prime minister of Lebanon from 1992 until his assassination in 2005. He came to power with an economic program that had a definite order of priorities: reversing the deterioration of the foreign exchange rate for the Lebanese lira, curbing inflation, and launching a massive reconstruction program.

tougher stance towards unions because he objected to their tactics and feared that their "exaggerated demands" for higher wages and more fringe benefits would jeopardize his economic reform program." (Baroudi, 1998:544) For example, in 1997, and in order to ouster the militant leadership of the CGTL, the Ministry of Labor licensed the creation of seven new federations loyal to the speaker of the House and the leader of the Amal Movement, admitting them to the CGTL despite being rejected by its leadership. Consequently, GCTL grew from nine federations of trade unions in 1970, to twenty-one in 1993, to twenty-eight in 1997 to thirty-seven in 2000 to fifty federations of trade unions, with 600 affiliated trade-unions. (Badran & Zbeeb, 2011) This inflation in the number of trade-unions didn't correspond to a growing number in their membership. On the contrary, a study that was done in 2000 and which was based on the official elections lists presented to the Ministry of Labor, estimated the total number of membership of all federations of trade-unions to be around 58 thousand. That means that the actual representation of the CGTL does not exceed, in the best case, 7percent of the total Lebanese labor force. (Badran & Zbeeb, 2011) And in the absence of more recent statistics, many trade-unionists and labor activists argue that, most likely, in the last ten years there was a deterioration in the trade-union membership, especially with the fall back of the CGTL's position, its actions and its inability to achieve any of the demands raised by its trade-unions for over a decade. Since the state succeeded in defeating the militant leadership of the CGTL in 1997, the CGTL has become an organization that maintains the status-quo rather than challenging it. The corruption of the CGTL and its alliance to political parties in power distanced workers from union politics. Workers' demobilization is also related to the fact that the CGTL have become a

proactive player in the political/sectarian division in the society. Apart from usual recourse to union's leaders, in order to sort out dispute between a worker and the management, the CGTL and its affiliated unions contributed very little to collective negotiations and workplace agitations. Union elections at CGTL, thus, were largely based on the politics of personal allegiances, in which the workers elected their representatives in order to provide a direct connection to union leaders that they could make use of when necessary. The CGTL became a corporatist body which is organized hierarchally with power concentrated at the top of the hierarchy. Rather than an institution representing workers, it has become an instrument fostering the interests of the state. While the CGTL has previously built its membership base among workers in the formal sector, today, more than ever, the workers in the informal economy constitute a challenge for the trade-union movement.

2.4. Workers without Trade-Unions

The informal sector accounts for half of the labor force in Lebanon. The common feature of informal employment is the level of precarity for workers involved. Some of the characteristics of informal employment are lack of protection in the event of non-payment of wages, compulsory overtime, lay-offs without notice or compensation, unsafe working conditions and the absence of social benefits and social security. At the same time, informal sector workers pose serious challenges to trade-unions, as Kabeer argues: "workers organizations tend to articulate their strategies, forms and modes of organizing around well-defined work places, tasks and employers, and around a model

of the worker as breadwinner man. Informal sector workers, on the other hand, may have physically dispersed workplaces, a wide range of tasks, no identifiable employer, and, increasingly women.” (Kabeer et al, 2013:4) Despite the growing number of informal sector workers, the attitude of the trade-unions towards them were, and still are, often characterized by fear and hostility, since they are perceived as a threat to the privileges they had won through their organized action. In the next section I give one example of this 'hostility' against informal workers that I have been following as a labor activist and journalist in 2012.

The beginning of May 2012 witnessed the contract workers of EDL (Électricité Du Liban) Lebanon’s electric public company, declaring a strike demanding permanent employment, fairer wages and social and health security. They hold their protest inside the EDL building and its courtyard halting all the work inside the company. The workers wanted the state to recognize that they have been working informally and in the shadow of the company for many years, and that the injuries some workers suffered during their highly risky job (especially for repair workers), had not been compensated. The strikers were also making a statement against the privatization of the company, arguing that it would take away their rights, their social security and other benefits. The strike would continue for 94 days, marking one of the longest strikes in the modern history of Lebanon and throughout which the workers were able to maintain their unity despite state's repression and harassment. The workers were pressured to end their strike following the so called 'political agreement' sponsored by the Hezbollah party, the Amal movement (two Shia parties to which many of the workers belong) and the Free Patriotic Movement (a Christian party established by Michel Aoun, an army general- to

which the Minister of Energy and Water belongs) and the umbrella of the CGTL (to which no one belongs). The agreement was based on an immediate cessation of the strike in return of a 'promise' for the workers to get the status of full time employees. The result was that the workers ended their strike. The promise of full employment evaporated. Three private companies (service providers) started operating in the EDL over which the workers were distributed on a contract basis, leading them to lose their bargaining power.

On one level, the CGTL betrayal of the workers, and the lack of union representation made the negotiations between the management and the workers mediated and dependent on workers' relations within their political parties. "We were left to face the Minister of Energy and Water alone, without any support of the CGTL; we felt that we were orphaned throughout the 94 days" a leader of the strike told me. Indeed, the EDL contract workers did not get any kind of support from the CGTL throughout the strike. The latter intervened on the last day to put an end to the strike in close coordination with the sectarian political parties in power that were more interested in having a share in the partial privatization deal that took place, rather than advancing the workers' livelihood.

On another level, the trade-union of the EDL employees held an aggressive position toward the contract workers and sided with the Minister and the EDL management. During the strike, the trade-union hung leaflets on the walls and doors of the company stating that the strike is "inhibiting the flow of work in the company and obstructing the interests of the citizens." Back then, one of the strikers told me: "if the union has taken a stand in support to our strike, we would have won and we would have

guaranteed our rights and the rights of the full time employees in light of the growing threat of gradual privatization of the company and the gradual attack on the rights of the workers.” The EDL contract workers' case represents only one example of the ways in which formal trade-union and the CGTL deal with informal workers. The latter are not only distant from their agenda and outreach but also denied and treated with hostility.

2.5. Women and Trade Unions: A Conflicted Relationship

Women and trade-unions have often had a conflicted history. In fact, the early history of trade unions was marked by exclusion of women workers. Societal representations of women and of their roles hindered their organization into a coherent force for change. For instance Malek Abisaab (2010) argues that in the 1920's the trade-union leaders' outlook and organizational strategies undermined gender differences in the labor force (2010: 17). Further he argues that:

“The lack of emphasis on demands particular to women forced the latter at times to take an independent course of action and march out against the government without the help of union leaders or workingmen. The unionists and communists, on their part, did not seriously investigate the strong female-based agendas, one of which addressed domestic work and child care as a critical dimension of what women's labor entailed. They did not attempt to seek women-friendly strategies for recruitment or women friendly schedules for labor organization meetings. Instead, male-tailored language, planning practices, and mobilization of initiatives prevailed.” (Abisaab, 2010: 18)

For these reasons, women's early expressions of labor activism were not borne out of unionism, but emanated from their own experiences of exploitation at work and they managed to create a significant labor militancy history of their own since the early silk factories in the 19s century in Mount Lebanon, that were highly based on women labor (Khater, 1996). With the decline of the previously highly lucrative silk industry, the tobacco industry expanded considerably with the establishment in 1935 of the French tobacco monopoly, the Régie Co-Intéressée Libanaise des Tabacs et Tombacs with a female force amounting to 40 percent. Abissaab shows the ways in which women were the most proactively radical, specifically during the 1946 labor strike in which they protested the Régie's discriminatory labor practices. Their activism, the author argues, directly resulted in the passage of the Labor Law for all workers that, while imperfect, were nevertheless an historic step in their struggle. However, women's contribution to the Lebanese labor movement was faintly acknowledged by labor historians as well as unionists and communists. The scarce historical records such as in Al-'Aris (1982) and Al-Buwari (1986), who are prominent historical leaders of the Lebanese trade-union movement, left out most of working women's labor struggles, mainly because many of these struggles fell outside of 'organized labor'.

Today, and despite the fact that the number of women in formal and informal workforces has increased significantly, the unions remain unwilling to rework their structures and strategies to accommodate the new labor force. The growing numbers of women in paid work has not lead to their unionization. Thus, women continue to remain underrepresented in the activities and leadership of all labor unions in Lebanon. Among

100 representatives of the 50 federations of trade-unions in the executive council of the CGTL, there is not one single woman representative.

A series of internal challenges associated with unions themselves have hindered the participation, organization and representation of women workers. A male-dominated culture within mainstream unions makes it easy to overlook women-specific issues. This culture also tends to blame the woman for her underrepresentation in the unions. Reflecting on this issue, Castro Abdallah the president of FENASOL, says:

“As FENASOL we are better of the other labor federations because at least we pay 'little' attention to women. Historically, we had women membership in the sewing sector, the printing sector and the tobacco cultivation sector. But there's still a problem in women's membership; and women are the ones who bear the responsibility because they lock on themselves at work. They don't interact with other co-workers. We tried to impose a law in 1982 that stipulates that at least one woman should be represented in the executive board of the Federation and in each union's branch and the law established a women's committee. However, once we couldn't find a woman to run for the women's committee representative seat, so a man took it. There's another problem related to the fact that old men in the federation wouldn't leave their seats for women working in their sectors. The mentality of the male unionists says that: if women don't want to join the unions, why should we address them or incite them to do so? After all, that will ease our burden as unionists. Others consider that: why should we call on women to join while they will ultimately compete on our seats? Women also did not impose themselves on the unions. On the one level, women are forgotten by the unions, on the other level, even when the unions paved the door for them to enter, the women didn't not initiate to push the door and wide open it.” (Personal interview with Castro Abdallah, the president of FENASOL, February 2015)

FENASOL is the oldest communist federation of labor unions which grew historically out of working class struggles against capitalism and colonialism in the 1930s. Following years of repressions, persecutions and incarceration of its leaders because of their "communist activities" (Bou Habib, 2011) the federation was finally granted a license in 1966 by the government. It became a member of the CGTL in 1970 and withdrew its membership in 2012. Following the civil war era, however, FENASOL didn't escape the fate of the overall labor movement in the country. The war in fact coupled with a growing trade-union bureaucracy undermined the basis of the work of the trade-unions.

The distance between the working class and their unions has grown consistently over the past few decades. The goal of the Federation's bureaucrats became one of preserving their "seats" even when there are no more members to preside over. The union leadership has become a class of old Lebanese bureaucratic middle class men who prefer certainties of established routines to the risks of struggle and recruitment of new union members. Keeping women out of the unions, despite the fact that it weakens all workers (including male workers) reflects the norms of the male centered union bureaucracy. Indeed, the labor unions suffered and continue, from structural problems related to their lack of labor membership, of internal democratic decision making mechanisms, and finally lack of independence regarding sectarian political interventions. These structural problems turned the labor unions into calcified bureaucratic bodies that act as a major obstacle to women membership specifically but also to migrant workers.

2.6. The Migrant as the "Other"

Since the 1990, Lebanon has increasingly become a 'receiving' country of both Arab and non- Arab migration. Palestinian refugees and migrants from different ethnic belongings from Syria and Iraq came to Lebanon long before 1990 and have settled in the country (Tabar, 2010). Syrian migrant workers have historically constituted a long pattern of inflow migration, ever since Lebanon and Syria emerged as separate nation-states. Tabar argues that the pattern of Syrian inflow migration was facilitated by the ease in transport, short geographic distance, social networking, and the relatively open border between the two countries. Since the end of the war in the 1990s, and the signing of the Ta'if Agreement, Syrians have become a considerable number of the labor force in the country around menial labor. Furthermore, there are large numbers of migrant workers from Asia and Africa employed as domestic workers. A 2011 World Bank report states that migrant workers represent 760 thousand of a total workforce in Lebanon of 1.2 million (for a population of around 4.2 million) who are predominantly condensed in the informal sector. That means that migrants constitute almost half of the workforce and 17.8 percent of the population. These figures preceded the large wave of Syrian refugees to Lebanon who fled the Syrian regime's war against the 2011 popular uprisings.

Tabar's article shows the ways in which Lebanon since its inspection has been a sending country that encourages the outflow migration of its citizens to benefit from their remittances and counting on migration inflow to do the menial labor the Lebanese won't do anymore: "the types of jobs that these migrants usually undertake are those jobs that tend to be tough, that retain a certain amount of hazard, and that can be

considered dirty (Shahnawaz, 2002). Lebanese nationals are less likely to be hired in these positions as they are less willing to suffer the indignities of a socially stigmatized, underpaid, and degrading job (Shahnawaz, 2002). In fact, these migrants are usually hired in "specific economic niches" (such as construction and sanitation), which most Lebanese do not tend to seek employment (Dorai et al., 2006:13; Chalcraft, 2009) and therefore do not pose a direct threat to the Lebanese economy or the Lebanese workforce." (Tabar, 2010:15)

Despite what Tabar terms as the "replacement migration paradigm" (2010: 10), trade-unions in Lebanon continue to organize along national lines. This phenomenon is not unique to the Lebanese labor unions. Its roots go back to the dominant ideology held by post-colonial countries that privileged a national market that guarantees self-fulfillment, a strong national industry and a national labor force. This is why even the trade-unions bylaws continue to operate following the same mode of thinking, linking membership rights to nationality. The migrant workers were given the right to become simple members of the trade-unions without having the right to run for elections or vote. To date the trade-unions discourse as well as their internal bylaws do not engage the development of transnational workers' mobility and open market policies that brought a large number of foreign workers to the country.

With the growing number of Syrian refugees and workers, both right and left wing trade-unions called on the Lebanese government and the Ministry of Labor to intervene in order to put an end to the 'competition' between Lebanese and foreign workers and to protect the Lebanese workers. This anti-migration discourse represents a technology for governing labor and also shapes the nationalist premise of the labor

unions. In 2015, the government imposed visa requirements on Syrian nationals for the first time in the Lebanon-Syria history that drastically limited the Syrian inflow migration. This policy was preceded by a Ministry of Labor decree that limited the work that can be done by Syrians to three sectors: agriculture, cleaning and construction.

The discourse propagated by the trade-unions, consistently divides the working class into two hostile camps: the national working class and the migrant working class that is accused for lowering the citizens' living standards. This antagonism is intensified by the dominant discourse of the right wing political parties along with their affiliated media stations regarding Syrian refugees, blaming them for economic, social and security failures; forging, by the same means, a xenophobic and racist popular culture against the migrants workers. The "*gharib*" or the alien (Syrian or Palestinian) is always mobilized in the political discourse in order to bring cohesion to the Lebanese national identity. I agree with Peteet (1996) when she notes that the "the Palestinian presence, perceived as a problem, can and does serve as a common denominator in unifying often disparate elements of the Lebanese polity." (Peteet, 1996) What Peteet describes in relation to the Palestinians, is also true for other "*ghoraba'a*" (plural of *gharib*) in Lebanon. Adding to this xenophobic discourse, there's a lack of legal protection for migrant workers. "The legal framework excludes the migrant groups from all domain of lives- most importantly the labor force." (Tabar, 2010:10) These elements make the migrant workers open to all sorts of capital exploitation. A precarious residency status coupled with precarious working conditions are widely represented in the 'low paid', feminized and racialized labor sectors. The lack of regulation of employment conditions, in particular in the construction, agriculture, cleaning and service sectors means that

migrant workers are constantly vulnerable to exploitation. Institutional racism and racist discourse that go hand in hand with the inflow of migrant workers, act to preserve the operating of cheap labor market and exploitation. The institutional racism upheld by laws and procedures such as the *kafala*, governing migrant workers and mechanisms of incarceration and deportation constitute the Schmittian notion reformulated by Agamben on the state of exception which implies a decision by the sovereign to place certain subjects outside the boundaries of the polis. Meanwhile, the trade-unions are not interested in defending migrant workers against their fragile working conditions or their exploitability. They are solely evoked by trade-unionists on the basis of their competition with the 'natives.' The state is continuously solicited to act to regulate and to put a limit to the flow of migrant workers that are presumed to be 'competing' and 'stealing' the jobs of the Lebanese.

Trade-unionists are interested in defending the rights of migrant workers on a common ground with Lebanese workers and are reluctant in building political alliances across differences to challenge migrant workers' exploitation in the labor market and to challenge class relations that are constructed within capitalism through practices and processes of racism, sexism and even sectarianism.

2.7. Conclusion

In this chapter went through the structural problems of the trade-union movement since the end of the Civil War in 1990th. These problems come to add to the pressing economic problems that were made deeper by the neoliberal policies of the

coalition in power. In the 1990s onward the already weakened trade-union movement had to face many challenges. The authorities' intervention in the labor movement succeeded in subjugating the movement, and at its core the CGTL, but also other federations that pose themselves as alternative to the CGTL such as FENASOL. The unions lost their independence and their representativeness of the working class. Hence, a reconfigured and a less conflictual labor movement has been the product of the post-civil war era and it's within this context that the union for domestic workers has seen the light.

CHAPTER 3

Women Domestic Workers and Trade-Union Organizing: challenges and possibilities

On January 25, 2015 domestic workers started to gather at the wedding hall facing FENASOL's headquarter in Cola in Beirut. Welcoming signs in different languages were hung at the front door. At 10 am the hall was completely full with over 300 workers wearing unified red clothes to propagate a sense of steadfastness and organization. A common feeling was shared by the workers; starting today, they will be 'making history', a sentence that I heard repeated by many workers with a noticeable sense of pride. Indeed, this day was a historic day for them as they declared the founding of their trade union, the first of its kind in Lebanon and in the Arab region. The pride the workers manifested and the sense of 'making history' they expressed emanated largely from their conception that what they are doing represents a challenge to the norm, to authority, to the law, and to the representation of domestic workers as helpless victims. They did not wait for the state to give its approval; they did it themselves, launching their union irrespective of the government's opinion. Their pride was rooted in the power they felt emanating from their collectiveness on that day, to claim rights in an occupation, which isolates workers and individualizes their problems. Over 300 workers from Ethiopia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Ethiopia, Philippines, Lebanon, Madagascar, South Africa, Bangladesh and Senegal held their congress under the slogan: "The Right to Organize on the Basis of Decent Work and the Path towards Achieving Social Justice."

Their congress marked the first real workers' congress in Lebanon since the 1980s, in which workers deliberated freely and democratically. It originated from a precarious labor category that has been historically sidelined from formal labor unions: domestic workers, who are predominantly women and migrants. The importance of their actions rests, however, on the fact that it comes at a particular moment of general mistrust in labor unions to lead change and at a time where the working class has lost its organizational instruments, while the majority of Lebanese workers and their fellow migrants remain outside organizers' reach. The actions of the domestic workers gave back hope to the hopeless, that organizing the unorganized is still a possibility; more than a possibility, it is a necessity under the current neoliberal regime.

This chapter looks into the process of organizing migrant domestic workers and their union. The organization offers complex and different positions of power and influence. The complexity pertains to the fact that power is not a thing that can easily be seized, but a system of relations within which the actors circulate (Agrikoliansky, in Fillieule *et al*, 2009). Analyzing the plurality of positions of power invites, in addition, and more importantly, an analysis of the structures, leadership and nature of the discourses that this attempt at unionization seeks to mobilize. My aim in this chapter is to explore the relations of power and relative privilege within a space that brings together workers from different national backgrounds, which is marked by racial and gendered relations, to look at the emerging potentialities, as well as the obstacles confronting this new organizational experience.

3.1. Workers and Individualized Services

Sunday December 28, it is a rainy day in Beirut. On this morning, the streets are still almost empty of cars and residents. It took me only 20 minutes on my scooter to get from Mansourieh in the Matn district of Mount Lebanon Governorate, to West's Beirut Cola area where FENASOL is located. My plan was to attend one of the meetings for domestic workers who were gathering every Sunday, in a long learning and organizing process that lasted for 18 months at FENASOL with the support of the ACTRAV ILO bureau in Beirut and other NGOs. I reached Cola at 10am. Usually, this area is very busy, as it represents one of the most important transportation hubs in the city and is also home to universities, mosques, markets and shops offering fast food and cheap merchandise. Drivers and passengers come from the four corners of the city, forming a mix of Lebanese workers and students, Syrians, and Palestinians. They converge at the square to move to other neighborhoods in Beirut, the suburbs, and other parts of Lebanon in the South, the North and Bekaa. A bridge that divides the area constitutes a temporary shelter for many homeless people, Lebanese and Syrians, whose numbers fluctuate depending on police and gangs raids. The area took its name from the Coca-Cola factory that disappeared a few decades ago and was replaced by a parking lot. During the Civil War, Cola and the neighboring areas such as Wata Al Musaytbeh witnessed the proliferation of leftist parties, which established their headquarters in the area, including the Communist Party, in addition to trade unions. FENASOL established its headquarter in 1976. Given its easy access and the socio-economic composition of its inhabitants and dwellers, the area is strategic for trade-union activities.

On my arrival to FENASOL's headquarter, I saw that the federation's center, which I used to visit often before my travel to Egypt in 2012 and was always almost empty but for a handful of Lebanese workers who occasionally come for specific services, is now almost full with tens of migrant domestic workers, either to ask questions about how to join the union or to complain to Castro Abdallah, FENASOL's president, about individual problems. Suzanne, a Malagasy domestic worker came that morning with five new migrant workers who wanted to join the union. One of them is a male Indian worker from Punjab who has been in Lebanon for 30 years and who overpassed his residency following the death of his sponsor and the closing of the sewing shop where he used to work. Sanjip came with the hope that the trade-union would help him legalize his residency in Lebanon. His case shows that many workers believe that the union's goal is to solve their immediate problems, such as residency and work permits, hence the motivation for them to come. Abdallah, who meets with the workers in his office, takes notes of the complaints, and either resolves them directly or simply asks the worker to return a few days later. His attention to every case that is presented before him creates a sense of trust with the migrant domestic workers. Resolving day to day problems of the workers, although requiring much effort and time, especially for a federation that lacks resources, volunteers and personnel, is an important strategy to engage with the domestic workers.

The process of organizing domestic workers occurred at a slow pace, compared to organizing that usually takes place around more standardized forms of work. There are, in fact, many obstacles to organizing these workers: "isolated, dispersed, and difficult to reach, these are working lives beyond the scope of conventional modes of

labor organizing." (Cornwall, 2013: vii) Despite this, migrant domestic workers started to join as the news about their trade-union started to circulate among migrant workers' communities and networks by word of mouth reaching 350 members.

Despite the importance of FENASOL's interventions in everyday problems on behalf of domestic workers, there is the risk of creating a 'new NGO', in the sense that FENASOL turns into another center for providing individual services for workers despite its trade-union organizing and focus on collective bargaining. This challenge is a real one especially within the context of the already weakened trade union movement in the country and the transformation of the labor unions into bureaucratic bodies, which resolve grievances arising between workers and employers, rather than engage in workplace agitation and workers' organizing.

3.2. FENASOL and UN Funding

During my interviews with FENASOL's leadership, I was constantly told that what had hindered the federation from extending its base to support and setup workers' unions, especially in the informal sector, is its lack of financial resources. It was only when the ILO approached FENASOL in 2012 with a project to organize migrant domestic workers, offering funds and practical support such as consultancies and training that FENASOL's leadership decided to embark on this project. In one exchange with the coordinator of a local NGO, which deals with migrant domestic workers, I found out that a couple of years ago she had approached several trade-unions to discuss the issue of unionizing domestic workers, but "they showed no interest," she said.

The reliance on UN funding (like the ILO) is nothing but a demonstration of the extent to which labor unions have become dissociated from the workers, weak and irrelevant in influencing social and economic policies. However, this cooperation offers both advantages and disadvantages. On one level, it allows the federation to forge international networks and, hence, helps it develop transnational alliances on labor rights. It also secures financial resources for the Federation, allowing it to reach a broader section of workers locally, such in the case of migrant domestic workers. On another level, reliance on external funding risks the cooption of labor unions by global governance, the way that social movements, such as the women's rights movements, were. The other risk pertains to jeopardizing the political independence, as well as the goals, of labor unions and their gradual adoption of the donors' discourse on 'social dialogue', for example, rather than class struggle and 'decent work' rather than the transformation of the capitalist mode of production and relations. There is also the risk that the Federation's easy access to UN funding would steer it away from workers' outreach and organizing and in the direction of developing funded projects, which treat workers as service beneficiaries rather than union militants.

Organizing domestic workers was a top-down process initiated by the ILO and began with Participatory Action Research (PAR) conducted between May 2012 and December 2014. In a 2012 regional 'tripartite' conference held in Cairo on ILO Convention No. 189, entitled "Raising Awareness and Sharing Knowledge on Decent Work for Domestic Workers," the ILO in the presence of state representatives, pushed the idea of organizing domestic workers in Arab countries as a precondition for the ratification of the Convention. For that purpose and during the same year, the ILO

proposed to implement a PAR in Lebanon with the objective of organizing domestic workers, raising awareness about their rights guaranteed by the Convention, building synergies between the workers, NGOs and unions, and increasing the representation of migrant domestic workers in ILO activities and in NGO and union advocacy campaigns in Lebanon. At that time, the ILO was still looking for a potential labor federation ally to implement the project; the choice fell on FENASOL because it was the only federation that agreed to cooperate, as one ACTRAV member says: "the CGTL still considers the domestic workers as servants unworthy of labor rights." A CGTL employee further explains the position held by the CGTL's leadership regarding migrant domestic workers. He says: " Ghassan Ghosson (the president of the CGTL) told me during a private discussion on the margin of a regional meeting on migrant domestic workers to which the CGTL was invited: do you really want me to equate my servant with the Lebanese worker regarding wages and rights?!" That year, FENASOL took a decision to withdraw its membership from the CGTL and announced that it will invest its efforts in creating an alternative democratic and independent workers' center. Organizing migrant domestic workers was an expression of FENASOL's commitment in that regard. But it is also driven by the hostility between the CGTL and FENASOL's leadership and the latter's quest for an official recognition of its federation as a representative of workers in Lebanon, which would grant FENASOL a status of interlocutor with the government on an equal footing with the CGTL in all issues pertaining to social and economic policies and tripartite negotiations. Unionizing the domestic workers is also a contested project, not only vis-à-vis the CGTL, but also within FENASOL where some

affiliated Lebanese union leaders don't perceive the project as a priority at a moment where the majority of the Lebanese workers are not unionized.

The implementation of the PAR took place in collaboration with migrant community leaders, NGOs and FENASOL. Initially the project was driven by the ILO and the NGOs, with FENASOL offering its Cola headquarters as a meeting space. The language of the PAR organizers is one that is largely based on NGO terminologies such as 'capacity building' and 'advocacy.' The aim of one of the PAR sessions was the following: "all research participants (research team and domestic workers) will identify needed normative and advocacy interventions to address the problems identified. ILO will provide much of the normative insights, NGOs will advise on effective advocacy techniques (online activism, poster campaigns, street mobs...), and FENASOL will formulate the action plan using union-related terminology" (email addressed to PAR NGOs' participants, Feb 13, 2013). Eventually the PAR led to the creation of the founding committee for the domestic workers' union.

3.3. Forging Workers' Collective Identity

Essential to trade union organizing and to the effectiveness of collective action is the extent to which members share a sense of common identity and interests. Given the social isolation, national diversity, and conditions in which the migrant domestic workers operate, shared class interests cannot just be automatically assumed, but has to be built almost from the ground up. This process of collectivizing the identity has been taking place in different sittings through community organizing, in which common language, religious affiliation and national belonging constituted a pull around which the

migrant workers organized. However, in comparison the union for domestic workers tries to overcome nationality and religious lines and organize around common laboring experiences. Among the domestic workers' members, a core group of around 30 workers were engaged in the process in its formative stage and acted as the main advocates and mobilizers among their respective communities.

The organizers were aware of the diverse constituency of the union's members, especially across nationality lines. Hence the focus on livelihood and common experiences of exploitation, lack of social and formal recognition of the value of domestic work, and its exemption from legislation regulating workers in the formal sectors, reveals a form of labor politics that seeks to forge an understanding of shared working experiences of domestic work. These concerns acted as a gravitational pull necessary to bring the workers together.

The workers took part in all the stages of the research and learnt about each other's experiences in the process. Hence, the individuated laboring experiences started to be collectively forged. The insights generated through the PAR were then discussed in common meetings attended by workers from all the nationalities. The common meetings were essential in creating a sense of commonality among workers and allowing them to see the structural patterns of their exploitation represented by the *kafala* system, the recruiting agencies, the laws and the migration policies. In these meetings, they found out that the problems they faced, as domestic workers from a particular nationality, were not exclusive to them, but also shared by workers from other nationalities. Gemma's words express the importance the workers accorded to these meetings in forging their collective identity as workers.

“Every meeting we had with the different communities, I wanted to make sure that we stress the idea of solidarity. Now we don't say Philippines, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia and Bangladesh. We say we are the unionists. We are the women workers. We don't mention communities. We emphasize women working together. That's how we have reached to have a union. I always remove my union's identity card and I raise it with my hand and ask: who has this? In response, the members would wave their cards. I say: you have this card now, if someone looks at you in different ways here, you say: hey! I am one of you! This is always what I emphasize. We are all domestic workers.” (Personal interview with Gemma, union executive board's member from the Philippines, January 2015)

Rose from Cameroun, also addresses the collective identity emanating from the union which she perceives as a way to get respect and render domestic workers visible:

“All domestic workers have the same problems. If we have a union today, it is because we sat down together, we raised questions and we finally fell on the conclusion that all domestic workers have the same problems, whatever was their nationality. We have the same problems and we live the same silence. That is why the union for me and for other women is a way to shout out loud and say that we exist. Grant us the respect we deserve.” (Personal interview with Rose, domestic worker from Cameroun, February 2015)

The PAR was coupled with training programs offered by ACTRAV and the NGOs, which helped bridge the gaps in workers' knowledge about their rights. The training focused on the meaning and purposes of trade-unions, on how to campaign and strategize, on the economic value of domestic labor, on the problems with the *kafala* system, and on the labor law.

Despite the fact that union training and research offered a space for a collective worker identity to emerge, the workers had a variety of motivations for joining the union. For some, as mentioned above, it meant a place where they can receive support for their immediate problems. For others, forming a union meant creating a space where

they can forge solidarity, enhance mutual support, and bargain collectively for their rights with the government and employers. As Lily puts it:

“Why is this union important for me? If I am alone I cannot face my employer with my request to have a day off to rest or to sleep. She (the employer) will not be convinced that Sundays are indeed important for us, because it’s the day we come together as domestic workers, eat together, and recharge our energy to cope with the week. On our own, we cannot claim that. Thanks to this union we can pressure now collectively for our right, we can fight together, and prove that we exist, that we are citizens, like all citizens, we are not properties of our employers.” (Personal interview with Lily, union member from Madagascar, January 2015)

When I asked about what does the union means to her, Mala from Sri Lanka, noted:

“I have been working and working for 33 years now, non-stop and few years from now I will have to go back to Sri Lanka; and Lebanon would say goodbye. I will return to Sri Lanka at my old age, and I don't know what I have there. I spent money on my children. I spent money on making a house there. What I want to make through this union is a project that guarantees for the women something for when they retire and go back home. Something like a deposit so that when they get sick, they use it. For 33 years, I have been paying money for insurance companies. Now there's nothing for me in Sri Lanka. We should think about our own lives.” (Personal interview with Mala, union executive board's member, February 2015)

Mala or Malani arrived in Lebanon 33 years ago. She was told that she was going to work in Cyprus. Trafficked by boat, she found herself in the middle of civil-war tormented Beirut. She left behind four children in Sri Lanka who were able to complete their university degrees and get married, due to her remittances. Mala spent most of her life in Lebanon. She knows Beirut, its neighborhoods, its churches and its NGOs more than she knows her home town. During her life in Lebanon, she forged connections among her Sri Lankan community and she ultimately became the community leader. Today Mala is 62 years old; she feels too old for her job. She is tired and wants to retire.

However, she is not allowed the option of retiring in Lebanon; as the right to family reunification and citizenship is denied to her as 'unskilled' labor. In fact, according to Lebanese residency regulations, certain categories of low-wage workers, including domestic workers, are not allowed to sponsor residency for their spouses and children. After more than three decades of working "non-stop", Mala is faced with the fact that she has to think about how to relocate to Sri Lanka and what her life will look like in her home country.

Mala's example shows the ways in which the personal histories, trajectories, gender, age, class and race shape women workers' political subjectivities and practices. In that sense, Mala attaches a different meaning to the union. The union for her is not only about solving immediate problems that surface while they are on the job as migrant domestic workers, but problems that will face them when they leave their work and ultimately retire. While younger workers' political militancy is turned to the present, the older ones' turns to the future.

3.4. The Paradox of Leadership

Those who play a leading position within the union for domestic workers are migrant women who have been in the country for a period between 7 and 30 years. Being freelance domestic workers, (which means that they have made an arrangement with their *kafil* so that he/she keeps sponsoring them while they work and live outside his/her house) their laboring experiences are also different from the majority of migrant domestic workers in secluded households. The longer they have been in Lebanon and

with their employers, the more they are able to establish relations based on trust with their employers and thus enjoy greater freedom of mobility in comparison to their newly arrived colleagues. These women are also older than the other members. The age is an important factor in leadership as it gives the women symbolic power as the most knowledgeable and helps them gain the respect of their community members. Rose from Cameroun says: "I became a leader of the community because my compatriots chose me. I think they made this choice based on the fact that I have been in Lebanon for a long time, that I am older, and because I try to bring support for them even on the moral level."

In other cases, such as for Gemma, she worked for the same woman employer for over 17 years during which a relation based on trust was forged which allowed her freedom of mobility. Gemma became friends with her employer, having a lot in common as single mothers who had to face life on their own, she says: "she knows me very well. She is a divorced and she supports her children. At the time of my arrival she was also depressed and since we were able to communicate we became friends. We talked and we understood each other. I also have 3 children that I left in my country and we were abandoned by their father. So we [Gemma and her employer] were like a support for each other."

Some of the leaders have also organizational experiences in their countries of origin and in Lebanon. Gemma for instance was the chairperson of a youth organization in her hometown and was active in the students' council in her school. At the university she became the president of the student council for a year. When she came to Lebanon she started volunteering in the activities and events of the Philippines embassy. In 2004

she became the chairperson of the Philippines Basketball league. In 2010 she left the league and started volunteering at different NGOs on migrant worker domestic issues, attended workshops and seminars. As someone who is immersed in Philippina community organizing, she was approached by the ILO about the PAR and became engaged in the union, and became a member of its executive board. Gemma's personal trajectory, but also the relations she forged with her embassy and her access to NGOs allowed her to gain prominence within her community and later in the union. Beside the 'historical' community leaders such as Gemma, the union has allowed the emergence of new leaders. Reflecting on this issue, Nabil, an ACTAV member says:

“Sri Lankans constitute the largest membership of the union together with Philippinas. These are historical [migrant worker] communities in Lebanon and their leadership is crucial in the mobilizing efforts. They are very active and have the respect of their community members. In comparison, the Malagasy community for example, does not have historical community leaders. The current leaders were formed during the unionizing process, not before.” (Personal interview with Nabil, ACTRAV member and consultant of the trade-union, February 2015)

In an unpublished report about the PAR, Carole Kerbage (2014) notes that despite the fact that dealing with community leaders has practical advantages it might also lead to monopoly of power, and it's here where the paradox lies. Kerbage cautions that dealing with community leaders as spokespersons on the behalf of their respective communities deepens the gap between the leaders and the other workers. She quoted one community leader saying: "many women workers broke the barrier of fear and shame, but there is a significant disparity in experiences between us [the leaders] and the rest of the workers." This gap appeared to Kerbage when she was interviewing one of the workers who took part in the PAR, she says: "in response to my questions, the

worker told me to address the questions to her leader saying that the latter knows better than her.” (Kerbage, 2014).

Hence, those who are endowed with relatively more social resources (such as education, connections, freedom of mobility) achieve the functions of leadership. The exercise of leadership rests broadly on this logic by which, the socially most privileged, have accesses to representation functions. These community leaders however, played a central role in the establishment of the union, as key persons with access to their migrant communities, they were the ones who propagated the news about the union and recruited new members.

3.5. Challenging State Power

For years, migrant workers, including domestic workers, had organized around communal lines, which aimed at promoting the community, strengthening and supporting its members, and mobilizing cultural, religious and national ethos. This community organizing aimed at retaining and cultivating the migrant communities' cultures and acted as support networks for domestic workers, especially those who suffer dire working conditions. In many of my interlocutors' personal narratives, there were stories of runaway domestic workers who seek support and assistance as they escape their dire working conditions. Some of the members would host them temporary at their homes, help them find another job and approach a new *kafil*. In cases where runaway domestic workers are detained by the General Security, their fellow community members would collect money from each other to buy them an airplane

ticket back home. Rose, for example, first came to Lebanon in 1999. Back then, a small community of Cameroonians was holding its Sundays' monthly meetings in a small church in Dekweneh. One day, she met a Cameroonian domestic worker who told her about the community meetings. She started assisting at these meetings and later on became the community leader. She says:

“We mainly spoke about our problems at work. We complained and shared what was happening with us during the month. It was a way for us to evade and temporarily escape our work. When the Sunday meeting came, I was very happy. On Saturday night I prepared the shoes and the clothes that I was going to wear the next day. I would put them next to me on the bed. I waited for the alarm clock to ring so I wake up and go meet my friends. I awaited this day, every month. It was very important for me.” (Personal interview with Rose, union executive board's members from Cameroun, February 2015)

As Rose's narrative shows, these community meetings provided migrant women with the opportunity to gather and discuss important events in their lives. The stress she puts on the act of talking ("we spoke", "complained", "shared") suggests that these meetings created important communication networks among them.

However, the Lebanese state rarely perceived these migrant agglomerations as threatening; it rarely tried to break them, as they did not constitute themselves as openly contestational, challenging discriminatory policies affecting the migrant workers. I do not mean to suggest that they were apolitical spaces. On the contrary, they were politicized in the sense that they sought to forge solidarity among community members. Solidarity is indeed a political act, but one that does not necessarily aim to challenge the state, but rather to forge new modes of sociality and social interactions and being in a community. These community spaces were the first instances of politicization for many migrant domestic workers such as Rose, who became a community leader and later on a

union militant. These communities created new avenues of access and mobilization and definitely provided the ground for new political subjects to emerge.

However, when the workers' organization took an open political turn of resistance, under the form of a trade-union for domestic workers, the government, through its Ministry of Labor, was quick to declare this form of organizing illegal, illegitimate and threatened to use security forces to break their congress in 2015, refusing to grant their trade-union a license.

In fact, on the eve of the trade-union launching on January 25, ACTRAV members supporting the trade union for domestic workers, were threatened by the minister of labor, Sejaan Azzi. In a phone call, he declared their action as an infringement of Lebanon sovereignty and in violation of its laws, as one ACTRAV member told me. The minister also threatened to send the police to prevent the trade union congress. However, FENASOL's leadership insisted on holding the conference despite the threats, profiting from the presence and the support of the International Labor Organization, the International Trade-Union Confederation, the International Federation of Domestic Workers and the Arab Labor Organization, besides local support from different human rights NGOs. The presence of the delegates of these organizations constituted a protection of the migrant domestic workers and ultimately curbed the minister's intention to forcefully break the congress, which otherwise could have caused an international 'stir'. The Minister of labor, to fight the union, armed himself with the Labor Law, which explicitly excludes domestic workers from its protection and denies migrant workers the right to establish a trade union. However, in order to be consistent with the law limiting the establishing of the union to Lebanese citizens, the union for

domestic workers, established as a committee under "the General Union of Cleaning Workers and Social Care" included Lebanese citizens to submit a formal request to the Ministry of Labor to have its authorization.

On another level, it is not a coincidence that the workers' congress was attended by the representative of the Lebanese General Security (*al aman el 'aam al lubnani*). The presence of the latter, with the absence of the representative of the Ministry of Labor, was a reminder addressed to the trade unionists that the only party that primarily deals with migrant workers in this country is General Security. Any initiative that concerns migrants should take place, if at all, under the direct auspices of the general security, or the state's "hand that strikes" to borrow Agier's (2011) term. This statement was also a reminder of the exceptional status of migrant workers in the country, who are differently positioned from the national citizen in relation to the state. The state's management of migrant workers' lives through General Security instead of the Ministry of Labor, for example, constructs the boundary between the migrant and the citizen. Their ineligibility to citizenship that Yuval Davis defines as the "full membership in the community" (Yuval-Davis, 1997), and their ineligibility for social and political rights, as well as their exclusion from laws that govern national workers, renders them as temporal migrants, in a permanent state of exception. Within this context, FENASOL's organizing efforts with migrant domestic workers should be seen as a defiance of these exclusionary policies and racist discourses on migration and as a struggle against discrimination in the labor market based on gendered and racial lines. But to what extent is the federation immune to the nationalistic discourse and ideology?

3.6. FENASOL's ambivalent politics towards migrants

Despite the fact that FENASOL took the initiative to organize migrant domestic workers and although the federation undertook a revision of its bylaws and internal structures to make it inclusive of migrant workers (after being exclusive to Lebanese workers), allowing them the same rights as Lebanese, FENASOL's politics and discourse on migrants remains ambivalent. The revisions that the Federation undertook, discussed and voted in its general assembly in 2015, gave the migrants the right to join the federations' unions, to run for elections on the level of the federation representative boards, and to vote. These internal reforms however are concomitant to FENASOL's public discourse that considers the migrant worker as an illegitimate competitor of the Lebanese worker, which can be read in its statements. FENASOL's leadership, however, rejects accusations that its discourse stirs nationalistic feelings and considers itself involved in struggles for the workers' rights irrespective of their nationalities, but it opposes the employers' quest to employ illegal and poorly paid migrants which constitute the basis of this 'illegitimate competition' in the labor market. Nevertheless, FENASOL's public statements take a stand against illegal migration rather than denouncing exploitation by employers. For instance, between 2014 and 2015, I collected tens of statements issued by the Federation's affiliated unions, many of which calling on the Ministry of Labor to intervene to put an end to the illegitimate competition between migrants and Lebanese and to stop the flow of illegal migration to the country that was most easily done, in the case of Arab migrants, through Syria before 2011. For instance, on December 22, 2014, the executive board of the Bakeries Workers' Union in Beirut and Mount Lebanon (which is affiliated to FENASOL) issued a statement that reads as

follows: "The board found that the social and economic situation in the country is hurting workers in bakeries, who suffer from the competition of foreign workers and the displaced [Syrian] workers that started to constitute a burden on all labor categories. Therefore, we call upon the Ministry of Labor and all concerned to put an end to the abuses and protect the Lebanese workforce."

The use of words like the 'illegitimate competitors' undermines any notion of solidarity. This discourse underlines the fact that the Federation's unions have problems with migrants in general, who are seen to be responsible for the low labor standards and economic hardship. For example, a common statement issued by the Union of Employees in Hotels, Restaurants and Cafes in the Lebanese Republic and the Union of the Lebanese Chefs on January 26, 2015, declared that the deterioration of the tourism sector is largely due to the replacement of qualified Lebanese workers by low skilled migrant workers.

FENASOL's initiative to organize migrants in domestic work and its ongoing nationalistic discourse are contradictory in the sense that the federation claims to be opposed to racism, but its statements remain anchored in nationalist discourse. This perhaps partly explains why the Federation has not been part of any visible campaigns or outspoken against racist attacks on migrant workers, in particular against Syrian workers (Lebanese Labor Watch, 2012). Some labor activists I met argue that FENASOL is only concerned about defending the rights of Lebanese workers and this contradicts the Federation's so called Communist principles of international solidarity. The question however remains, why would FENASOL organize migrants in domestic work, if it still perceives migrant workers as a threat or competition?

One explanation can be that that migrants in domestic work do not really constitute a 'competitor' to local domestic workers. The migrants in this sector outnumber the Lebanese who do not perceive domestic work as an attractive job for many reasons, one being "social shame" (Fernandez & de Regt 2014:8) and the second because it is poorly valued and remunerated. Another explanation can be that migrant domestic workers have become part of a global humanitarian agenda and many international donor organizations are providing funds for local initiatives seeking to help redress their working conditions. Organizing migrants in domestic work, hence, allows FENASOL to forge relations with international donor organizations and have access to funds. For instance, the project to unionize domestic workers was funded by the ILO with an approximate amount of USD 61,500. The total amount was announced during the trade-union congress for domestic workers in order to maintain transparency with the workers. The announcement was coupled with an explanation on how and when the money was spent.

Thus, despite the initiative to organize migrants in domestic work, FENASOL and its affiliated trade-unions have not had a strategic discussion on how to organize migrant workers. Organizing precarious workers, such as informal workers, including migrants, continues to be an issue that has not been taken seriously. The instance of organizing migrant domestic worker appears as isolated in the absence of a conscious strategy for recruiting and organizing migrants and informal workers. Thus, we have the rise of an "us versus them" class consciousness, tied to an enduring nationalism.

3.7. The Politics of Feelings: Shame, Pride and Pity

Contrary to popular perceptions, the union for domestic workers is not only intended for migrants. The union does not specify the nationality of its members. It is open to nationals as well as for migrant women and men in domestic work. However, since the beginning of the unionization process, the organizers seemed to focus solely on migrants from African and Asian origins. The PAR was implemented with migrant domestic workers and was designed to understand the plight of the migrant domestic workers only. The working conditions of the Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian domestic workers, remain unknown. They continue to be far from the reach of the union and are not considered as a 'target group' for recruitment and outreach, which explains why the migrants are the largest constituency of the union membership. There is no doubt that organizing migrant domestic workers is an easier endeavor, since they have already established community networks, as discussed above, and there are particular locations and areas where they live, work, congregate and meet on their days off (churches, markets, community centers, NGO activities). Such community networks for local domestic workers are not present and, hence, approaching them would not be as easy as in the case of migrant women. The growing association of paid domestic work with women of Asian and African origins, pushed Lebanese women to prefer to work as waitresses or cleaners in offices rather than working in houses, which also denotes a rigid racial division of gendered labor.

Despite the fact that migrant women outnumber Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians, the latter continue to do this job. However, the social shame attached to working in other people's homes, which is shared among local domestic workers, stands

in opposition to the feeling of pride that the migrant unionists attach to their work. The pride and the consecutive claim for recognition of domestic labor as work, upheld by the migrant domestic workers, acts as a political motif for their recruitment, organization and mobilization, while the feeling of shame cannot possibly be an incentive for political action. However, in the absence of a conscious union strategy to approach local domestic workers, it would not be possible to transform the moral economy of shame into politics of pride. Such strategy would alter social responses to and definitions of stigmatized attributes associated with paid domestic work considered to be a source of shame, the same way that many social movements build and use emotional capital to mobilize and propel participants into collective action which in its turn generates pride and solidarity.

The lack of connections made by the union between migrant and local domestic workers also has repercussions on the way the handful Lebanese unionists discursively produce themselves and other migrants. In fact, three Lebanese women (one works as a house cook, the other as an office cleaner, and the third in accounting at a private company) were pushed by FENASOL's leadership to join the union for domestic workers and ultimately made their way to its executive board which is made up of 12 women overall. The professions of these workers did not matter for the organizers. What mattered was their nationality. The union needed to have Lebanese membership in order to get the license from the Ministry of Labor. Hence the Lebanese, who submitted their papers to the ministry in order to get the license, became the legal 'safeguard' of the union and of its members before the state.

Maryam, a 36 years old Lebanese accounting worker was elected by the union's general assembly as its president. Maryam has no previous engagement in union

activities. She joined FENASOL in 2014 through its national campaign on the right to housing. At the request of Castro Abdallah, she joined the union for domestic workers and became its president in 2015. This is how Maryam describes the role of the union that she presides. She says:

“I encourage the idea of a union for domestic workers so they stop being enslaved. I feel pity for them. Now they have a union so they know that they are (the migrant women) like us. They have the same rights similar to us who work in private companies. At my family house we employ a domestic worker from Bangladesh. I feel enthusiastic to always share with her what I do and what we do in the union for them. She likes it and she even told her family in Bangladesh about it. I want the union to achieve the demands raised by the domestic workers. To gain something for them, so that when they come to work they wouldn't be afraid of their employers and the placement agencies. We want to convey to them the idea that we, as Lebanese, stand by their side and we will gain for them their rights, but they have to be good to us as well. I previously worked in a maids' recruitment agency and I was bothered from the way the owner used to deal with them.” (Personal interview with Maryam, the union for domestic workers' president, February 2015)

In my interview with Maryam, I felt unease with the language that she used, in particular the way in which she relates to the other migrant domestic workers. Her choice of language can be considered not 'politically correct', especially when it emanates from a union president who ideally should be grounded in the language of solidarity, resistance and defiance, not the language of "pity". However, her discourse reflects the way she positions herself in relation to migrant domestic workers. Maryam relates to the experience of domestic workers from her relatively more privileged position as a worker who is formally employed in a private company on a contract base, which guarantees a minimum wage and social and health security, a minimum of rights that the migrants do not enjoy. Maryam is also speaking from her social position as Lebanese national and as an employer of a migrant domestic worker, which has an

epistemic impact on the claims she makes. In speaking on behalf of the migrants, a line of demarcation is drawn between 'us' the Lebanese and 'them' the migrants. By positioning herself as an outsider to the domestic workers, as a Lebanese who is here to save them only, she dissociates herself from the paid domestic work as a shameful activity. The problematic of this differentiation, other than the fact that it reproduces the hegemonic discourse on migration, is that it constructs the migrant worker as substantially different from the Lebanese. The issue of the shared labor experiences of Lebanese domestic workers and migrants is replaced with the discourse on how the first are here to save the others.

However, one needs to take a step back and dig deeper into the language of pity. Aradau (2004) argues that what she terms "politics of pity" can in some cases create commonalities and challenge the existing social order which has caused suffering. In this framework, pity functions as "an anti-governmental technology, concerned with emancipation from particular systems of power," (Aradau, 2004: 257) in this case, the power that regulates and governs migrant domestic workers and which denies them their rights. However, Aradau cautions that pity and other emotions are socially constructed and shaped by social institutions and power relations. This is flagrant in the way Maryam conditions sympathy towards migrants in return to "them being good to us" i.e that they do what they are asked and told to do.

Furthermore, there's a limit to Maryam's solidarity. Solidarity pertains to an understanding that one's interests and those of the other members of the same political community are aligned insofar as one inhabits shared political spaces with them and it does involve a feeling of identification with others. However, being an employer of a

domestic worker herself, Maryam's political solidarity cannot transgress the language of pity. In this context, her feeling of pity does not act as a base for "emancipation from systems of power;" rather, it is rooted in the power relations that structure her encounter with the Bangladeshi domestic worker she employs. Hence, the position she occupies as a union leader for domestic workers is very much conflated with her position as an employer of a domestic worker. Yet, by focusing on Maryam's discourse, I do not mean to imply that the discursive practices pertain to individual choices. The problem is a social one, as Alcoff (1991) argues the discursive practices are socially constructed and cannot be analyzed as simply the result of autonomous individual choices. In fact, "politics of pity" based on victimization has been advocated and practiced by various NGOs, including women's rights NGOs (see chapter 4). They are part and parcel of the local and global human rights regime on migration.

Finally, having a Lebanese woman presiding over a union for workers who are predominantly migrants shows the dual act of power. On one level, the state, by its laws and regulations, does not allow militant migrants to exercise their militancy to its full potential. The state's authority is always there to impose itself from the outside. The workers have to relegate their position in the union to a formal Lebanese leadership that does not share their knowledge, their political history in organizing, or their working conditions as domestic workers. At the same time, for FENASOL, this strategy was the only option to engage the state's regulatory regime, which denies migrant domestic workers the right to form unions of their own. It was a tactic employed to withstand the government's rejection of the union and ultimately protect the migrant members from any potential arbitrary actions on the part of the state. However, this shows the ways in

which labor unions have entered the dynamic of the 'system' and became absorbed by the logic of regulation, where the respect of law takes precedence over labor agitation.

3.8. Redistribution Isn't Enough

FENASOL's involvement in assisting the organizing of domestic workers involves the navigation of two distinct sets of issues. One converges with standard trade-union concerns, such as collective bargaining to ensure the domestic workers' rights for a day off, formal recognition of domestic work under the labor law, minimum wage, and ending the *kafala* system, which fall under what Frazer (1998) terms as claims for "redistribution." In other words, these are concerns that emanate from the socio-economic injustices that the migrant domestic worker faces. These claims were raised by the workers during their congress and were also commonly underlined by my interlocutors. Thus, the right to mobility and decent working conditions were the concerns raised by the workers irrespective of their nationalities. The other set of issues that FENASOL leadership finds difficulty in handling are the gender-specific constraints and problems that women workers have to contend with in their daily lives, such as sexual violence. These issues continue to be perceived by the leadership of the Federation as not being part of its domain of intervention, but as the domain of expertise of the women's rights groups. This is why the leadership expressed unease and discomfort in having to deal with cases of rape and sexual harassment. Moreover, the leadership believes that the women who come to complain of sexual violence are being sent by NGOs in order to 'test' the federation's commitment towards domestic workers.

With the sudden increase in the membership of women domestic workers, FENSASOL's leadership had to contend with cases of sexual abuse that keep surfacing. However, the lack of knowledge and absence of internal mechanisms to deal with such issues remains a challenge. Under the current structure of the Federation, there are no gender sensitive bodies through which women can seek support. Abdallah told me how he personally dealt with the case of one domestic worker who came to him asking for help as she was raped by her employer. He said the following:

“Two hours ago a Bangladeshi worker came to me. She came four months before. Her employer raped her. She had the courage to tell me about the issue. She came back today. I told her: you should file a legal case against him. But she's scared to face him.”

He goes on to tell me about another case:

“A few months back, a domestic worker that speaks French came to me. Rabie (an ACTRAV member) happened to be here, so he translated to me what she was saying. She was collapsing. I talked to her and I tried to provoke her to speak: what was he (the employer) doing to you? Did he grab your hand? She wasn't resisting him much. She was weaker at nights when he approaches her. She became uncomfortable when he started to use her mouth. I told her: I don't care, we should file a legal complaint and that the federation will pay for it. I asked her if there were any evidence that she was raped. She replied that the last time he raped her was a week ago. She told me that she couldn't forget it. She cannot sleep and stop blaming herself. She used to accept to have sex with him, but when sex became oral, I think she didn't want it anymore. And there are many similar cases, but the women refuse to file legal complaint.” (Personal interview with Castro Abdallah, president of FENASOL, February 2015)

Abdallah's words disclose many problems. One, the worker who comes to complain about sexual violence has no one to address but a man who clearly stated that such cases are not of his concern as a unionist. Meanwhile the newly born union for domestic workers' executive board does not yet have the capabilities to deal with

individual cases. Second, the woman is not directly believed; her resistance to rape is the object of questioning and she is asked if she can prove that she was raped. Third, the context in which she is offered a place to speak about her experience does not respect her most definite need for anonymity and privacy: "Rabie happened to be there to translate." We do not know if the woman was okay with having another male stranger translating such a personal experience. Fourth, the woman is left with only one option: to file a legal complaint. This is the only support that the Federation could offer. Fourth, Abdallah expresses his surprise that the women refused to file a legal complaint; in so doing, he not only ignored women's understanding of their sexual vulnerability; but also minimized the particular dangers confronting women who publicly resist sexual exploitation. This denotes a complete ignorance of the profound impact of institutionalized (police and law) racism, sexism and classism regarding women in general and women migrant workers in particular, and the privileged position that the alleged rapist as a Lebanese male employer has over his domestic worker.

A study conducted by the ILO and the Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center in 2014 found that migrant domestic workers' access to justice is very difficult. First, women are reluctant to file a case against their employers as they know it is very difficult to change employers without their consent because of the *kafala*. Second, the report identifies structural loopholes in the legal system, which "discourages domestic workers by placing them in the position of defendants, even when they are victims of serious violations of the Penal and Civil Codes." (CLMC & ILO, 2014) For instance, if the domestic worker leaves the residence of her employer without the

latter's consent, she is charged for violating the decree on the entry and stay of foreign nationals in Lebanon. Moreover, the study points to the "marginalization imposed by various actors and in particular by the judiciary, on low-skilled foreigners." (CLMC & ILO, 2014) For example in certain cases involving migrant domestic workers, the report sent to the Public Prosecutor's Office makes reference to offenses, such as damage or injuries, but the Prosecutor did not initiate legal proceedings against the alleged offender.

This shows how racial and class discrimination and male domination operate in a legally and culturally authorized system of exclusion for migrant and women workers. Hence, labor unions need to combine politics of redistribution and anti-racist/sexist politics, which are intertwined and cannot be separated, being a main constituent of the life of migrant domestic workers. For the workers, the concern is as much about social justice and redistribution as it is about gender justice and dignity. In that sense, the Federation cannot choose to deal with one aspect of their work and neglect the other aspect, as they both constitute the laboring experience of women workers. Otherwise, the latter will be rendered victims twice: first by those who exploit their labor and the second by those who claim to defend them.

3.9. Daughters or Co-workers?

I was at FENASOL one Sunday morning to interview Abdallah. Interviewing the 'president' was my legitimate 'excuse' to justify my presence at the Federation. Since my frequent requests failed to convince Abdallah to allow me to attend the domestic

workers' meetings, I had to resort to this trick in order to get an ethnographic sense of the various activities and interactions at play within the federation. I understood his rejection as largely due to the fact that he was afraid that an outsider's presence might jeopardize the newly born union, which was already under attack by the Ministry of Labor. He told me, for instance, how a local newspaper published an article disclosing the fact that the unionists submitted their papers to request the union license from the ministry, something only a handful of people knew about. Such incidents made him suspicious about an 'alien' presence. His fear is also mediated by his sense that the 'NGO people don't want FENASOL to succeed in its organizing endeavor: when the workers succeed to have their union, these people might find themselves jobless," like he said. He was also afraid that I might be sharing the 'union's secrets' with 'these people'. My promises that my presence is exclusively related to my academic research and has nothing to do with NGOs-FENASOL tensions did not succeed in appeasing him. Despite his anxiety about my presence, Abdallah did not hesitate to tell me about the hidden distrust between the federation's leadership and some of the NGOs. In other words, he trusted me enough to tell me about these usually unspoken tensions. However, the fact that I needed Abdallah's permission to attend the domestic workers' meetings, and not the domestic workers' unionists themselves, who should in principle enjoy sovereignty over their meetings, is telling about the relations of power between the domestic workers' unionists and the federation's leadership. Furthermore, it was interesting for me to see how power gets produced discursively by the different union actors.

On the day of the trade union congress, a small ceremony took place following the formal proceedings, in which the active supporters of the union for domestic

workers were handed symbolic gifts by the women militants. When the turn came to Abdallah to be handed the gift, tens of union members started to cheer him by calling him "papa" followed by a long round of applause. Following this scene, I became more attuned to the language used by the union leadership and the workers in addressing each other. For example, on many instances, Abdallah would call the women: "*Al banat*", (plural of *bent*) which in Arabic means "girls" and sometimes could refer to "daughters".

My Cameroonian interlocutor member of the union justified this by saying:

"We always address Abdallah as Papa, because it shows respect; and respect for us is rigor [...] I cannot allow myself to be at the same level as him. He is the president of the Federation. In my head I think: he is the founder. But I am also not inferior to him. We are all comrades. I am not... how to explain? I respect... I have respect for him." (Personal interview, February 2015)

It is common in Lebanon to hear employers talk about their domestic workers as 'daughters'. The worker, on her part, is usually expected to address her employers by 'papa' and 'mama'. This myth of close kin is part of the effort to secure the worker's dependence and devotion to the family and employers. In other words, this discursive intimacy usually entails granting the employer more control over the worker as guardian and protector. Inherent to this relation with the employers is that the domestic worker is not perceived as an independent woman. The 'daughter' in that sense, is one on which moral and paternalistic power is exercised and consequently expected to negate her own needs as an adult woman.

In the context of the union however, the words "*banat*" and "papa" point to the conflicting position the domestic workers occupy as unionists and as workers in the domestic, which also includes two contested elements: being unionists, which entails a

status of parity and camaraderie with fellow unionists; and being a woman employed in the domestic which pushes the supposedly 'fellow unionists' to mobilize a discourse of protection and guardianship by calling them *banat*. This is to show that the nature of the work, its location and gender, are all contingent on the ways in which the workers are discursively produced within the labor union context. This also shows that the Federation, as an institution is not immune to the discourse of guardianship that claims protection over the domestic worker in the family sphere. On the contrary, by reproducing the same discourse, a hierarchal relation is being forged between the women workers and the federation' leadership, following the image of Papa Abdallah and his *banat*. Hence, the mechanisms of domination, which structure social spaces and against which domestic workers intend to fight specifically, are reproduced within the Federation.

3.1.1. Conclusion

In this chapter, I tried to undertake an analysis of the politics emanating and the power shaping the relations between the different union actors and non-governmental organizations I encountered during my fieldwork. I highlighted the ways in which solidarity is being forged among women domestic workers across nationality lines, how class interests are being carved among them and how, from these efforts, women militant leaders are emerging. In their action to form their union the workers are challenging the state regulatory power that continuously produces them as exception and excess and denies them the right to organize and thus to have a political voice. In

that sense, their labor rights activism implicitly critiques the exclusionary practices of citizenship upon which access to rights is mediated. However, while doing so, they have to navigate the minefield of power within the context of their union and the Federation's structure itself. For instance, I gestured towards the ways in which agitational politics is hindered by global governance, by the reliance on external funding, and through the federation's unwillingness to challenge the state regulatory regime. I also underlined the challenges in solidarity-building where gender, class and nationality limit the fragile alliances within the core group (such in the case of the Lebanese leadership of the union for domestic workers); and that despite the best of intentions of FENASOL leadership, the masculinist ideology bounds the potentialities that can emanate from the union. In fact, under the current economic climate and for the labor movement to ensure its relevance, there is no other option but to engage with the changing face of the labor force, which is increasingly migrant and feminized. This means that, besides organizing domestic workers, labor unions should develop strategies to organize the informal Lebanese and migrant workers. This also means that the labor unions have to address and defend women workers' specific needs and rights whilst also addressing their concerns as migrant workers. However, women's issues particularly those related to violence are taking a secondary position with the Federation's focus on decent work, rather than abuse, and the extent to which women workers would play a leadership role is doubtful under the current form of the Federation's male dominated bureaucracy. Despite the fact that the Federation has offered a space for domestic workers, to organize them is to grasp the different ways in which they are being exploited, not only as workers, but also as women and as migrants. Thus, women's domestic workers'

demands for labor rights, rooted as they are in gendered and racialized analysis of work, continue to pose conceptual challenges for the labor unions and for the women's rights organizations (as I will discuss in chapter 4 which need to be addressed if we are to build a movement that does not seek to defend what was previously gained as rights, but that acts to deeply transform the relations of exploitation under capitalism. In this struggle, the complex hierarchies and inequalities in power relations, including gender and race within our movements, have to be simultaneously addressed and transformed.

CHAPTER 4

The Missing Worker in “Domestic Worker”:

Class Politics and Women's Rights Organizations

We may unite with Lebanese women who have the same problems as us; for example, the Lebanese women working in the same sector as us. I am speaking about working class women, but women in the city, I do not know. I work at their homes. That's all. We have nothing in common. I am speaking about women workers; somewhere they share with us the same lack of respect. If am stressing the respect, it is because the work we do is considered worthless

(Personal interview with Rose, migrant domestic worker from Cameroon, February 2015).

The years 2000 witnessed a growing interest on the part of NGOs in the issue of migrant domestic workers. The Lebanese government was pressured by international human rights organizations to make adequate reforms in its legislations and policies regarding the working conditions of migrant domestic workers. The adoption of the International Labor Organization Convention No 189 concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers in June 2011 put the issue of migrant domestic workers on the global agenda of human rights and further mobilized donors (such as the EU, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and UN Women) around this issue. In compliance with this new international agenda, local NGOs started developing projects and programs on migrant domestic workers specifically designed to provide legal, medical and social assistance in the absence or because of the absence of state policies. Again, the NGOs agreed to play the role of the state, exempting it from its responsibilities

towards its population by providing these services instead of enhancing mobilization and collective political action. Salameh (2014), Daou, (2014) Mitri (2014) Jad (2004) highlight the rise of more 'managerial'" type of organizations which are less and less action-oriented and more associated with what Wendy Brown (2006) terms "liberal legalism" that seeks to regulate differences in the context of the nation-state. All these elements contribute to the depoliticization of social movements. Depoliticization means that questions of inequality and injustice are perceived as individual and personal rather than political problems: "it involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from a recognition of the *powers* that produce and counter it."

In the context of migrant domestic workers, this depoliticization occurs first by singling out their experiences as unique or exceptional to working class experiences and under neoliberalism, an idea that I challenge in chapter one. The NGOs projects designed for migrant domestic workers exclusively, for instance, reaffirms the extent to which this issue is understood as separate from the project of securing workers' rights. Second, by following a strategy that gives more importance to legal reform and collaboration with state institutions, such as the Lebanese General Security, as opposed to enhancing organization and mobilization of domestic workers; and third by according a bigger role to service provision rather than enhancing collective action. One example is the Consortium on Migrant Domestic Workers established in 2012 as the result of the growing coordination between NGOs around migrant domestic workers issues. It aims at developing a common data management system that would guarantee an effective referral system for abused migrant domestic workers to the specific organization that

provide services and in order not to replicate the services provided for them. In this framework, politics is turned into "data management" and "referral system" of domestic workers rather than envisioning and creating new laboring practices.

Among the NGOs, Kafa is the only Lebanese women's rights organization that is active on the issue of migrant domestic workers, uncovering the abuse they face, providing services for them, advocating for the abolishment of the *Kafala* system and calling for the bettering of their working conditions. However, the dominant approach of the NGOs, Kafa included, is a humanitarian one, focusing on cases of violence, trafficking and deaths at the expense of the working conditions of the domestic workers. This approach that focuses on extreme cases of abuse, constructs migrant domestic workers as helpless victims, rather than political agents under circumscribed conditions. I argue that this framing of migrant domestic workers as victims is the natural consequences of the 'death' of politics, class politics in particular, and the growing professionalization of the women's rights organizations and the categorical production of women's rights experts and women's beneficiaries.

4.1. Class Politics and Contemporary Women's Movements

While women workers militancy in Lebanon can be traced back to women's industrial actions in 19th century silk factories and in the first half of the 20th century in the tobacco industry, working class women problems rarely made it to the agenda of the women's rights activists. Bernadette Daou (2014) distinguishes four waves of women's rights movements. In conjunction with the independence movement in 1943 the first

wave was largely based on the significant participation of women in the national liberation movement. The second wave emerged in the context of the Arab defeat of 1967 against Israel, and the rise of a 'new left.' The third emerged within the context of post-civil war era which was marked by a growing trend towards the NGO-ization of women's claims. Finally, the fourth wave was born out of the anti-war and anti-globalization movements in the early 2000s. Despite the relatively long history of working class women active presence in the public and in labor activism, the sole women activism that has been recognized in academia, in the press, in women's specialized conferences and in activism reports, is the one lead by upper class women who rarely challenged the socio-economic aspect of the patrimonial and patriarchal Lebanese order (Makarem & Rizk, 2014).

The early years of the twentieth century were marked by women's literary salons, mainly for upper class women who also ran charitable organizations, and later women's political unions. The first wave of women activists was predominantly concerned with the anti-colonial struggle and the right to vote and to political participation. Its relation to the poor took place through charity exclusively. The underlying characteristics of this wave was the detachment of women's issues from the domain of the social: "this elite had no awareness of women's needs in other situations, no interest in defending women belonging to lower economic classes, for example [...] the feminist discourse of this generation reflects the degree of overlap between national identity and female identity" (Daou, 2014:14-15). The women who emerged from influential families and educated notable classes were interested in the question of nationalism, colonial rule and modernization (Abisaab, 2010). Parallel to this, women

workers and peasants, who at that time constituted more than the half of the formal labor force, were at the forefront of the national campaigns against French colonial rule and its monopolization of tobacco production by the Regie. The workers' campaigns were the basis of the political movement for independence that culminated, as Abisaab (2010) argues, in the departure of the French and the promulgation of the labor law in 1946. These campaigns didn't stop with the declaration of the independent national state that was regarded as an extension of, rather than a break with, colonialism. The working class women active in the anti-colonial struggle shared little of the national ideals of upper-class women. The following lengthy extract from Abissaab (2010:36) study questions gender as an independent analytical category that unites women despite class divisions, and captures best the different interests, goals and aspirations of the women on the opposite sides of class politics:

“It was a public activism (women workers' activism) that was more suspicious of modernization, particularly when mechanization was introduced to industrial manufactures. It was less concerned with promoting women as the keepers and promoters of the moral ideals of "the nation" against European colonialism, than with direct rejection of colonial exploitation of their labor, its severe disruption of peasant family as a producing unit, and its implementations of new and "modern" forms of patriarchal practices that, on the one hand, removed women from direct family control and, on the other, forced them to accept half a man's wage at the industrial plant. Working women's struggle against the French and the Lebanese colonial state and capitalists was specifically for and about women's place in the market economy and their waged labor. Peasant and working women always have been in the public and have always worked. Seclusion and segregation were however, what upper-class and educated women writers of this earlier period tried to change in connection with anticolonial struggle and the discourse of modernization.”

Abisaab concludes that "there is more than one trajectory of women's history in Syria-Lebanon, and a common gender language or culture of resistance is absent. Beyond rallies against the Regie monopoly and French colonial rule, upper-class

feminism and working class feminism rarely met." (2010:36). In the early sixties the national question remained the primordial preoccupation for the second wave feminists. These feminists that became politicized in the union and student movements were part of a broader struggle for socialism, resistance to colonialism and to occupation. In fact, the seventies and the eighties witnessed the creation of different feminist organizations that constituted sister organizations of the nationalist and leftist political parties. Hence the League of Rights for Lebanese Women (*Lajnat Houkouk El Mar'a*) was a faction of the Communist Party. The Lebanese Democratic Assembly of Women (*Al-Tajammou Al-Nisa'i Al-Dimocrati Al-Lubnani* (RDFL) was founded as a sister organization of the Organization of Communist Action. The Progressive Women's Union (*Al-Itihad Al-Nisa'i Al-Takaddomi*) was founded as a sister organization of the Progressive Socialist Party. Despite the fact that some of these women organizations such as the RDFL, tackled the issue of women's rights at work, and hosted awareness raising sessions for working class women, these actions remained marginal on their agenda compared to the question of the national independence, relief work and resistance to Israel. Despite the fact that the claim for the recognition of the economic value of domestic work figured as one of the objectives of the RDFL, it never materialized into a public campaign to pressure the government and the employers towards this recognition. Daou argues that these feminist organizations had no independent agenda of their political parties to which they were attached, political parties which did not conceive of feminist struggles independent of the struggle for socialism, and that "the victory of the feminist cause depends on the victory of the socialist cause" (Daou, 2014:18).

A new wave emerged following the civil war and was characterized by the growing NGO-ization of women's issues. The principal event for third wave feminists was the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Within this context, many specialized organizations have emerged such as the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women (LECORVAW) and the Collective for Research and Training on Development (CRTDA), and later on Kafa (Enough Violence and Exploitation). A new language was born parallel to the emergence of 'new' causes like 'positive discrimination' and 'gender based violence.' Thus concludes Daou: "the structures of these new NGOs meet the requirements of international donors: the initiatives are turned into projects, the militants into "project coordinators", "professionals" and "employees" (2014:21). The feminist discourse was transformed into a 'single issue' right based discourse, the mass movement into projects, the militants into "project coordinators", "professionals" and "employees." The leftist discourse of the 1970s feminists was turned into a discourse on partial reforms, in this sense "women's liberation was dissociated from the pre-condition of the liberation of the society" (Daou, 2014:23). In this context, the majority of women, especially those who belong to the working class were marginalized from the agenda, politics and strategies of the women's rights NGOs (Salameh, 2014). A line has been drawn between the women's rights professional advocates and women 'beneficiaries." The women beneficiaries are often seen in the position of victims rather than women who share the same cause" (Salameh, 2014:78). The hierarchal structures of these organizations turn them into exclusive spaces of experts and professionals who strategize, advocate, lobby, and draw policies for women, in isolation from the women whom they claim to defend. Salameh argues

that these structures alienate working class women who "are turned into victims, rather than being part of platforms where women's voices and experiences can be raised and shared" (Salameh, *ibid*).

The fourth wave of feminist emerged from within the LGBT movement born out of the anti-war and anti-globalization demonstrations in 2000. The feminist militants focus on sexual and bodily rights as well as identity politics. And despite the fact that they self-identify as anti-capitalist and anti-colonial, they are led by educated middle and upper middle class women emerging out of Beirut's most prestigious private universities (Daou, 2014).

Lebanese feminist movements throughout their modern history have predominantly sidelined the class dimension. Little interest has been given to the actual lives and experiences of poor and working class women. Similarly, not many women's groups have taken up the cause of women migrant workers with priority being given to the "Lebanese woman" as a prominent feminist activist once put it in a public discussion around migrant domestic workers in 2011. An activist from Kafa observed "I feel that women's rights organization continue to resist the idea of handling the cause of migrant domestic workers. They would say: let's find work for the Lebanese women first before the migrants" (Personal interview; January 2015). Hence, to the general marginalization of working class women, there's a lack of support shown by the majority of women's groups to women migrant workers that can be attributed to the national centric ideology of these groups. In this regard, it is worth observing that the struggle of migrant domestic workers that has received a growing attention from international human rights organizations, did not receive support from most of the women's rights

groups except Kafa (and Nasawiya before its dissolution in 2014). This marginalization can be attributed to the fact that each organization is 'specialized' on a 'single-issue' or specific mandate. But most importantly, this can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the predominantly middle-class women have not reconciled the role they also play in denying these workers their rights (Ng, 2004). In other words, there is a conflict of interest in claiming for instance, a minimum wage for domestic workers.

The attention that migrant domestic workers have received especially from Kafa, didn't come out of its concern with working class women in general, but mostly as mentioned earlier, followed the international mobilization of funds intended to assist this category of women in specific. In Kafa's framework the issue of migrant domestic workers is a question of violence against women rather than labor exploitation

4.2. Violence against Women or Labor Rights?

Kafa is a prominent women's rights advocacy organization that was founded in 2005 with the mission of combating violence against women. It officially began working on the question of migrant domestic workers in 2010 as part of Kafa's anti-trafficking program. One Kafa coordinator explains how they frame the question of migrant domestic workers:

- We wanted to address this issue from the perspective of gender based violence, not from the labor and poverty perspective. We are facing problems in propagating the problem from a gendered perspective because the dominant framework is the one related to the labor rights and workers' migration. But we must not forget that they are women, and they constitute one of the largest women labor force in the country. From here, the violence exercised against the domestic worker within the household is not dissociated from the violence

exercised by the husband against his wife. The power dynamics within the family are replicated against the domestic worker even though in most cases the source of physical and psychological violence against the domestic worker is the woman.

- Do you mean that the violence against the domestic worker is linked to domestic violence?
- It's not linked to the violence against the d We can say that if the Lebanese woman is battered within the family, most probably the domestic worker is battered too either by the man perpetrator of violence or by the woman victim of violence. What I mean is that the power dynamic between the husband and the wife is the same between the employer, man or woman, and the domestic worker. It's violence. This is what we want to get to. It's violence that is practiced against the domestic worker because she's a woman. Of course, because she's a woman, from different race, color, religion and poorer... but we cannot forget her gender identity" (Personal interview with Kafa coordinator, January 2015).

The gender specific approach of Kafa to domestic work is a continuation of the work of Kafa against domestic violence. This approach allowed addressing the difficult working conditions, physical and psychological violence female and male employers direct against their women domestic workers. However, a study conducted by Ray Jureidini (2011) shows that there is no significant correlation between abuse of the domestic worker and abuse of female employer by her husband (2011:9). Violence between employers and employees is enhanced by the *kafala* system that renders the migrant domestic worker dependent on the good-will of their employers. The framing of domestic workers' issue as gendered violence hence leads to the questioning of the sponsorship system. However, in this framework, the labor dimension is sidelined. The concern that is being neglected is that the value of this labor is not economically recognized because it is considered an extension of the natural role of women and part of the informal economy.

The concealment of the labor approach in Kafa's framework relegates the discussion about labor rights and the social organization of reproductive labor to a secondary position. The gender based violence approach to domestic workers, despite its importance in integrating the gendered and racialized exploitation of workers by their employers with spousal violence, is not successful in negotiating the differences between labor organizing and domestic violence work which is largely based on institutionalized responses to domestic violence, where survivors are turned into clients and activists into service providers.

In fact, two years back in 2013, Kafa started to organize a group of Nepali domestic workers (NARI group) with the support of the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions and Anti-Slavery International. Organizing the Nepalese over national lines is an act that mimics the pattern of migrant community organizing, but a one that the union for the domestic workers is trying to overcome. This pattern is a spontaneous form of organizing in which migrants meet over common language, culture and religion. The community in that sense is a bridge between the spontaneous and the more open political form of organizing such as the union. However, while NARI group was initiated by Kafa following an upper-down form of organizing, other migrant communities have self-organized historically even before the intervention of the NGOs is their regard. The Nepalese workers are among the least organized because they are smaller in numbers and among the most recent migrant workers in the country. The management of this community organizing is over-determined by Kafa in everything related to funding events, trainings and advocacy work. Kafa's motivation to mount NARI, as one Kafa coordinator puts it: "is to empower a group that becomes a reference whenever a

worker is in trouble or is abused." NARI in that sense plays only a limited role as an intermediary between the abused worker and the NGO, or as a referral system that links the worker in need of assistance to the service provider. This approach limits the political potential of mobilization for domestic workers and also confines them in the category of victims of violence. The labor approach for domestic workers on the contrary opens up another aspect for mobilizing, one that is based on the shared experience of exploitation of labor and working class solidarity among women across nationality and race.

4.3. Towards the Revaluation of Domestic Labor

Women's rights activists in Lebanon rarely discuss the mixed pattern of work that women workers undertake outside and inside the house. When women workers rights at work are raised, such as the right to social security for women and equal pay and so forth, these demands are not linked to the women's workers conditions within the family. Official labor statistics claim that women constitute 23% of the labor force (Salameh, 2014) other sources estimate that women represent 35% of the total number of employed workers (Khalaf, 2002). These figures exclude the informal sector and imply that the majority of women in Lebanon do not work. In other words, the labor of women, the one performed informally or in the household, is made invisible and officially unrecognized. Rima (name has been changed), a feminist militant says:

“Domestic work is a problematic that can unite Lebanese and migrant working class women. However, the feminist activists either talked about women's social reproduction role inside the house, or about women workers rights outside the house, they never did the link between the two spheres; they never spoke about

the woman as a worker both inside and outside the domestic sphere. However, as a feminist I don't accept that my liberation from the domestic work takes place at the expense of the liberation of another woman; many Lebanese women consider that they are liberated because they work outside the house, while they employ a domestic worker for very cheap. I see that the societal and economic revalorization of domestic work is a struggle that should unite women. Lebanese women should know that the wage they pay for the domestic worker reflects the worth they themselves attach to this labor. This means it reflects the value they attribute to their own labor." (Personal interview, January 2015)

Rima makes an important point that is missing in the discourse of Kafa and women's rights organizations in general, which is the idea that the struggle for the labor rights of domestic workers will open up the political possibility of the recognition of domestic work as 'real' work whoever is performing it, whether a full-time Lebanese housewife or a migrant worker; as eloquently put by Salameh: "the non-recognition of women's domestic work as an economic value and the exploitation of migrant domestic workers relieves the state from the burden of providing those services, placing them on the backs of women" (Salameh, 2014:72). The non-recognition of the economic value of women's domestic labor runs parallel to the societal and official celebration of women as caregivers and housewives. Giving the fact that the private family is responsible for the well-being of its members in the absence of adequate state policies in that field, it is the women who carry the burden of the unpaid caregiving services for children, the elderly and the persons with special needs within the family. Hence, the labor related framing of domestic workers allows for a discussion on welfare policies for the household, such as state funded childcare policies, care for the elderly and disabled and income for domestic work which are until today absent from public discussions and women's rights groups agendas. Yet, the common struggle for the re-valorization of domestic work should not at the same time subordinate differences of race and

nationality that structure the encounter between non-migrant and migrant women.

Rodriguez argues in the context of Europe that:

“Though these two women might share the effects of structural violence against women, the exploitative effects of the logic of capital accumulation and heteronormativity, these moments are crossed by the logic of the coloniality of power. Thus, while these women might, for example, share the same nasty feeling of "disgust" attached to the social devaluation of domestic work, this feeling is connoted by different moments of domination (...) Political organizing around the question of feminization of labor, thus, demands more than a retrieval of identity politics as the fabric of the feminization of labor is embedded in the coloniality of labor.” (p: 159)

Indeed, the non-recognition of the value of domestic work is not the result of its feminization only, but also of its growing racialization. In his study on the history of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, Jureidini (2009) notes that prior to the civil war, Palestinian women from Lebanon’s refugee camps, Kurdish refugees, and women from neighboring Arab countries, such as Syria and Egypt, constituted the majority of the domestic labor force. With the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, Arab domestic workers were slowly replaced by women of African and Asian origins. In the postwar environment in Lebanon, there has been a pronounced internationalization of the domestic labor force. Hence, any labor approach to domestic work, must critically confront racist and nationalist discourses in the struggle against exploitation of migrant workers and migratory policies at large. In fact, the plight of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon is not just a legal issue that can be remedied by reforming the *kafala* system. It reflects deeper class, racial and gendered prejudices that must be addressed. Domestic workers' oppression is nominally three-fold: they are working-class women of color from the global south. In this regard, coloniality of power is inflicted with gendered and class divisions. In this framework, the labor unions must recognize the insufficiency of

interpretations based on class as a universal entity. Likewise, the feminist interpretations of paid domestic work are insufficient when they do not incorporate contributions regarding gender and race.

4.4. The Perfectly Tailored Victim and its Binary Other

“Kafa helps mistreated, abused and raped women, but I am not in this condition and I don't personally suffer from these problems. Kafa also deals on a case by case basis, not of domestic workers only, but of all women. But the trade-union is something different. It's us who are trying to unite to defend our rights, in our name. This is the difference. There are many NGOs who help and protect us but following their own terms. But in order to eradicate the roots of the problem, to assert our own rights, we cannot wait for someone to lead the struggle on our behalf. It depends on us and us only, as domestic workers. The NGOs help us in each case that appears. However, what we want from this trade-union is to eradicate the roots of our exploitation.” (Personal interview with Lily, domestic worker from Madagascar, January 2015).

Lily acknowledges the importance of the services provided by Kafa, however she expresses her lack of feeling of ownership within the NGO in contrast to the trade-union which she considers as a place that unites workers to defend their rights "in our name." What Lily expresses is the need for NGOs to be supportive of the workers' struggle without dictating the terms of this struggle. Also she expresses her frustration of the category of "abused woman" in which she must fit in order to benefit from the services offered. She notes the discrepancy between her personal experience as worker and this categorization. Her insistence on her subject positioning as "domestic worker", challenges the individual identity of "mistreated, abused and raped" woman. Gemma from the Philippine shares similar concerns:

“The role of the NGOs is helping us. But their help has limits. They say: this is the allotted amount for this project, for example, and when the funds are short, that's it! We stop to that. While for us, having our union is the sacrifice we make. It's the commitment in our heart. We are the key actors, and players in that union. It's not you. It's not the ILO. It's us.” (Personal interview with Gemma, domestic worker from Philippines, February 2015)

The ways in which Gemma and Lily define who they and their fellow workers are constitutes a shared understanding that begins to take shape in the union organization process. The statements put forward by these workers challenge the framework upheld by the NGOs that tend to manage them as victims.

A study conducted by Kafa entitled "Dreams for Sale, the Exploitation of Domestic Workers from Recruitment in Nepal and Bangladesh to Working in Lebanon" (2014) found that the migrant is first a victim who has been deceived by recruiting agents and brokers in her country of origin. Second, the migrant becomes a victim of forced labor upon her arrival in Lebanon. Third, the migrant domestic worker is a victim of emotional, physical, and sexual violence exercised by the employers or the placement agencies. In this account Kafa has drawn the image of the perfect victim; a domestic worker who has been deceived, abused and exploited throughout her migration trajectory. In this portrayal of extreme victimhood replete with images of slavery a depressing and potentially disempowering scenario is being constructed. While the victimhood discourse can be useful in propagating and rendering visible the dire conditions of the migrant domestic workers within a human rights framework, it constructs the domestic as an incapacitated subject that cannot be an active actor in transforming her reality, but on the contrary who needs someone to make the change on her behalf. After all, advocacy work necessitates a language of victims to prove the large

number of people affected negatively by a certain policy. This framework cannot possibly reflect the daily struggle of the domestic workers, how they sustain themselves under this regime and become in certain cases militants for workers' rights. In fact, the day to day lives and resistance of the women goes unnoticed and invisible to the state, the law, the NGOs and the research community in general. Gemma reacts to this victimhood discourse put forward by the NGOs:

“I am not afraid. I always say to my colleagues: FEAR has two meanings. The first is: Forget everything and Run. The second: Face everything and Rise. This is what I share with them. If the fear will control your life, until when you will hold it? I know, it will take months, maybe years for the government to approve what we are doing, but we keep on fighting. Nothing can stop us now. The pride that we had last Sunday nobody can erase it. We made history. Decades will pass. But it will be marked that this generation of workers formed a union on January 25, 2015. You cannot remove this from the record.”

4.5. Individuation of Rights and Security Concerns

To assist the victims, Kafa developed its project on domestic workers providing legal counseling services, psychotherapy and referral to temporary safe house for abused domestic workers. The domestic workers who profit from these services need to meet certain criteria, mainly of being exposed to sexual and/or physical abuse by employers or the placement agencies' personal. These services come to redress individual violations but they fall short in questioning the structural problems that enables these violations to occur. As Wendy Brown (2000) puts it:

“While rights may attenuate the subordination and violation to which women are vulnerable in a masculinist social, political, and economic regime, they vanquish neither the regime nor its mechanism of reproduction.” (Brown, 2000: 231)

The limits of the rights discourse is the law and the state institutions. For instance, Kafa held an *ad hoc* agreement with the General Security to stop the detention and the deportation of a runaway domestic worker who escaped abuse and approached Kafa for help. The domestic worker in this position was referred to a shelter, which acts as a 'more human' alternative to the General Security prison. The coordination with the General Security, while it can benefit the domestic worker on an individual basis, allowing her to avoid the insecure fate of deportation or the dire life of being incarcerated for an undefined period in an underground General Security prison, is problematic on a political level. In fact, illegal migrants who are detained by the General Security are usually sentenced to prison, fined, and ultimately face deportation (Human Rights Watch, 2008:2). Kafa's coordination with the General Security, however, does not question this apparatus and its long standing history of violation of migrant workers' and refugees' rights and for its responsibility in oppressing migrants on the basis that they constitute a security threat. Dealing with migrants from a security perspective as Aradau (2008) has successfully argued, is the first step in the process of rendering them unequal and reducing them to a shadowy existence. In that sense, security acts as a negation to politics that resists discrimination. For example, in January 2014 the General Security issued a directive under which it is permitted to expel migrant workers with children on the grounds that they have started a family in Lebanon. By May of that year, dozens of women migrant workers were deported with their children in a clear violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The practice of deportation should be seen as a

disciplinary practice that acts to regulate the population and which cannot be understood in isolation of the regime of citizenship. In fact, citizenship acts as a marker of identification that regulates the division of humanity into distinct national populations and put them under different regimes of governance following racial, gendered and class lines. It's under this regime that the migrant is considered an "excessive subject", recognized only as an anomaly, as someone who "should not be there" (Aradau, 2008:191).

It is worth mentioning that such campaigns that seek collaboration with state institutions such as the General Security attract donor organizations that do not, or cannot, question these institutions' records of human rights' violations. For example, in partnership with the Internal Security Forces (ISF), and despite that police forces are famous for their human rights abuses (Dockery, 2013), Kafa launched the 16 days of activism against violence against women on November 25, 2013 on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, under the title "We have a mission, if you are threatened don't hesitate to call 112". The campaign aimed at "rebuilding trust between women victims of violence and the ISF, and informing the public on the ISF's ongoing preparations to provide women with the protection they need." (Kafa, 2013) The campaign is part of a wider project implemented by Kafa and the ISF, called: "the role of the Internal Security Forces in combatting family violence." This campaign was funded by the United Nations Population Fund, the Italian Embassy in Lebanon, the Norwegian Embassy in Lebanon; the Swedish organization Kvinna Till Kvinna, the Norwegian Popular Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children and the European Union.

Such campaigns pose critical questions regarding the role of donors in maintaining the status quo and shaping the discourse and strategies of women's organizations (Salameh, 2014) and the extent to which these organizations become part and parcel of the regime of governance. Most importantly, as labor activists expressed, coordination with an oppressive state apparatus threatens any initiatives taken by migrant workers to collectively organize. It is legitimate to ask: will the NGO take a position in support of the trade-union for domestic workers for instance, if the General Security decides to attack the union militants, to incarcerate and deport them? Won't their trade union militancy jeopardize the relationships that the NGO sustains with the General Security, and consequently risks the operation of their projects, programs and services?

At the time of writing this thesis these relationships between NGOs and the General Security are still unfolding, yet all the indicators suggest that domestic workers militant unionists will not find support if/when their actions start to go beyond the accepted norms. An activist at the Migrant Community Center told me for example, that Caritas-Lebanon, a prominent NGO working on domestic migrant workers issues, refused to co-sign a statement that criticized the General Security and expressed its objection to any confrontation with the state or this institution that might threatens their programs. In fact, Caritas's work is based on close and cooperative relationship with the General Security in dealing with the problems of migrant domestic workers. Between 2000 and 2001 for instance, Caritas contributed in the funding of the General Security Detention Center in Adliyah which is designed specifically for migrants who had visa violations. This "controversial agreement" with the General Security, allowed

Caritas to provide medical and health services in the detention center and to monitor the treatment of the detained migrants (Jureidini, 2011). However, the discourse of the migrant labor activists, such in the case of Lily and Gemma, already challenges the boundaries of the hegemonic model of activism set by the NGOs. For them, their trade union will enhance their collective rights as domestic workers. They portray the individual problems of abuse that face domestic workers as structural ones and they conceive their struggle as a collective and historical one.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter questioned the class biased politics of women's rights agenda. I argued in favor of an alternative feminist politics that seeks to advance gender and class justice for women irrespective of nationality and race. I have also argued in favor of a politics of labor which opens up the space for collective action as part of an emancipatory project and moves us from the restricted terrain of identity politics and narratives of victimhood. In my fieldwork migrant domestic workers repeated on many instances that 'we are workers with rights.' Despite the fact that such a call does not constitute a break from capitalism, but occurs within it, and hence remains partial, yet represents an emancipatory move from the regime of governance and the securitizing practices that categorize migrants as threat, other, and excess.

The problem with the politics adopted by women's rights organizations depicts a larger problem related to the growing institutionalization, professionalization and depoliticization of the women movement where claims for justice for women are turned

into data management and referral systems. Contemporary Lebanese women's rights organizations resort to a liberal discourse on rights calling for state intervention through its regulatory system. This is largely the effect of the demise of class politics and the critique of capitalism and its culture. In this framework claims concerned with gender and race (as in the case of rights for migrant domestic workers) appear not as supplement for class politics but as external to them. I give one example that clarifies further my argument; in a discussion with one Kafa coordinator, I was told that class is a variable that acts as a layer of exploitation of migrant domestic workers next to race and gender. In this framework class is recognized and named, but not theorized or developed as a domain for social identification or as an axis of mobilization. In other words, the 'death of politics', gave rise to women's rights' organizations that address migrant domestic workers issues separately and as part of heavily funded campaigns and projects. This depoliticization of the women's rights movement is further pronounced by donor funding preferences for 'empowerment' and 'capacity building' requiring measurable changes in women's lives instead of feminist consciousness and grassroots organizing. This has reconfigured feminist and women's politics on the national level. Movement building and agitational politics were replaced with training expert reports, funded short time programs of empowerment and advocacy campaigns, as Manicom (2001) puts it: "the danger is that the objectives of women's emancipation are buried by the rationalities of administration (2011:11). Indeed, the victimhood discourse can be understood as a consequence for these "rationalities of administration" that turn the migrant domestic worker into an object of power (the NGOs and the state). In this discourse, a line is drawn between 'us' the women's rights defenders and the

'them', the victims that the women's rights campaigners design projects to save or call on the state to save. 'This construction neglects the everyday array of mechanisms employed by these workers to cope, to negotiate and even resist their precarious conditions. But more importantly, and as Harvey (2014) puts it: "a politics that rests on narratives of victimization does not inspire solidarity."

In this context the domestic workers in Lebanon started to organize and mobilize following a union model, pumping new blood into the veins of the trade-union movement in the country. Their actions takes place within a framework of insecurity resulting from the regimes of governance that manage them as aliens with no or limited rights; Their actions reminds us of the fact that power and resistance inhabit the same moment where as " no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings" (Foucault, cited in Brown, 2009:397). This contradictory act of power is what largely lacks from the theorization of women's groups, who tend to inscribe their 'beneficiaries' under the one category of 'victims'.

CHAPTER 5

The Prospects Around Organizing Migrants in National Framework

5.1. More than a Broom

Sitting in a restaurant with Rose, a domestic worker from Cameroun and member of the executive board of the union for domestic workers' executive board, on a Sunday afternoon, she narrated her experience of laboring in Lebanon. The restaurant was empty except for an old couple sitting three tables away from us, this gave her space to speak freely. With an exasperated sigh she said "you know Farah? What we lack in our work is respect. The work we do is considered worthless." Her tone of voice changed and became louder as she continued "But no! It's not. Why is it that work you do with all of your sweat, your body, your heart and your soul is considered worthless? No, this should not be so. You wake up in the morning at 6 am, you begin by preparing breakfast, you clean everything, then you pass to other things, you wash, you iron, then you have to run to pick up the children from the school bus, you give them something to eat, you clean up after them, then in the evening you prepare dinner and you clean again. You are the last one to sleep and the first one to wake up in the house. How can that be nothing? It should be honorable, because this is what it is. But today, in this society people only see the broom, they don't see that behind the broom's stick there's a human being that is pushing it. How can this not be considered work? If you consider that to be nothing, then send me back to my country and you do the 'nothingness' of the work that we do!"

In tracing the work histories of the migrant domestic workers I often asked them that if they had the opportunity, what would they change about their conditions in Lebanon? Their answers varied, but one thing that appeared repeatedly in these narratives was the desire of enjoying a dignified existence. Their narratives were filled with stories about having to endure alienation from the social as racialized bodies and the ill-treatment from the society at large from the taxi driver to the cashier and customers in the super-market, to the waiters at restaurants, and always by the police. Similarly, Rose's narration of her work experience centered on recognition. She did not complain about the workload or an overbearing employer as much as she deplored the misrecognition of her labor as "worthless," about people's appreciation of the broom more than the human being behind it. For someone whose job is the hard work of caring for others, the misrecognition of her labor struck her as absurd.

The metaphor of the broom recalls Marx's analysis of the worker's alienation from production, the self and the other and it also serves to frame pressing questions about the undervaluation of caring labor, whether waged or unwaged, in relation to the legacy of their gendering and racialization. Domestic workers constitute an emblematic example of the ways in which workers' subjectivities are subsumed and merged with their labor under the new economy. The work they do is not about producing material things that are touched, but about things that are felt and sensed that pertain to affect and care. In that regard, the "broom" becomes an extension of the bio-body of the worker, and affect is produced through the constant interaction between the different bodies within the household. Since labor is embodied, Rose's expression of frustration is

not only about the amount of labor she has to deploy as much as it is about the fact that the misrecognition of her labor constitutes misrecognition of her humanness in itself.

Thus, I suggest that we read the workers' enthusiasm about their union and the sense of pride emanating from their new collectivity that I discussed in this thesis, in relation to the desire that Rose expressed, that this labor be counted as worthy. Labor politics in that sense is tightly woven into the desire for recognition. For example, we might recall when earlier Gemma described how she encourages the union members to wave their union membership ID. By that, she was not only gesturing to the importance of workers' collective identity, but also and perhaps more importantly, soliciting in them dignity and pride, shedding the stigma of an activity associated in the wider social imaginary with shame and dirt.

5.2. The Nation and the Politics of Labor and Life

Recognition also amounts to another desire that is usually unspoken and expelled from the zone of formal labor politics, which is the desire for life. The recognition of the desire for life is part and parcel of the recognition of the workers as human beings. Migrant domestic workers are prescribed in the category of the migrant 'other' throughout their stay in Lebanon. They are perceived to be in the country for one thing which is to push the “broom”, this is explicit, for example, in the ways in which the workers are denied, for example, their sexuality by their employers or as Moukarbel puts it: "the maids are not permitted to exist as women in their own right, denied having friends and having a private life for the entire duration of their contract." (2009:329) In fact, migrant domestic workers are subject of a

stringent discipline regarding their sexuality that is promoted by the state. For example, this year the General Security issued a new directive following which an employer has to notify the General Security if the domestic worker gets involved "in any kind of relationships" or "gets married to a Lebanese or a foreigner residing in Lebanon", in this case the worker is object for deportation. In other words, the General Security directive declares that domestic workers are not allowed to love. These kinds of policies governing migrant women workers which pertain to control, surveillance and exclusion are usually not the subject of formal union politics which are concerned with work disputes taking place on the site of work between the employers and the workers. However, life entails all the other things that people do outside work. In that sense, domestic workers constitute a challenge to the labor unions, because their labor is embodied and their entire being is disciplined and instrumentalized. Their lives are not expected to know leisure, love and sociality, rather reduced to labor. Mala's example that I presented earlier, speaks volumes regarding this issue. Mala who lived and worked in Lebanon as domestic worker for 30 plus years is obliged, today, to retire in her 'home country,' Sri Lanka. Her narrative destabilizes our understanding of what constitutes 'home' and national belonging. The politics of life, I argue, comes into focus as life as it is lived here and now. Beyond laboring- as we all labor whether sitting behind a desk or pushing a broom- it pertains to sociality, to the right to claim membership in the society in which one lives and works, to have a say in determining the conditions that affect everyday life and to be able to transform the conditions of institutional subordination. This means that labor unions, if they are to be reinvented, will have to open up to fields 'outside production'.

On another, I perceive the union for migrant domestic workers as an attempt that has the potentiality of destabilizing the exclusion that the logic of the nation-state, as protector of capital, imposes regarding migrant workers who are recognized solely as a source for constant

inflow of low wage-labor (Parreás, 2001). The migrants become these bodies whose exclusion is essential in maintaining the space of the nation's sovereignty, imagined as coherent and homogeneous. Asking the question from the position of labor allows us to open up the imagination for other forms of sociality that transgresses national distinctions. It also allows us to look at the ways in which workers, and migrant workers in particular, while they are the object of state and capital regulation they are continuously challenging the nation's order and orderliness (Walters, 2001; Appadurai, 2003). I argue in favor of a politics that allows the migrants to have the right to make choices in the country where they live and I suggest we look at labor politics as a mean to fight against the exclusion of migrant workers from life.

5.3. Organizing the Excluded

For more than 4 years I have been engaged with most of the labor actions that took place in Lebanon as a militant, journalist and researcher. I have seen the ways in which informal workers, migrants and the Lebanese working class has been struggling in vain to achieve very basic of rights such as minimum wage and secured jobs. I have seen the ways in which these workers' actions have been easily crushed by an alliance between the government and the employers, and disregarded by the formal trade-union organizations. Since the 1990s the labor unions have moved through a steady path toward bureaucratic and service oriented unions. Privileging a Fordist model of organizational structure, despite the fact that this model has become a historical artifact, labor unions played an active role in further excluding the majority of workers. In chapter 2, I showed, for example, that more than 90 percent of the enterprises in Lebanon employ less than 10 workers and that migrant workers constitute a

considerable portion of the workforce and that the majority of the workforce (migrant and Lebanese) is condensed in the informal sector. The neoliberal onslaught has affected working conditions, livelihoods, and has rendered older forms of union organizing ineffective. The administrative structures of the main labor unions have largely become instruments of state regulatory actions. Unions, even those coming out of the Lebanese left, have turned into bureaucratic male dominated organizations, demobilized and manipulated by the authority at the same time as they have been effectively stripped of a broad political function.

Given these contemporary conditions I approached the initiative to organize migrant domestic workers in a union, under the auspices of FENASOL, the ILO and the NGOs, with skepticism as an organizing structure that is highly mitigated by relations of power between the different actors over gender and nationality lines. But also as a project that is driven by international governance. This fact makes us pose the question of: why international capital, at this particular moment, is interested in initiating and supporting labor union organizing and to what emancipatory goals? Did labor unions give up on agitational politics for short term funded project initiatives?

Despite the fact that the union is in its preliminary stages and that there are limits to the generalizations that can be made out of this experience, however, the actors' discourses, especially on the level of FENASOL's leadership do not reflect a political commitment towards building real alliances with migrant workers. Rather, FENASOL's initiative to organize migrant domestic workers can be best understood in relation to the opportunity that global governance (ILO) allowed in terms of funding and visibility to the federation but not as a genuine commitment to build a strong and combative labor movement. On this level, one example is telling: on the occasion of May first, International Workers' Day, when the newly

formed union for domestic workers called for a protest claiming that the union be recognized by the Lebanese government, none of FENASOL's affiliated unions marched in solidarity with the domestic workers. This expresses the fact that organizing migrant domestic workers continues to be a contested project within FENASOL with Lebanese union leaders considering it as a secondary project at times where 'Lebanese' workers are unorganized. Thus, beyond the formal organizing of migrants (domestic workers), labor solidarity needs to be tested on the ground, in the practices and discourses of the Lebanese unionists.

At the same time, the women migrants are aware of the contradictions and limitations of their unionization and also of the actions of the NGOs on their behalf. On many instances they reacted to the discourses that victimize them and claimed ownership on their union. Maybe, because of all these factors, the union gives hope as it is at the very least offering possibilities of reworking ideas of labor organizing. If nothing else, the energies, enthusiasm and hope consistently expressed by the migrant domestic workers is something to be taken seriously. Bringing together migrant women from the global south, who have been driven to migrate because of the devastating effects of capitalist globalization to work in private households under exploitative working conditions, in a job that is excluded and invisible, perceived as 'shameful' and 'dirty', is a reminder that workers in even the most secluded employment can attempt to reconfigure the relations of power and inequality that underpin their working conditions. Redirecting the site of the struggle from narrowly defined workplace disputes to public contestations over the value and meaning of work is an important step for rethinking questions of labor organizing in the contemporary. Although these efforts may not directly subvert existing hierarchies and inequalities, they generate visibility for excluded workers, joining demands for redistribution with demands for recognition, as Fraser (2005) suggested.

Rather than question whether it is possible to organize more vulnerable segments of the workforce such as migrants and women, the migrant domestic workers unionization obliges us to shift the debate to how and under what conditions the excluded can leverage any power at all. With millions of migrant workers in the Arab World constituting around one fifth of the population (according to a member of ILO ACTRAV) the question for those concerned with social change is how to benefit from the migrant's considerable presence and work on building workers' organized political power? How to build strong alliances across nationality lines to enhance political change? And what potentialities will this have on our imagination of the political and the social?

Irrespective if the union members will succeed in attaining the minimum of rights they are struggling for, what is more important is that they are engaging in an attempt, learning through it and teaching us at the same time, to challenge the structural inequities and the values of sexism and racism that is part and parcel of our capitalist present. Their struggle, in my view, is not only about winning small gains, but it is about opening up the space for the excluded to have a say in determining the conditions of their existence, and by virtue of this struggle they are transformed and transforming the society with them, as Gemma puts it: "having this union was one of those historical moments when everyone present knew that an important barrier had been crossed, that there would be no turning back."

Finally, in this research I tried to situate the question of migrant domestic workers in relation to the labor movement on one level and to the women's rights movement on the other. The goal is to analyze the organizing of the domestic workers within its broader social context, highlighting the challenges and the possibilities residing in this attempt, rather than looking at migrant domestic workers as an isolated

and as an exceptional labor category under neoliberalism. Adding to that, the research tried to grasp a moment, which is the moment of initiating the union, a moment that might not last, giving all the threats that engulf it and all the contradictions within it, yet in this moment resides a certain potentiality. The potentiality that I attempted to grasp is the intrusion of the excluded into the socio-political space, or what Žižek (2009) calls the "universality of the social body". In fact, throughout the writing of the thesis I had Lenin's question reiterated by Žižek: "How to Begin from the Beginning?" or in other words: how to imagine alternative movements that constantly work on the inclusion and that acts to destroy the contemporary forms of social apartheid that divide people along national, gender, race and sectarian lines?

But how would we expect that the migrants form strong political and labor movements while the mobility of the society that hosts them is almost non-existent and where institutional sectarianism coupled with social injustice have succeeded to bring the society down on its knees? Would the impasse or deadlock that the Lebanese society found itself in - social movements and labor movements included- be overcome by, the migrants, those who are the most excluded and on the margin of this society? Or this presumption, as a friend of mine cautioned, throws the burden of the 'failed revolution' and social inactivity, on those who are the most fragile and the most precarious?

I think there's no easy and straight forward answer to these questions. I think that the brave act of the migrant domestic workers to assert themselves and reclaim labor and human rights that have been denied to them is a first attempt towards the inclusion of the excluded that I talked about earlier, and will have permanent effects on the other 'aliens'. The history has shown in different contexts that social movements

while may have different agendas they build on each other's histories, failures and successes. The call for *isqat al nizam* (fall of the regime) in Tunisia and Egypt found its echoes in Greece and the *midan* (the square) occupation in Egypt made its way to as far as the US.

The migrant domestic workers, through their action are forcing the attention of the nation that the migrant labor force became a considerable part of the society that cannot be sidelined anymore. In that sense, it's not a coincidence that on the eve of May first International Workers day 2015, the only serious call for mobilization came from the migrant domestic workers in Lebanon claiming the right that their union be recognized. In fact this is very telling and in this very fact the whole story resides.

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