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Surviving Displacement, Alienation, and *Kafala* in the Nineties: An Oral History of Grassroots Organizing

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It is not an easy task to write about the history of organizing by migrant domestic workers in Lebanon during the nineties.¹ The “archive” of this struggle, an important source for historical writing that could illuminate radical moments from the past to support intersectional struggles in the present, is elusive and incomplete.² Even if archival documents were within reach, however, they could only lay claim to history fragmentarily, long after heroines had disappeared—and they haven’t seized to be present.³ The first is Malini (Mala) Kandaarachchige who arrived in Lebanon from Sri Lanka during the civil war, labored in domestic work, and organized the Sri Lankan community surrounding Dahr el-Souane around mutual aid praxis in the nineties. Difficult material conditions forced educator and longtime community mobilizer Gemma Justo out of her home in the Philippines and into postwar

¹ I would like to thank Malini Kandaarachchige, Gemma Justo, Aimée Razanajay, Farah Salka, Lina Abou-Habib, and Sara Wansa for conversing with me and sharing their insights, Lara Bitar for reading different drafts of this essay, thinking its ideas with me and helping me better understand Kandaarachchige’s story, Mariane Ghattas for interviewing Kandaarachchige, Deema Kaedbey for accompanying me throughout this process, and Safaa T. and Zeinab Al Dirani for their editorial support. I also want to extend my gratitude to Viviane Akiki who translated into Arabic an earlier version of this essay which the Knowledge Workshop published in their edited volume on feminism in Lebanon during the nineties.

² Gemma Justo still has photographs from that decade in her home in the Philippines. Aimée Razanajay has a few “files” and photographs that she has kept with a friend, although she routinely tore most of the documents after a case was closed and the repatriation for an unpaid and/or harmed domestic worker was complete. She tells me that she couldn’t rent a space to store the hundreds of files she has compiled over the years. According to Lina Abou-Habib, former Country Program Coordinator, Oxfam also shredded documents that may have been useful when the Beirut office was closed in 1999. While it is possible to look for this history through scattered documentary fragments, the myriad crises, not least the pandemic, afflicting those who live in Lebanon and elsewhere, necessarily defer such research pursuit.

³ Learning from Avery Gordon, I do not intend to paint the protagonists of this chapter as “superhuman agents” that overcome all adversity and conditions of structure, and nor do I endorse the common portrayal of migrant domestic workers as helpless victims, especially within the human-rights discourse. These two characterizations are neither useful nor fair, and cannot adequately attend to these women’s “complex personhood” and the realness of “complicated” and “contradictory subjectivity,” experience, and politics. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4.

Lebanon where she spent more than two decades initiating repatriation processes, advocating on behalf of migrant domestic workers, and contributing to transform the local feminist movement. Then at the close of the nineties, missionary Aimée Razanajay gave up a more privileged life in Madagascar and came to Lebanon as a domestic worker. Dedicating her resources, she organized through the church to repatriate Malagasy domestic workers enduring exploitation and abuse. However diverse their strategies may have been, these women were notable makers of that decade's organizing history. This chapter is grounded in their primary accounts.

Deema Kaedbey, feminist scholar and co-founder of the Knowledge Workshop, Farah Salka, feminist activist, organizer and director of the Anti-Racism Movement, and Lara Bitar, media activist and editor in chief of *The Public Source*, helped me identify these early figures of a longer, broader, and ongoing movement for migrant domestic workers' liberation.⁴ Through the course of my research and series of interviews, I understood that this piece of historical writing is likely to miss the perspectives of other important but unknown protagonists from this struggle. While Kandaarachchige, Justo, and Razanajay have been involved in broader feminist organizing in Lebanon, there have been others who remain unknown to the local feminist movement and are, therefore, absent herein. These anonymous "foot soldiers" channeled important but unseen everyday labors through their always already in flux migrant communities and were essential for the movement for as long as it has existed. Others who are equally absent are those who may have had their labors hidden or co-opted, a dominant feature in much of organizing work globally. Their hypothetical accounts are an unfortunate omission that could have potentially shifted this historical narration toward a wider web of actors and a

⁴ Others who arrived in Lebanon and/or were active in the eighties and nineties include Rose Mahi, Tania Ushani and Sister Angela of Laksetha shelter in Dawra. Father McDermott and Father Salim also supported migrant domestic workers in the nineties.

characteristically more communal form of organizing in the spaces and possibilities that seem to be created by a single organizer. Finally, there are many more who departed, could not be interviewed due to illness, old age, precarity or distance, had returned home, were deported, or could not secure a sponsor under Kafala, without which organizing is even more risky. Along with the passage of time and geographical distance, then, legality and power asymmetries are also the invisible but legible binds that partially restricted who could or could not be featured in this chapter.

This historical narrative is the result of a series of conversations with Kandaarachchige, Justo, Razanajay and several Lebanese feminists, including Farah Salka and Lina Abou-Habib who has been an active feminist since the nineties. Although I occasionally followed hierarchical patterns to theorize them structurally, my aim was not to critically engage with the organizing strategies and ways of thinking but to primarily reconstruct how some migrant domestic workers organized to survive the nineties. Whenever possible, I included direct quotes, especially lucid ones that succinctly spoke to my queries. Because these conversations rely on recollections that stretch as far back as thirty-eight years, the reader should relate to chronological details outlined as general approximations. Because the recollection process is inherently discontinuous, unfolding over several hours and multiple conversations, the narrators sometimes diverged from the stories that are most relevant to the scope of this essay to share other important events that are nonetheless tangential. Therefore, I sometimes collated quotes from disparate parts of a conversation to provide an aggregate picture on a given context. I tried, as much as possible, to reflect these discontinuities by including ellipses between the fragments. Due to my own limitations with the pidgin that emerged in the encounter between Sri Lankan migrant workers and their Lebanese sponsors, in few instances language barriers also stood in the way of certitude, particularly as I listened to

Kandaarachchige's account.⁵ I filled in the blanks, when absolutely necessary, though I kept extrapolation to a minimum. I will also note that I was the one who conversed with, recorded, and transcribed the accounts of Justo, Razanajay, Salka, and Abou-Habib; I also transcribed, with the help of Lara Bitar, the account of Kandaarachchige with whom I had a subsequent conversation for further clarification. Any error herein is entirely my own. Lastly, I am especially grateful to feminist activist Mariane Ghattas who made an invaluable contribution to this essay by interviewing Kandaarachchige. The eight-hour long recording from that meeting between the two women over many a cup of tea in December of last year at DammeH Co-operative jumpstarted my project in a rare instance of inspiration.

1985 – 2000: “We came together because we need[ed] each other” – Malini Kandaarachchige

A witness to the social and urban transformation of Dahr el-Souane where she has lived and forged communal lifelines for 38 years, Kandaarachchige's account is a compelling starting point because it provides a unique glimpse into the eighties, even if it exceeds the main premise of this essay, as a segue into the nineties. Her story portrays a life continuously weaved into the lives of others, and describes how she was subjected to the perils, political and economic conditions of the civil war from her position as a migrant domestic worker; how the employment agency was a thieving and cruel trafficker; and how one sponsor instrumentalized the possibility of exploitation within Kafala while another acted as an ally. Evocative vignettes in bomb shelters in the eighties, then organized mutual-aid formations within the Sri Lankan community in the nineties are the heart of this episode. I will begin by briefly relating her arrival to Lebanon and her experience with her first sponsor and

⁵ Fida Bizri, “Sinhala In Contact with Arabic: The birth of a New Pidgin in the Middle East,” *Annual Review of South Asian Languages and Linguistics* (2009): 135-149.

the agency to relay some of the common predicaments she endured through Kafala on her way to becoming an organizer.

Not knowing she was going to work in Lebanon when she left Sri Lanka in May of 1983, Kandaarachchige was tricked by traffickers. The agency in Sri Lanka told her she was going to Cyprus, which was corroborated by her ticket. Upon her arrival to the island, however, she and her travel mates were taken to a seaport, and only the next day were they informed that their final destination was Lebanon. “We were six on the boat departing from Cyprus,” she said. “It stopped in the middle of the sea and they moved us to a smaller boat. And it was like that. Some people’s suitcases fell down into the water.” Two days later, her sponsor picked her up from the agency and took her to the house where she would work for 18 months in Dahr el-Souane. The moment she arrived, her sponsor cut her hair, watched her bathe, placed her clothes in a trash bag, and gave her new ones that signaled her new role and place in the world.⁶

With the unabating flames of war, movement became dangerous and the financial situation of her first sponsor seems to have gradually deteriorated because of inflation. Kandaarachchige was instructed to write one-page letters to her family once a month to limit travel and mailing costs, and was only allowed to send remittances every three months for the same reasons.⁷ When currency depreciation spiked, her sponsor no longer paid her wages. “I said to

⁶ For an account of her arrival in Lebanon and experience living with this sponsor see Mala, “Migrating to the Lebanese Civil War,” *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research* 2 (2016): 132-134. (Last accessed on 13 February 2021). Available at: <https://kohljournal.press/migrating-to-civil-war>.

⁷ Because her letters were lost or delayed in the mail, her family believed she had been killed in the war. Consequently, it seems, her father died of a heart attack, which her family hid from her until she traveled to Sri Lanka upon the re-opening of the airport in the final years of the war. She retells how this trip was costly. Like many who survived the war here, she explains how she had to pay dues to every party who controlled her movement. “Michel Aoun took my *iqameh* money... Hezbollah at the airport [upon departure] ... then Samir Geagea took my money at the seaport in Jounieh [upon return].”

her, I came for money; my children are small and I left for them.” The sponsor argued that she had children to educate, refusing to recognize Kandaarachchige’s motherhood. Then one day, Kandaarachchige went on strike, refusing to work without pay, and locked herself in the room for a few days.⁸ Reaching an impasse, Kandaarachchige and the sponsor went to the agency to terminate the contract. The latter took from the sponsor the cost of a return ticket to Sri Lanka, beat and then stripped Kandaarachchige of all her savings, kept the cost of the ticket, and then let her go.

By compiling different details from this account, one learns that a migrant domestic worker’s living and working conditions, and then the ability to organize, have partly depended on the “coincidence,” according to Salka, of having a decent human being for a sponsor. When it pertains to migrant domestic workers, Kafala institutes the sponsor-worker-state relationship through a coercive legal-residential status and non-binding contractual provisions that place the worker at a disadvantageous, if not a *de facto* propertied position. This situation explains why the International Labor Organization and various local and international NGOs have focused on regulatory reform toward a standard unified contract since 2009.⁹ Regardless of reform, which is inherently narrow in scope, intersecting sexist, racist, politico-legal, and social-reproductive structures are bound to Kafala and preserve this vague and permissible social-legal space that governs the lives of migrant domestic workers. Operating across these structures and hierarchies, Kafala, then, makes gendered and racialized violence, in addition to

⁸ Mala, “Migrating”

⁹ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_402364.pdf

exploitation of labor, “unpunishable,” and therefore, legitimate, and vice versa.¹⁰

Kandaarachchige relates, for instance, that when working for her first sponsor, she was not allowed to leave the house on Sundays and often watched the world go by from her bedroom window. That her sponsor held her in captivity on her day off, denied her movement, restricted communication with her family, and withheld her wages became a reality under Kafala. Organizing too was inherently impossible. This predicament changed, however, when she returned to Dahr el-Souane and worked for a new employer at a juncture in the war in which it was difficult for the state to enforce a legally binding sponsorship-based employment. Out of luck too, perhaps, this employer was “an influential judge and military prosecutor” who, fearing for his life, “left Dahr el-Souane a year or two later when the assassination of political figures surged,” and gave her a section of the house where she still lives.

At his villa, she frequently cooked and organized dinner parties for “hundreds of guests” and worked as a “freelancer” for other families in the village. More in charge of her time, she worked according to the ‘bombing clock’ with no set working hours. She and everyone else in the village used to listen to radio announcement to know when it was possible to leave the bomb shelter, attend to the houses, and buy groceries. Therefore, work only happened in the hours of the day when bombing stopped, leaving her with enough time on her hands to forge social ties within the broader Dahr el-Souane community. This was a time in which she led a networked existence, largely with Lebanese villagers. When bombing intensified, she said, everyone, “*kul el bouyout ya’ne*,” hid in the underground shelter, and people “took care of each other,” tending to the sick.

¹⁰ I discuss this in more detail in Sintia Issa, “Kafala Reform a Liberal Veneer: Migrant Workers and the Struggle for Liberation,” *The Public Source*, September 7, 2020, <https://thepublicsource.org/kafala-reform-liberal-veneer-migrant-workers>.

The frequent and sensuous memories of food sharing throughout Kandaarachchige's account, not just during the war, is perhaps a testament to the vital self-sustaining and social place of food for survival.¹¹ She describes how in the bomb shelter they made "*khebez* over charcoal fire because there was no gas or electricity," and how "the [village] doctor often brought tahini to the shelter." And because she worked for a military judge, the army often brought vast amounts of food to the villa, "*tanjara, saynyyeh kbire*," from which she always saved a share to feed everyone in the bomb shelter at night. She explains, "they all liked me and started calling me 'Rayyis Mala' because I worked at *beit el-rayyis*," and how food was shared communally. "Everybody took care of you... we ate together; the whole village was together. Now there is no one to say hi to because [there is] building [after] building," a statement on the end of communal life in the village following postwar development.

In the late eighties, she met Sri Lankan domestic workers from the surrounding area. On Sundays these women used to buy groceries from Farid's supermarket in Dahr el-Souane and continue to Kandaarachchige's home where they would cook and eat together. This was around the time that she was learning social work and fundraising, helping a Lebanese woman called Vera organize small-scale, localized events at the Besançon school for the poor. Then in 1988, a cataclysmic event pushed her mobilize this experience to organize with her community. One day that year, two Sri Lankan women got into a car accident in Antelias; one was hospitalized while the other succumbed to her injuries and died. She recounts that once a month, these women, who possessed legal documents, would make the trip to Dawra to buy staples like rice, fish, chili, and curry powder for the community. The accident happened on their way there.

¹¹ Having transcribed parts of this conversation, Lara Bitar made this brilliant observation.

Heeding to Kandaarachchige's call for support, presumably, the community of Dahr el-Souane and its environs came together, and "Lebanese, Indian, and Filipino/as" gathered funds to cover hospital bills and burial costs. With the help of Father Salim, they brought the body, upon which he prayed, to the church before burial. Notwithstanding broader community support, this Christian burial was painfully removed from the rituals of the deceased in Sri Lanka. There, she explained, they "bring the body to the house, embalm it in coconut oil, make it beautiful, and invite community members to see the dead" and bid them farewell. Saddened by this hasty burial, Kandaarachchige felt the urge to organize the Sri Lankan community and advocate for the founding of an embassy of Sri Lanka in Lebanon, as a "home to the Sri Lankan community" through which it would be possible to stay closer to culture. Ten years later, in 1998, she and her compatriots would bear the fruit of their labors with the establishment of the Sri Lankan embassy.

In the meantime, Kandaarachchige and her compatriots founded different mutual-aid organizations, that became especially active in Dahr el-Souane and its environs in the nineties, to support the community through hardship and celebration. The first of these was Solemar Young Club which was founded in 1989, shortly after the woman's death and another violent event that deeply marked Kandaarachchige and her community. Solemar Young Club, she told me, was named in relation to the killing of young Lebanese soldiers or militia fighters – it is not clear – who were stationed in the area in an ambush by the Syrian army.¹² Club members came together and offered their labors toward

¹² Kandaarachchige told me that the name pays homage to the 15 young Lebanese men who died, or were injured, in an ambush by the Syrian army in 1988, a traumatic event she witnessed before partaking in rescue and cleanup efforts. I could not find any traces of "Solemar," however, in the area, and Kandaarachchige could not tell me how to spell the name of the organization. My own research suggests that "Solemar" may have been "Shalimar," an upscale neighborhood in Baabdat, where the Nationalist Syrian Party was stationed, and then at different times of the war, the Lebanese Forces, the army, and the Kataeb were also there. The event may have taken place in 1988, 1989 (in the context of

“post-bombing house repairs and fundraised to support one another through sickness and other life circumstances.” With the end of the war, movement eased a little, though not completely, and they gradually expanded their activities. They generated revenue by “cleaning houses and cooking together, selling cakes and flowers.” Some of that money was used to organize social events in a hall they rented close to the Douar roundabout where they held “dinners and dance parties, movie nights and valentine’s day gatherings.” When they could not use the court of a local school, they rented one either in Baabda or Mkalles at the rate of \$10 per person, and on days off, “men played cricket while women played *elle*,” a Sri Lankan bat-and-ball game. Sometimes they were joined by other Sri Lankans from Antelias, Dawra, and Hazmieh who came to join the games.

Years later, however, Solemar Young Club members had a disagreement over finances, a dynamic that she implicitly described as gendered, which impacted decision making within the organization. In one instance, a club member unilaterally decided to utilize all the money that was raised in the coffer, \$1800, to cover the hospitalization of a Sri Lankan man who hailed from a well-off family, leaving nothing for other community members who also needed support. This member, a man, sidelined the other two members in the governing body, which included a president, a manager and a secretary, and by-passed the decision-making process. Consequently, some women, including Kandaarachchige, then focused their energies on each other through a women-only organization they called Women Power which also fundraised for its members and adhered to mutual aid principles. The omnipresence of Syrian checkpoints, Kandaarachchige says, restricted their movements. Therefore, during that time, these women prioritized taking care of each other, especially when one of them got ill. They were also attentive to the harms to which they

Aoun’s “war of liberation” or 1990 (when the Syrian army invaded the area on its way to invade the Baabda Palace at the close of the war).

could be subjected based on their gender, race, class and undocumented status, differentiations that marked their experience. For instance, if a member “needed to travel, the others would organize among themselves so she would have company on her trip to the airport to make sure she gets there safely.” This form of organizing, in which women banded together to protect each other, became the norm after one of them was “robbed by a taxi driver on her way to the airport one night in 1998.”¹³ Similar interventions to help women escape toxic environments and life-threatening conditions were central to Gemma Justo’s organizing in the nineties.

1995 – 2000: Gemma Justo’s multi-front struggle

One of five siblings, long-time activist, educator, and organizer Gemma Justo grew up in a farming family in Ilocos Sur on the island of Luzon. In her youth, every Saturday, she tilled the land with her father whom she remembers fondly, a time that profoundly influenced her political consciousness. “I think I get my heart and mind from my dad,” she said to me, “he believed that everyone is equal, and I grew up with this idea and exercised it.” Ever since, she has worked with “less privileged” community members, accompanying them to the municipal hall, so they could better “fight for their rights.” She then founded the first daycare in her village to support young mothers, and helped dispossessed youths apply to different foundations to fund their education.

¹³ Kandaarachchige’s organizing far exceeds this brief recounting. In 2005, for instance, she founded Sri Lankan Women Society whose operating budget enabled a greater distribution of funds to a wider community in Beirut. She also started Sunday school in the same year to teach Sri Lankan children Sinhalese, literature, poetry, history, geography, and mathematics, a project that lasted until 2013. In the twenty-first century, she organized Buddhist prayers in the embassy, then Nasawiyya; worked with various NGOs including Insan and Kafa, co-founded the Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers, led trainings at the Migrant Community Centers, and so much more. She is still an active organizer.

Romantic as it may seem, however, pastoral life was not easy. “Being a farmer is very hard because you cannot earn daily. We have a rainy season, and then you could have the rice in four months... And so, you toil, you till the land, and you are only compensated when you harvest.” For many farming families, longing across the seas has been the price of bread and education. Guided by the belief that “education is a must in the Philippines for a better life,” her mother left for Lebanon in the eighties to work as a domestic worker and get her children through school and then university. Consequently, Justo completed an undergraduate degree in education. Yet her education and training could not boost her meager salary. To supplement her income, she began selling cosmetics and food containers—but that too was not enough. “I thought that going abroad would help us financially. I thought of my kids.” Soon she would endure another painful separation, this time from her children. Severed ties with the land and the community, displacement, and expulsion have been the legacy of imperialism and late capitalism.¹⁴

In 1993, Justo followed in her mother’s footsteps and travelled to postwar Lebanon for work where she met the woman who became her sponsor throughout her years in the country. Later in the conversation, when I asked whom she considered a supporter or ally of her organizing in Lebanon, she said, “my sponsor was first supporter...because she supported me financially, then by using her landline, and letting me out one particular afternoon if I wanted to meet or rescue someone.” Notwithstanding that she “liked [her] employer,” however, she was unfulfilled and wanted to return home. “Two years into the contract,” she said, “I didn’t know anyone... and was not happy because it is the same routine every day; it’s household work, but I am an activist since my youth with my own mind.” Torn by economic need and her

¹⁴ Filipino novelist and poet Carlos Bulosan’s semi-autobiography *America Is in the Heart* (1946) explores, among others, the gradual dispossession then displacement of Filipino farming families, the experience of exile, racialized and feminized labor, and migration in the context of American imperialism in the twentieth century.

desire to engage in meaningful care labor and community organizing back home, she ultimately stayed in Lebanon. This was the beginning of a new and lengthy chapter in her life in which she thrived on comradeship, entered in strategic collaborations and urgent co-operation, and organized on multiple fronts, though not without upsets, within and beyond the Filipino community, the struggle of migrant domestic workers, and the wider feminist movement in Lebanon.

In the second half of the nineties, “I organized my Filipino community,” Justo said to me. Together with friends who shared her “passion” and “interests,” in 1996 she formed the Filipino Community Association which had a sports program. The church, the embassy, boarding houses, and an expanding migrant domestic workers’ geography became essential nodes of mobilization that began in Antelias. “When we lived close to Kaslik, I used to go to Saint Elie Church in Antelias, and then when my employer moved to Achrafieh, I started going to the Baptist Church on Makhoul street where I met other comrades, like Aimée.”¹⁵ The church was a place where Filipino/as first met, exchanged landline numbers, set up appointments to talk when the sponsors were not home, forged friendships, and shared experiences of violence, captivity, hunger, and withheld wages, in person or through word of mouth, and joined forces. After morning church service on Sundays in Antelias, sometimes they carried their lunch baskets and went up the hill they called *Tralala* where they regularly had picnics and celebrations and nurtured sociality and belonging.

¹⁵ Aimée’s account will follow Gemma’s.



Antelias, 1993, Gemma Justo Archive

During these gatherings, she learned from her compatriots that embassy staff were “snobbish” and “didn’t treat them well.” So, in 1996, she began serving her community as a Filipino Community Mobilizer, a liaising function to improve the embassy’s response to the conditions of Filipino/a migrant workers. This labor, then, was an extension of the work she had done in her village so “less privileged” individuals could better advocate for themselves in the municipal hall. In her new role, she instructed her community on ways of engaging with staff members and filed grievances to the Philippine government which responded with swift action. After a successful petition with the government to replace a problematic ambassador, she was able to corner embassy employees to finally fulfill their responsibilities or risk losing their jobs. Justo, then, instrumentalized this position to create the necessary

conditions so the embassy could advocate for its citizens and repatriate them when necessary.

Justo told me that “at the time, the Philippine embassy was the most active embassy in Lebanon, negotiating with the General Security and sponsors” to collect unpaid salaries and finalize repatriation. However, the embassy was only the endpoint in an otherwise parlous process that fell on the shoulders of an invisible web of organizers who shared hard-earned resources and cooperated across underground networks of whispers to “rescue” one another. The following excerpt explains, for instance, how they mobilized when a sponsor deprived one of their own of food and whenever a woman needed to escape:

We would go and collect sardines, boiled eggs, whatever we have, and we would tell her [the woman denied food] through a friend of a friend of her friend—word travels through the channel—that we will place the food in a basket [on an agreed upon day and time]. She would usually be on the balcony next to her bedroom window, because the maid’s room is next to the kitchen, and would pull the rope and basket up. Otherwise, you tell her to go to the lift, wait, and her food will be there. We organized this way and wrote a letter which we added to the food basket with instructions on how to get to the shelter at the embassy. We would tell her what to do, and I would organize so a cab would be waiting for her, and she would go to the shelter. I would then urge her to testify about what the sponsors did so the embassy would record it... I had to sacrifice \$10 for a cab; I consider it a thanksgiving for me because I was with a good family... We also had a monthly newsletter, the Filipino Community Newsletter. I would give a copy to a friend [who would make sure it gets to the basket] to be aware of what’s happening, of the rights of migrant workers against trafficking... Sometimes, if a friend doesn’t have an employer, or the employer is away on travel, we negotiate, ‘can you take this woman for two nights until I can take her to the embassy?’ We pass this worker to whoever is available; we hide her out of sight from the employer [because] the employer will go to the police and report that she ran away. We also used boarding houses [that we rented by the day], and so we organized to let her stay there until we could take her to the embassy.

Besides her intervention in the embassy and these fraught-with-danger cooperative rescue missions, Justo worried about other problems she perceived in the Filipino community among men and women: “excessive partying at discos” and “gambling” in “boarding houses.”¹⁶ Justo explains that these were vacant houses and buildings, notably the Chahine Building in Antelias, that generated considerable profit for the Lebanese who managed them. Migrant workers from the Philippines, Egypt, and elsewhere rented these rooms and apartment for \$150/month, which gradually increased to \$500/month, to spend time together every Sunday. Justo recounts that after church service, many gathered in boarding houses and played *Quatorze*, a popular card game in Lebanon, “imitating their sponsors, gambling their money away and losing as much as \$50 of their wages in one day.” To address these issues and alleviate the sense of alienation, painful distance from beloveds, and difficult living and laboring conditions, all of which lurked underneath, Justo co-founded PhilBall in 2000, a sports organization she headed for ten years, that held a summer league in basketball for men and volleyball for women.¹⁷ She approached I-Remit, a remittance services company, to sponsor the league and raised \$20,000 a year toward court rentals and referee salaries. PhilBall too became a space for survival, belonging, and a renewed sense of purpose.

In the following two decades, Justo met “inspiring comrades” from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, and a few “genuine feminists” from Lebanon, and extended her organizing beyond her immediate community. In 2017, she was de facto deported from Lebanon when the General Security began to increasingly hound the Migrant Community Center (MCC) and target prominent organizers within the migrant domestic workers’

¹⁶ The concern was not chiefly moralistic. Justo always used to tell the others, “what will you send to your family?”

¹⁷ Gemma, “The Road to Dissent,” *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research* 2 no. 2 (2016): 135-139, (last accessed on 13 February 2021). Available at: <https://kohljournal.press/the-road-to-dissent>.

movement. As empowering and transformative as it may have been in public politics, the visibility of migrant domestic workers organizers, like Justo and Sujana Rana, attracted the predatory gaze of the state and led to a series of deportation. Justo's was formalized shortly after labor-day march which she co-led at the forefront of the MCC contingent. When I asked her if she is still organizing today, she said that as a founding member, she is active with the Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers from her home in Ilocos Sur, ending our conversation with this note:

When activism is running in your veins, you cannot stop. I have been organizing women, young mothers, at the daycare center that I had founded. It was closed when I wasn't here, and I mourned for that too; it was my sweat and blood... Now I give sessions for young mothers who are here three times a week. I'm raising my granddaughter, and that's what matters. That's what I do here aside from farming. I run a little farm."

1998 – 2001: Repatriation as missionary work in the account of Aimée Razanajay

Aimée Razanajay led an active life in Madagascar during the nineties. At a time when the political situation in her country was challenging, she founded her own business to procure goods and services that were no longer available on the local market. A combination of skills and character, like ease of communication, strong personality, personal initiative and an adventurous spirit, made it possible for her to travel to Mauritius, La Réunion, Kenya and elsewhere to facilitate the import of much needed material supplies and spare car parts for government ministries, hairdressers, wedding planners, and other clients. Besides her profession, she was also active in church, supporting people who were in need through counseling and occasionally providing her home as a temporary shelter. One day in February of 1998, a woman sought her counsel, and in the course of the conversation, asked her if she would like

to work abroad. She neither hesitated nor asked questions; “I had a personal feeling and immediately said yes.” The next day, she got a same-day passport through her connections at the ministry and waited.

In April, the same woman called and told her, “are you ready? You will be traveling the day after tomorrow.” When she responded that she was sick, the woman retorted, “people are paying a lot of money.” The following day, the woman gave her a contract that read: “\$125/month... domestic worker... Lebanon.” Although Razanajay thought the compensation was very little, did not know anything about Lebanon nor what “domestic worker” meant, she did not object. Before her departure, she “met a man who spoke well of Lebanon,” and

that was that. In my heart, I didn’t care, whatever God was dealing.” She often shares this story with the women who come to her in critical moments for counsel to reassure them that “he [God] knows how to protect you.”

When she arrived at her sponsor’s house in Achrafieh, she recounts, “the woman did not tell me bonjour! How can you live with someone who doesn’t tell you bonjour?” She was led to her small, windowless room to which she learned to adapt but could not like. In the days that followed, Razanajay mobilized her faith, skills, and personal traits to subvert the power dynamic that was institutionalized through *kafala* and performed by her sponsor:

I was instructed not to touch the reception hall, only once a month. But I touched everything, the curtains, the old cupboards, the rusty pans. I cleaned everything. Even the balcony became a little living room, whereas before it was useless. Life changed in the apartment and soon enough, the woman started receiving guests on the balcony to play cards. It touched her... I didn’t feel like a slave who is told what to do. Rather, I changed the house; I fixed it; I took charge of it, and it was a benediction. J’ai la passion de nettoyer, de l’ordre, tout ça [I have a passion for cleaning, order, and all of that]. I insisted to go out on Sundays... At first, she noticed I’d return home at noon, and then it became 1pm, and so on; so,

she started to clean the table and not wait for me. She was a witness to what I did.

She quickly met her neighbor, a Filipina domestic worker who soon become her “assistant,” and together they went to church, a focal point in this episode.¹⁸ At first, the sponsor’s driver took them there, which “bothered [her] because [she] wanted to be free.” Then she started getting there by taxi, dealing with drivers who did not want to return the change. And then one day, she met a taxi driver, who presumably wanted to support her work at the church, and every Sunday, he drove her to Hamra, refusing compensation. Since July of 1998, she has been going to the First Baptist Church on Makhoul Street. There, she attended morning service at 11am, and then began meeting women she would later come to help.

Her organizing work picked up at Ras Beirut Evangelical Church in the same year. A Syrian “fellow” who was managing the sound system gave her access to his room so she could “meet with the women, one by one after church service,” and offered them food. This continued even after the Syrian fellow got married and left. The Liberian concierge still opened the space for her to continue her work. “That room became important,” she says, because it was there where she listened to the women who gradually started bringing other women.

[In introspect,] I learned how to help others through my experience. The stories I heard I had known—so I felt their passage. Between 1998-2001 [the end of her contract] I was restrained. In that period, I did the same [counseling] work I did in Madagascar to help people; only I had a different salary, and the conditions were different too... At home, I listened to the radio and recorded Christian chants on cassettes which I gave to the girls... I calmed them, taught how it was important to forgive and communicate well... With the help of my assistant, we trained the girls on how to communicate... Communication is a gift I have from God, especially for conflict resolution. Later it also helped me mediate with the NGOs and the authorities.

¹⁸ I could not reach her, and therefore will maintain her anonymity.

The following year, she joined the African Group Church Fellowship which met in a space on Jeanne d'arc street within walking distance to the church. Nigerian and Cameroonian believers formed the majority of the congregation which was led by a Sudanese pastor who was studying at the Near East School of Theology and became her friend. Through the fellowship, she met the first Malagasy woman in 2000 who then connected her to a broader Malagasy community of domestic workers. One of them was a sex worker. Razanjay believed that meeting her was a part of a "mission by God" and went to the apartment, which the woman shared with other sex workers in Achrafieh, where she held morning prayers every Sunday morning before going to Hamra. Razanjay identified as a missionary, and these women may have found solace in religion and survived through her mediation.

Between 1998-2001, while she was under Kafala, she also began to dedicate her skills and resources to repatriate women in the networks she entered and founded who were exploited and abused. "*Il faut s'organiser pour quitter,*" [to leave, people must organize] she said to me. Many women she encountered trusted her with their stories, and it was then that she began collecting their testimonies. Father Salim put her in touch with Caritas and Roland Tawk, a lawyer who was advocating on behalf of migrant domestic workers at the close of the decade. Although she was not allowed to receive guests in her sponsor's home, she was able to meet the women who sought her help in the lobby and use the landline of her sponsor. "*Le téléphone n'arrêtait pas de sonner*" [the telephone would not stop ringing]. She listened carefully to the accounts of domestic workers, sometimes more than once, as they related the "deception schemes of agencies, or how the sponsors forbade them from eating, withheld their wages, prevented them from communicating with their families," and even raped them. She would then compile the names of the sponsors, photocopy at the Christian library in Hamra the documents she could obtain, and write

down the horrendous details of each account. Once a file was complete, she would then go to the dermatology clinic of her sponsor to fax the documents to the local consulate, the ministries of labor and foreign affairs in Madagascar, and Caritas. That was how she organized toward repatriation at the turn of the millennium.

She expressed, however, that in the end, Kafala was a form of imprisonment that restricted her missionary and repatriation responsibilities, even though she was able to negotiate contract terms with her sponsors.

I sent \$500 to the family every four months so it's worth it. I wrote them letters and sent them by mail, and I used a calling card to talk to them. Sometimes I did not have enough money for transportation, but I managed. At the end of the contract, [in 2001] they [the sponsors] asked me to stay but I didn't want to because I felt constrained in a tight space. [Only on] Sunday, I used to help others and intervene because I couldn't receive anyone at home. The man knew I was involved with the church, and I told them I don't want to renew the contract because I have commitments. But they refused my desire to stay but not with them.

Since 2001, she has expanded her missionary calling, repatriation and advocacy work for migrant domestic workers, seeking, for instance, humble, temporary shelters for those who flee their sponsors and coordinating repatriations during the war in 2006. She continues to be involved with Caritas and the MCC and supports incarcerated migrants in prisons and detention centers. All of this became possible, she told me, “when I became free.” While dedicating her life to these urgent interventions, she lived through poignant personal losses. “Because the problems of migrant domestic workers never stopped” from the moment she landed, she never again saw her sister and brother, who died in her absence, and would only see her ill mother 14 years later.

In closing, she repeated that “coming here was the work of God, not a coincidence. It was his will to continue what I had started in Madagascar and he knows why and where I am needed.”

These religious overtones, it seems, partly explain why feminists in the nineties did not meaningfully engage with migrant domestic workers who, anyway, have demonstrated throughout this chapter that they did well for each other on their own. It is important to note, however, that the distancing by Lebanese and Arab feminists who were active in that decade is also in part the result of racism. Indeed, I understood that the road to the Anti-Racism Movement was arduous and long, extending almost two decades, and at time treacherous, with “insects” and “snakes” lurking around the corner.

Roadblocks in the way of feminist solidarity

In the 1990s, I didn't know any, not even a single, Lebanese feminist or activist. [...] It was in late 2000 when I met these Lebanese feminists that call themselves feminists, activists, and human-rights fighters. But it's only a show-off—not all of them are genuine. In every forest there is an insect, there is a snake. – Gemma Justo

On November 24, 2020, the Knowledge Workshop organized the “Hypothetical Intergenerational Meeting: Feminism and the 1990s in Lebanon,” putting Lebanese and Palestinian feminists who have been active since the nineties in conversation with younger feminists active in Lebanon today. Although none of the participants were migrant domestic workers and organizers, it was still possible to get a sense of the ways in which migrant domestic workers were excluded from the ‘woman’ category, both in the “women’s” and “feminist”

movements of the nineties.¹⁹ Lina Abou-Habib, Chair of the board of directors of the Collective for Research and Training on Development – Action (CRTD-A), conveyed that in her experience, the World Conference on Women, also known as the Beijing Conference, in 1995, was a “feminist haven” in which migrant workers and refugees were present, many for the first time in an international conference, though not from Lebanon. Part of the outcomes of Beijing, she added, was to “institutionalize gender mainstreaming so it becomes part of the public sector,” an effort led by the women’s movement that culminated in the founding of *al-hay’a al-wataniya li shu’un al-mar’a al-lubnaniya* [the National Commission for Lebanese Women] in 1998.²⁰

Since its founding, the naming of the commission and its organizational structure have exemplified the state’s politics of exclusion. Not only does the Arabic name include *al-mar’a*, as a singular, cis-based understanding of womanhood, but it also insists, through *al-lubnaniya*, on the ethnonationalist character of the woman category and who is worthy of inclusion. I learned from Abou-Habib that a conversation between the commission and some feminists ensued in response to the commission’s name and agenda. The feminists argued for replacing “*al-lubnaniya*” with “*fi lubnan*” to represent non-Lebanese

¹⁹ Joumana Merhi, for instance, the director of the Arab Institute for Human Rights in Lebanon, explained that after the Taif agreement, what emerged was a “women’s movement” that was focused on “humanitarianism and rescue,” falling short of organizing for “total equality,” a defining feature of the feminist movement in her understanding. Merhi’s account is based on binary oppositions; the “women’s movement” was led by “traditionalists” invested in religious and state institutions, while the emerging “feminist movement” was more secular and based in civil society. Their diverging visions became a source of tension in the context of the Beijing Conference. It is also worth noting that “men” and “women” were understood at the time as essential categories, while feminism was understood and continues to be understood by many feminists in Lebanon as a movement for equality and not as a movement that seeks to abolish structural asymmetries tied to racist, militaristic, colonial, heteropatriarchal, and political-economic configurations and legacies.

²⁰ Abou-Habib described the commission as a “microcosm of the regime.” The public decree stipulated that it would be headed by the first lady of Lebanon and that members of parliament and ministers who are women were de facto part of the governing body. See the commission’s website, <https://nclw.gov.lb/nclw-law/>.

women residing in Lebanon but were not successful, likely because of an attachment to ethno-based notions of citizenship and the long presiding anti-Palestinian sentiment that was renewed in the context of the civil war. Needless to say, migrant domestic workers were even further from consideration, not only because they were absent from the negotiation table. Their erasure was a symptom of deep racism manifesting in an unwillingness to recognize their humanity, let alone their situation as “labor-commodities,” in the words of Neferti Tadiar, often exploited in labor and sometimes thoroughly exhausted through their racialized and sexualized bodies.²¹ But one should not make the mistake of believing that racism, at the time, was exclusive to the state and its organizations; the Left was equally complicit through the racist rhetoric of some of its members active in women-based organizations affiliated with the communist party.²² Lastly, NGOs who were doing advocacy work for women in the nineties also ignored the predicament of migrant domestic workers and many of their staff-members unapologetically discredited and blamed the survivors for the violence to which they were subjected.²³

A handful of Lebanese—who did not necessarily attach the feminist label to their identities and work—led “personal initiatives” to repatriate women who fled their sponsors with the help of Caritas and Laksetha, a day-time shelter for migrant domestic workers in Dawra run by a Sri Lankan nun named sister Angela.²⁴ That this rescue effort was marked by a religious character deterred

²¹ Neferti Tadiar, "Domestic Bodies of the Philippines," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 12, no. 2 (1997): 153-91.

²² One of the feminist activists I interviewed who prefers to remain anonymous related to me the Left's failure in this regard.

²³ “Typical statements [by women NGO workers in the late 90s] include: 'they came here of their own free will', 'they would have starved to death in their countries', 'they're stealing jobs away from Lebanese', 'they complain too much and are un-grateful, they deserve it all', and 'they are thieves and liars, and I cannot believe that they are beaten and raped by their employers.’” Lina Abu-Habib, “The Use and Abuse of Female Domestic Workers from Sri Lanka in Lebanon,” *Gender and Development* 6 no. 1 (1998): 56.

²⁴ According to a Lebanese feminist who prefers to remain anonymous, some of these Lebanese figures monopolized the issue, pushing others who likely identified as feminists

some Lebanese feminists who believed that the “religious mantle” inherently stood “in the way of organizing,” and that “the missionary legacy is not [part of a] feminist [project].”²⁵ One feminist confessed that “in hindsight, we had the resources to make the connections but there were gatekeepers. But also, besides repatriation on an individual level, we did not know what to do that would have had far reaching effects.”²⁶ There is definitely something to be said about learning and practicing the politics of organizing through trials and errors over time. Yet besides racism, gatekeeping and the inability to listen to what migrant domestic workers themselves said and wanted ultimately stood in the way of feminist solidarity.

In closing, Kandaarachchige, Justo, and Razanajay’s personal experiences and insights into the nineties converge in a heterogenous, geographically extensive, and incomplete oral history of migrant domestic workers’ organizing to survive local and global conjunctures webbed through Kafala. What is also at stake is the glaring confirmation that the struggle of migrant domestic workers could never be contained within programs to “work on” in the myriad NGOs,²⁷ and nor is it an issue to simply “add” to the local feminist movement.²⁸ Long in the making, this struggle was bound to fundamentally transform the local feminist

away from the struggle. These “gatekeepers” acted as sister Angela’s “guardians,” which in reality was a covert form of racism rooted in the belief that migrant domestic workers have no agency—a grave historical fallacy, as it has been revealed throughout this chapter. Further research is needed to better understand the parameters of the dynamics that were shared with me.

²⁵ Based on a conversation with a Lebanese feminist who prefers to remain anonymous.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Salka also makes the distinction between “working for” and “working with” when she explains how ARM and the MCC differ in their approach from local and international NGOs.

²⁸ Women and queer of color critique has emphasized the need to move away from the “additive approach” because it offers nominal references in political organizing that do not challenge the status quo and the dominant structures it rests on. See for instance, Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3 (1997): 437-485.

movement beyond equality and toward a radical politics against the dominant political economy and the gender and race formations that sustain it.²⁹

²⁹ For further reading see Sumayya Kassamali, "Migrant Worker Lifeworlds of Beirut" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016); Amrita Pande, "From 'Balcony Talk' and 'Practical Prayers' to Illegal Collectives: Migrant Domestic Workers and Meso-Level Resistances in Lebanon," *Gender and Society* 26 (2012): 382-405; Dima Kaedbey, "Building Theory Across Struggles: Queer Feminist Thought from Lebanon," (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2014); Ray Jureidini, "In the Shadows of Family Life: Toward a History of Domestic Service in Lebanon," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5 (2009): 74-101.