



**International
Labour
Organization**

Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Lebanon and what employers can do about it

In Lebanon, the health emergency relating to COVID-19 is aggravating the broader socio-economic crisis and policymakers are under pressure to deliver a comprehensive response to both crises in a timely manner. While the primary focus is on containing the spread of COVID-19, the risks emerging from shortcomings in labour and social protection, and the impact of these risks on the most vulnerable groups in society, have increased and worsened considerably, and are becoming critical.

This brief provides a summary of the particular vulnerability of migrant workers during the COVID-19 health emergency, with a focus on migrant domestic workers, who in Lebanon are mainly employed inside people's homes. It recommends practical actions in line with the principles of integrity, gender equality and respect for diversity, all of which contribute to peace, social justice and stability in societies.

Current issues affecting migrant workers, including domestic workers:

Economic impact

- Prices of basic hygiene products, including detergents/soaps/sanitizers, etc., are rising rapidly, and some migrant workers cannot afford to buy them.
- Food prices have also increased markedly, which makes it more difficult for migrant workers to access a balanced and healthy diet.
- Because many businesses are now required to close, many employers are terminating the employment of migrant workers without prior notice or have stopped paying salaries to their employees.
- Panic and fear of the COVID-19 virus is increasing xenophobia and abuse against migrant domestic workers, including abrupt termination of their contracts. Before the airport shutdown, migrant workers reported forced departures before their contract end dates and without prior notice.
- The economic crisis combined with COVID-19 is increasing pressure on lower-income families who employ migrant domestic workers because these families can no longer afford to pay their salaries, cover expenses for food, clothing and medicines, or provide them with a suitable private room in the household. A high risk of forced labour exists and avoiding it requires strict and effective monitoring by the Ministry of Labour.
- Given the restrictions on mobility during the lockdown in the country, and given the measures regulating the working hours of most businesses, migrant workers have limited capacity and opportunity to transfer money abroad - if and when they receive their salaries.

- Most migrant domestic workers who work as freelancers ('live-out' workers) are unable to earn income because many employers have ceased to request their services. While freelancing is not legal in Lebanon, the practice exists. Without incomes, many freelance workers can no longer afford food and rents, and are left with nowhere to go.

Social impact and mobility

- While some Governments and employers have taken protective measures to shield workers from the impact of the crisis, many responses tend to be discriminatory based on gender and other related factors. In particular, live-in women migrant domestic workers are subject to increased restrictions on their mobility. Many of those who used to enjoy a day off are now asked to stay inside the employer's residence with limited or no possibility to communicate with family and friends, which adversely affects the mental health of the worker.
- Teleworking and home schooling, which are now mandatory measures in Lebanon, are increasing stress levels within families and directly affecting migrant domestic workers, especially in the absence of private spaces (including a private room for the domestic worker) in the household, and raise expectations that domestic workers perform more tasks and work longer hours.
- Some employers are giving obsessive instructions in cleaning tasks, asking domestic workers to use certain detergents excessively without considering their health risks and without guidance on safety measures.
- There is higher usage and incurred costs of broadband services by household members. The result is that many households are now limiting access to home broadband for their domestic workers who rely on these services to communicate with friends and family.
- Because there are no proper social protection mechanisms in place, which address their basic needs, day workers who can't afford to stay home are jeopardizing their own safety and that of others. The risk of debt bondage for migrant workers increases in this case,¹ in particular for part-time workers and freelancers in the domestic work and service sectors (food shops, cleaning, etc.).

Impact on health

- Access to healthcare is one of the key gaps facing migrant domestic workers, both those who are in a regular or an irregular status. While the government has committed to offering free testing for COVID-19 to all, it is unclear whether this also applies to undocumented workers, and who will cover the cost of the treatment if a migrant worker becomes infected with the virus.
- There is a significant risk of infection in detention centres and shelters where there is a high concentration of migrant domestic workers and where few protective measures appear to have been put in place.

¹ In this context, debt bondage refers to a situation of forced labour when workers end up working for an employer for no wages or meagre wages in order to repay their debts as a result of taking out a loan or advance from employers or labour recruiters to meet basic needs.

- Migrant domestic workers in shelters who were benefiting from the amnesty cannot return home, due to the airport shutdown. This is leading to mental health issues among workers, and is increasing the pressure on the existing shelters given their limited capacity compared to the demand.

Recommended action by employers of migrant workers

Employers are encouraged to contribute to solidarity among all persons resident in the country irrespective of their social status, sex, race, ethnicity, religion or nationality, and inspire positive actions to limit the risks that migrant workers, and domestic workers in particular, are facing during this difficult time.

The ILO recommends that employers adopt higher standards of respect and empathy in their treatment of migrant domestic workers in their employment, whether they live in the household or not. In particular, the ILO recommends the following:

For all migrant workers,

- Inform workers about COVID-19 and share information in a language they understand.²
- Pay workers' salaries in full, on time and in USD or the market exchange rate for USD.
- Provide access to health care and access to psycho-social support, and inform the relevant embassy or NGOs providing services to migrant workers in case they are subject to a health risk.
- If migrant workers test positive for COVID-19, respect their right to paid sick leave without terminating their contract.
- Share information with workers about the future of their work and residency status to manage their expectations. Employers need to be aware that renewal of work and residency permits has been put on hold during the COVID-19 crisis, and that migrant workers and/or employers will not be subject to penalties until further notice.
- Be proactive as a consumer, and if you notice ill-treatment of migrant workers take action, such as: informing the management of the service provider, reporting any ill-treatment to relevant authorities, and boycotting the service provider until you observe a change in their behaviour.

For migrant domestic workers in particular,

- Inform the domestic workers about COVID-19 and share knowledge material in a language they understand.
- Manage their work assignment and schedule in a realistic, fair and humane way allowing enough time for daily and weekly rest and recuperation. This is especially relevant now that all members of the household are in the house at all times.³

² A link will be made available to download brochures on COVID-19 in different languages, including mental health material.

³ A schedule template that can assist in managing the time of migrant domestic workers can be found on these links:
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_616437.pdf
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_614037.pdf

- Give clear instructions in cleaning tasks taking into account safety measures when using certain types of detergents.
- Ensure that the basic needs of domestic workers are met without any deductions from their salaries, in particular regarding access to hygiene products and quality food.
- Pay workers' salaries in full, on time and in USD or the market exchange rate for USD.
- Support workers who wish to transfer money abroad by identifying the opening hours of the closest money transfer agency.
- If you intend to terminate the employment contract of domestic workers, give them notice of at least one month, and flexibility to transfer to another employer if they wish to stay in the country.
- Given the limitations on mobility, if workers stay home on their rest days, make sure they do not work on those days.
- Support domestic workers to have access to means of communications to enable them to keep in touch with their family, friends and migrant workers' associations. This will have a positive impact on their mental wellbeing.
- Ensure that all members of the family treat their domestic workers with respect and protect them from violence and harassment.
- If any family members test positive for COVID-19, make sure that the domestic workers are also tested, inform them about the situation, and provide them with a well-ventilated room⁴ and access to daylight in case workers need to self-quarantine. Such circumstances may trigger the onset of mental health issues, and employers can play a positive role in preventing extreme reactions even suicide.
- If the domestic workers test positive for COVID-19, provide access to health care and access to psycho-social support, and inform their embassy or NGOs providing services to migrant workers. According to the Insurance Control Commission, the mandatory insurance policy that covers domestic workers includes access to treatment related to COVID-19.
- If domestic workers test positive for COVID-19, respect their right to paid sick leave without terminating their contract.
- Employers who can no longer afford to pay salaries of domestic workers are encouraged to help the worker find another job. Keeping the worker against her will is a sign of forced labour and the employer and member of their families are not only liable to prosecution under criminal law but may also risk being blacklisted, which will jeopardize their ability to employ migrant domestic workers in the future.
- Keep informed and share information with workers about renewal of work and residency permits as per government updates.

⁴ Having access to a private well-lit and well ventilated room should be the standard, and not only in case of quarantine. This is re-articulated in this context based on reports showing that this right is not always respected.

Relevant emergency contacts:⁵

**Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) Hotline
number on COVID-19**
01-594459

Insurance Control Commission (ICC)
Hotline: 01-999069;
WhatsApp: 81-999069;
Email: icc-care@insurancecommission.gov.lb

For more information please contact:

Ryszard Cholewinski
Senior Migration Specialist
cholewinski@ilo.org

Zeina Mezher
Labour Migration Focal Person – Lebanon
Work in Freedom Coordinator – Lebanon
mezher@ilo.org

ILO Regional Office for Arab States (ROAS)
Aresco Centre, Justinien St., Kantari
Riad El Solh 1107-2150
P.O. Box 11-4088 Beirut, Lebanon

⁵ The Ministry of labour will launch a Hotline number dedicated to migrant domestic workers. This brief will be updated with the hotline number when it becomes available.