

The Hidden Impacts of COVID-19 on Women Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in the Middle East

التأثيرات الخفية لجائحة كوفيد-19 على العاملات المنزليات المهاجرات في الشرق الأوسط

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ملخص:

تُصنف العاملات المنزليات المهاجرات على أنهن عاملات غير رسميات وغير ماهرات، ويفتقرن إلى الحماية القانونية، وغالبًا ما يُشار إلى هذا العمل بالانجليزية على أنه وظائف D3 و ما يقابله باللغة العربية- قدرة وصعبة ومهينة. وعلى الرغم من هذه الصعوبات، تمثل العاملات المنزليات مورد مالي مهم لأسرهن في بلدانهم الأصلية الهدف من دراستنا هو معرفة اثار الأزمة الصحية كوفيد-19 على العاملات المهاجرات في المنازل و هذا في بعض دول الشرق الأوسط، وتحديدًا دول مجلس التعاون الخليجي ولبنان والأردن، التي تستضيف نسبة كبيرة من هذه القوة العاملة. و ذلك بالاعتماد على المنهج الوصفي و التحليلي ، خلصت الدراسة إلى أن الوباء أدى إلى تفاقم الوضع لدى العاملات المنزليات في هذه المنطقة و المعروف بالسيئ أساسا. و من بين أثار الجائحة تخفيض الأجور، الحد من خيارات ارسال التحويلات المالية إلى بلدانهم، والعودة القسرية، كل ذلك بينما يواصل نظام الكفالة تقييد حقوقهن

الكلمات المفتاحية: العاملات المنزليات المهاجرات؛ وظائف D3 ؛ الكوفيد-19 ؛ دول الشرق الأوسط ؛ نظام الكفالة

Abstract :

Women migrant domestic workers (MDWs) are classified as informal and unskilled laborers, lacking constitutional protections. This work is often referred to as 3D jobs—dirty, difficult, and demeaning. Despite these difficulties , women MDWs serve as a crucial financial resource for their families in their home countries. The aim of our study is to explore the effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on women migrant domestic workers in some Middle Eastern countries., specifically the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Lebanon, and Jordan, which host a significant proportion of this workforce. Using an analytical descriptive approach. The study concluded that the pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities for women MDWs in this region. It has led to reduced salaries, limited options for sending remittances home, and forced returns, all while the sponsorship (kafala) system continues to restrict their rights.

Keywords : Women MDWs ;3D jobs ;Covid-19 ; Middle East countries ; Kafala system

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Introduction :

Domestic work is regarded as one of the most informal and vulnerable occupations attracting unskilled foreign workers willing to work in dirty, demeaning and difficult conditions known as 3D jobs. Since many migrant workers for all sexes in general face risks and vulnerabilities while moving abroad for work, the situation for women is significantly worse than it is for their male counterparts (Nhengu, 2022)

Globally, there are 75.5 million domestic workers aged 15 years and older with 76% of them being women. Overall, the largest proportion of domestic migrants is concentrated in East and Southeast Asia with 36%, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean with 19%. Domestic workers have historically been excluded from national labor laws (Ismail & Ogando, 2023)

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted countries as well as numerous people and communities, necessitating an examination of specific situations and population groups. Women migrants are among the one most vulnerable to the consequences of this pandemic (Eclac, 2020).

According to reports, Employers are more likely to end the employment of women migrant workers in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic's negative effects on the economy since they typically operate in the informal sector of the economy under insecure conditions without formal employment contracts and with minimal protection under labor regulations. On March 15, 2020, the International Labor Organization (ILO) projected that worldwide, such actions had a significant negative impact on 49.3% of domestic workers, whether through a reduction in hours worked, a decrease in wages, or job losses. This prediction increased to 73.7% by May 2020. (Almasri, 2022). Due to a lack of social safety, their livelihood and income stability were negatively impacted by the restrictions (Nanda, 2020)

As the need for care labor increases, particularly in the Middle East region, the demand for migrant domestic workers (MDWs) has expanded over the past few decades. According to the ILO, 83% of MDWs are hosted by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Lebanon, and Jordan. The bulk of these people are from Asian and African nations like Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Ethiopia. In addition, If we compare the number of men and women working as domestic workers, we find that 6 out of 10 are women, while 1 out of 10 men work as domestic workers. (Nanda, 2020).

The aim of this study is to explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women MDWs, particularly in the Middle East, a region that receives a significant proportion of this group of migrants. Hence, we aim to answer a double question;

- First: What are the effects of the COVID-19 health crisis on women MDWs in the Middle East region and has it affected their job security? Second: did the governments of Middle East region's countries implement specific measures in response to this crisis in order to protect this category of migrants?

In this study, we relied on the descriptive analytical approach as the most appropriate method to provide an overview of the effects of COVID-19 on Women MDWs, as we relied on many literatures and references that were published during the last five years.

Our study is divided into three sections: The first outlines the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic workers around the world, with a particular focus on women MDWs, the second section focuses on some Middle Eastern countries that host a significant number of women MDWs and the final section makes policy and recommendation suggestions to ensure the protection of women MDWs during an economic downturn.

1- Overview about women domestic workers and covid-19 in the world:

In order to fill labor shortages in some sectors like construction, manufacturing, agriculture, plantations, cleaning services, and automotive maintenance, many employers hire a large number of foreign workers for "dirty, dangerous, and difficult" so called "3D" jobs (Ahmed, Supaat, Wook, Tagoranao, & Abdul rahmane, 2018)). The majority of women migrate toward 3D jobs like care and domestic labor since they are disproportionately migrants with low educational and skill levels (Nhengu, 2022). This group is thought to have insecure working conditions and to be the least valued, protected, and marginalized employment sector. (Foley & Piper, 2020)

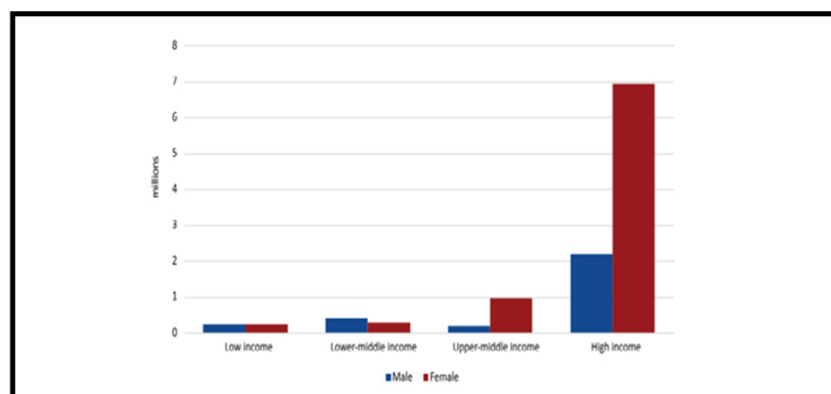
A domestic worker is defined as "any person engaged in domestic work within an employment relationship" (article 1(b)) by ILO convention n° 189. A domestic worker may be hired full-time, part-time, by one or by several different families. Additionally, regarding the place of residence, we differentiate between resident work, which is when the worker lives in the home of the employer, and non-resident work, which is when the worker lives in his own home. (Menegatti, 2016), the number of domestic workers worldwide is estimated by 67 million, with 11.5 million of them being migrants and 80% of them being women (Foley & Piper, 2020).

Wemayalsofind a domestic worker employed by one family or several families. Additionally, regarding the place of residence, we differentiate between resident work, which is when the worker lives with the employer, and non-resident work, which is when the worker lives in their own home.

Wemayalsofind a domestic worker working for one family or several families. In addition, in terms of place of residence, we distinguish between resident workers, who live without an employer, or non-resident workers, who live in their own homes.

The following figure shows the difference between migrant domestic workers in terms of gender and region of origin :

Figure n°=01: Migrant domestic workers in terms of the income level of the destination country and gender



Source: (Foley &Piper , 2020)

Migrant women are frequently employed in precarious, part-time, or temporary positions. Many works in the informal economy, and their lives have been completely changed by the determination of working contracts (Johnsten, 2020).

Migrants workers were particularly sensitive to the economic downturn caused by the Covid-19, because they are primarily employed in unstable lows wage sectors (Jones, Mudaliar, & Piper, 2021). The worldwide socio-economic situation has been significantly impacted by this health crisis.

This health crisis has had a significant impact on the world's socioeconomic situation, especially on labor conditions. As a result of the crisis, a large number of companies were affected by the decline in incomes and opportunities, which led to the dismissal of many workers, as well as delays in the payment of salaries, in addition to unpaid work in some. (Almasri, 2022). This has special repercussions for women migrant workers, Who are considered as the most vulnerable to losing their jobs, in addition to experiencing violations of their human and labor rights, which affects their job security. Without neglecting the possibility of contracting the virus, all these conditions lead them to work informally, especially in household services and care, under unstable contracts and without legal protection that prevents them from obtaining paid leave. Furthermore, the nature of this work makes it impossible to work remotely, unlike some other jobs that have adapted to remote work due to the health crisis (Unwomen). Additionally, this crisis has also increased their burdens, as approximately 27% of employers requested domestic workers to work longer hours in May 2020. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) , the negative impacts on the labor market, including job losses, wage reductions, and decreased working hours, have affected nearly 49.3% of domestic workers worldwide.(Almasri, 2022).

Many women MDWs are being fired as a result of homes' worry of suspected Covid-19 transmission. Due to the closure of borders as a result of this crisis, this group of migrants found themselves in a situation that prevented them from obtaining new jobs or even returning to their home countries. (IOM, 2020). On the other hand, the number of the incidences of violence against women and girls has increased, two-thirds of women in abusive relationships experienced higher

levels of violence from partners, and three-quarters of women reported that it was harder for them to escape their perpetrators (Johnsten, 2020) .

Despite pressing requirements, domestic workers face a lack of policy concerns (SA, 2022). Domestic work is inadequately regulated because it is undertaken in private homes by women (invisible). The ILO Convention 189 recognizes domestic work as a legitimate occupation that should be governed by labor and social policy; this convention applies to all domestic workers and makes no distinction between nationals and migrants. As a result, it believes that domestic workers have the right to decent living conditions and fair working conditions. (GFMD, 2012)

2- The women MDWs and covid-19 in the Middle East : impacts and policies :

2-1- kafala system :

The Middle East is characterized by the kafala (sponsorship) system (Aoun), which emerged in the 1950s to regulate the relationship between employers and migrants, particularly those coming from various countries in West Asia. This system remains in effect in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), as well as in Jordan and Lebanon. (Migration Forum in Asia). The Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, have been considered among the most important destinations for many refugees since the mid-1950s.

As a result, their number increased from 1.3 million to 2 million in the 1980s (Azhari, 2016).

Under this system, the status of the migrant worker is legally tied to the sponsor or employer(Kefeel) for the entire duration of the contract. Consequently, the sponsored migrant worker is not allowed to enter the country, change jobs, or even leave the country without obtaining written permission from the sponsor. (Migration Forum in Asia)

In the other hand, The Kafala system, which we previously indicated is specific to Middle Eastern countries, it has been likened to a modern- day system. (Jureidini, 2010) Due to the responsibilities granted to the sponsor by the state for employing migrants and granting them residency (Ikama) , this has allowed the sponsor to violate the rights of migrant workers and treat them as personal property during the contract period. This occurs in the absence of laws that protect their rights, preventing any punitive measures against those who abuse them. (Kandilige, Kofi Teye, Setrana, & Margaret Badasu, 2022)

Bahrain abolished the sponsorship system, becoming the first country in the Middle East to do so and was recongized as the country most committed to improving the skills of migrant workers and improving their living conditions. Despite that, domestic workers reported that they sometimes work consecutive hours of up to 19 hours a day without taking a day off, are prevented from leaving the employer's home, and they are not given adequate meals. Thus, it is noted that despite the official abolition of the sponsorship system, it is still supported through the exploitative behaviors practiced by employers on domestic workers. (Al-Hindi, 2020)

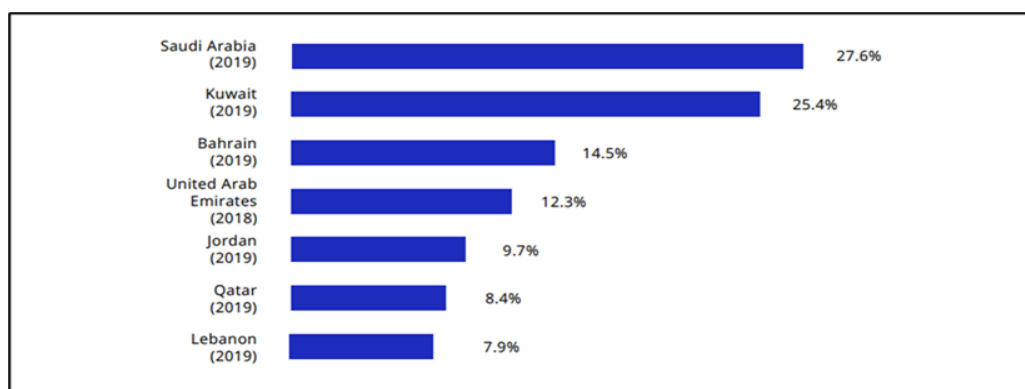
2-2 :Women migrants domestic workers in the Middle East region:

The Hidden Impacts of COVID-19 on Women Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) in the Middle East

About 6.6 million domestic workers over the age of 15 are working in Middle Eastern Arab countries, making up 8.7% of all domestic workers worldwide. In this region Domestic work is a crucial area for women's employment (ILO, 2021). Women who migrate to the Gulf states, Lebanon, and Jordan are most likely to work as domestic workers (Esim & Smith, 2004), where they earn less than half the average wage, work long hours, and are one of the least protected groups of workers under national labor law (Alecia, 2014).

Saudi Arabia is considered the first country in the world to receive domestic workers, accounting for 28% of the total workforce, followed by Kuwait with 25.4%, then the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Jordan with 12%, 14.5%, and 9.7%, respectively. (ILO, 2021). This is illustrated in the following figure.

Figure N°=02: The portion of domestic workers from the total employment



Source: (ILO, 2021, p. 3)

A significant part of today's migrants are women domestic workers (ILO, 2014). The domestic employees and their gender distribution in the gcc countries are shown in the following table.

Table n°=01: Distribution of domestic workers by gender in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries(GCC):

Region	N° of domestic workers (million)			Domestic workers in total employment (%)			Domestic workers among employees (%)			Share of women in total (%)
	total	women	Men	total	women	Men	total	women	Men	
GCC	5.80	2.05	3.74	21.3	47.8	15.6	21.4	48.0	15.6	35.4

Source: (ILO, 2021, p. 3)

The number of migrant female domestic workers is increasing compared to males (Esim & Smith, 2004). In both the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, migrant domestic workers are predominantly female. In Lebanon, the employment of migrant domestic workers is limited to women. As a result, women domestic workers constitute the largest percentage of workers in the region, accounting for 32.4%.(ILO, 2021).

Women MDWs frequently reside inside the homes of their employers, and due to a lack of legal protection where they are required to clean, cook, and take care of any children or elderly family members. The national labor laws do not apply to women MDWs employed under the kafala system, and their welfare is primarily dependent on the goodwill of their employers (Aoun). In the same context, The International Labour Organization ILO , funded by the Swiss Agency for Development, launched a regional program titled "Decent Work for Domestic Workers" during the period from December 2012 to November 2014. This program calls for institutional reform in the Middle East, aiming to improve governance and provide protection for migrant domestic workers by focusing on research and policy reform. (Alecia, 2014)

2-3 : The impact of Covid-19 on women MDWs in the Middle East region:

Gender is one of the defining elements that has a greater influence on workers and migrants than other groups as a result of the covid-19 pandemic (foley & piper, 2020). Globally, this crisis had a disproportionately large impact, but migrant domestic workers in the Middle East were one population that was particularly at risk from its repercussions. (aoun). Throughout the pandemic, domestic workers' ability to work and generate revenue was significantly impacted (Ismail & Ogando, 2023)

Due to the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), countries in the Middle East adopted a range of measures to deal with the situation, yet, many women MDWs in GCC countries, Lebanon and Jordan have lived in deplorable conditions (Bhutia & Kularatne, 2022). In addition, (Siraj, A Whitman, H Pine, & Lee, 2024)pointed out that domestic workers were not provided with sufficient information about the pandemic or how to deal with it

As a result of the dual risks arising from both the sponsorship system and COVID-19, this has exposed them to increased dangers. By Ramadan 2020, as employers were unable to hire additional workers, this resulted an increased responsibilities and burdens on women migrant domestic workers. Moreover, they did not have the ability to access necessary healthcare services or even to isolate themselves, leading to a number of them contracting the virus. (Aoun)

In 2020, the GCC faced two challenges: the covid-19 pandemic and a drop in oil prices. As a result, problems like wage theft have increased. This has affected migrant workers, especially in the GCC countries during the pandemic period. Regardless of the nationalization of jobs in the GCC countries, the government did not take any action in response to the issue of wage theft (bhutia & kularatne, 2022)

Women MDWs in this region have seen three effects of the covid-19 pandemic: reducing their salaries, fewer alternatives for sending money home, and forced returns or irregular status after losing their jobs (Ahmed, s.d)

Over 250000 migrant workers from Africa and Asia, mostly women, live in Lebanon. Even before the pandemic, migrant domestic workers in Lebanon faced numerous pressures and mistreatment, which primarily manifested in verbal and physical abuse, as well as being forced to work long hours without the right to take leave. They also risk not receiving their salaries or facing delays in payment, in addition to wage deductions and restrictions on their mobility. furethemore,

they were not covered by Lebanese labor law and were instead governed by the kafala system. The health crisis (covid-19) has exacerbated the situation of women MDWs, leading to an increase in cases of exploitation and violence, as well as a rise in poverty rates among this group of migrants, all amid the restrictions imposed by the Lebanese government. As a result, women's shoulders are burdened (Mona, s.d.) .

In 2021, Jordan had an estimated 52,221 documented domestic workers, with Ethiopia ranking first at 23,742, followed by the Philippines and Bangladesh with approximately 11,212 and 7,009, respective

Bangladeshi workers are the most employed by Jordan, due to their lower cost compared to other nationalities (Weldali, 2022). The situation was not different in This country , where the Covid-19 pandemic increased the suffering of domestic workers. They were forced to stay at home of their employers and work for long hours in exchange for reduced wages. Additionally, a small number of them lost their jobs compared to other countries. However, all hygiene measures were provided to prevent the spread of covid-19 (Idwfed. (s.d.)).

4. CONCLUSION :

Our study has brought attention to the challenges faced by women migrant workers in 3D jobs, particularly women migrant domestic workers (MDWs), who suffered in accessing healthcare as well as adequate social protection, even before and during the pandemic. This health crisis has exacerbated the existing vulnerabilities of female migrants, particularly in some Middle Eastern countries which represents our case study due to the large proportion of this category of migrants received in this region.

In terms of policies governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Jordan, and Lebanon did not include migrant workers in their policies to address COVID-19. On the other hand, the kafala system has raised many questions and doubts regarding its violation of the rights of migrant workers through it.

International human rights legislation defines various obligations that states must respect and fulfill toward all residents on their territory. Consequently, these laws grant migrants equal status under the law. Based on the above, we propose the following recommendations.

- The GCC countries, lebanon and jordan, which have highest population of migrant domestic workers, particularly women, should issue strict instructions to employers to respect their rights, including a fixed working day, a weekly day off, and the right to communicate with their families and friends
- Governments should step in to safeguard women MDWs from abuse and promote their access to healthcare, as stated in the article 12 of the un international government and economic, social and cultural rights “emphasises that the rights of health extend to migrants population including the asylum seekers and illegal immigrants”
- The governments of these countries should adopt new mechanisms aimed at combating inequality among different groups of migrants;

- The kafala system adopted by the governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries(GCC) , Jordan, and Lebanon should be reevaluated and revised to serve the rights of migrant workers. In the same context, the governments of these countries should sign International Labour Organization Convention No. 189, which pertains to decent work for domestic workers, as well as the Migrant Workers Convention related to the protection of their rights and those of their families.

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