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Resisting Borders:

a Conversation on the Daily Struggles of Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon

Gemma, Rose, Mala, Meriam, and Julia

Edited by Ghiwa Sayegh

This recorded conversation between migrant domestic workers living in Lebanon was held on the 19th of November 2016 and lasted for three hours.

"Openings" is a corner in *Kohl* that aims at presenting a collective experience in thinking and writing, through publishing excerpts of recorded discussion sessions among those who work in a particular field or topic, or people who are interested in it. The discussions take place in the presence of a mediator who directs the debate then extracts the main ideas to write them and publish them in a summarized article.

"Openings" aims at showing and exposing different and even opposing points of view and opinions, and opening the floor for the expression of a large number of people who have valuable experiences and opinions, and who do not have the time or the will to write.

"Openings" intends to challenge the traditional methods of knowledge production, especially within academic circles that are often characterized by exclusivity, individuality, selectivity, and complex requirements.

It also hopes to expose and activate the intellectual wealth that characterizes the discussions and collective thinking, and then to incorporate the public audience in the suggested issues. This experience combines journalism and public discussions by tackling subjects that are usually categorized as academic or "elitist." This way, "Openings" allows for the revaluation of writing, publishing, and representation politics, and encourages those who participate to exchange their experiences and their ideas and to develop them openly and publically.

If you would like to suggest an idea for discussion, or even host a discussion with a particular group of people in the "Openings" corner, you may contact the *Kohl* team at: info@kohljournal.org

Border Control: the Isolation Room

Meriam: I came to Lebanon in 1994. I was only 18 years old. The first employer I worked for used to beat me up, the second accused me of theft, and the third locked me up with no days off and no phone. When I ran away, I was illegal for three years. My sister always told me I had no luck with employers. I felt stuck in a cycle. But I survived, every day, and I am still here. The first time I came here, I was locked up inside the immigration room at the airport for hours, as were other women from different nationalities, Sri Lankan and others. We sat on the floor without food.

Mala:[1] And no air.

Meriam: We had to stay there until the employer would come and pick you up. They call it isolation room.

Julia: I am from Madagascar. I came to Lebanon in 1996, I was twenty one; I was also very young. I had just finished high school, and our country was totally collapsing economically and politically. I have the same airport story. When I arrived, they put us all in that room. But fortunately I only stayed there for three hours until they fixed my papers. People were sleeping or sitting on the floor as there were no chairs. I did not sit because I did not stay long.

Mala: Airport officials look at us as if we're animals. They dismiss us or order us to walk with a wave of their hand, like they would do with dogs. We would travel for more than twelve hours, sometimes overnight, then upon arrival we were made to sit on the floor of that room with no water. Some girls[2] drank water from the bathroom tap because they were thirsty. That is, if they were allowed to go to the bathroom.

Rose:[3] No, we weren't, at least not until you peed yourself.

Mala: The airport security wouldn't let them go out and would scream *yalla, fouti jouwwa, fouti jouwwa*![4] Then I spoke to the Lebanese Minister of Labor and he was surprised, as he had never heard of that room. Two months later, it was decided that only migrant domestic workers who land in Lebanon for the first time would go through it.

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[1] You can read Mala's testimony at: http://kohljournal.org/migrating-to-civil-war/
[2] Migrant domestic workers are referred to as "girls."
[3] You can read Rose's testimony at: http://kohljournal.org/beiruts-welcome/
[4] "Go on, go inside, go inside!"

Gemma:[5] That is the fruit of our activism. Now, as long as you have an *ikameh*,[6] you are allowed to go out alone. But before, you had to wait for your employer. That was the life. It is not only us, every one single domestic worker who came to Lebanon experienced that.

Julia: When I left that room in 1996, it was the last time I saw my passport. I only saw it again three years later when I went to visit my family in Madagascar.

Meriam: I could not keep my passport and papers either. I had nothing on me, not even a photocopy of my papers. Only with my previous employer was I able to keep any sort of documentation.

Sexual Borders: Racialized Sexual Harassment

Gemma: As migrant women, the sexual borders we experience are relentless. Before public transportation by bus became a thing in Lebanon, we could only take cabs. The family I worked for dealt with two taxi drivers who were brothers. When I was new to Lebanon, my mom, who worked for the same employer back then, asked one of the brothers to pick me up. He asked me to sit in front, so I did with no bad intentions. He then started touching my legs, caressing them up and down, and murmuring *nehna sawa sawa*.[7] I didn't know what it meant, but I asked him what he was doing. As he continued touching me, I slapped him and screamed at him to stop the car right there. I had already opened the door, so he was forced to stop. It was a Sunday and I didn't know where I was. I found my way back by randomly walking for hours. It was my first week in Lebanon, and I was twenty six.

Meriam: Last year, I was invited to a friend's place in Sioufi, and she asked me to bring noodles with me. As I was holding the pot of noodles and sitting at the back of a cab, the driver kept telling me *yalla, ta'i la hon*[8] for me to sit next to him. I said I was already seated in the back, so there was no point for me to sit in front. While still driving, he took off his seatbelt, turned his whole upper body towards the back, and touched my thighs with his hand. I threw the noodles in his face.

Rose: Same here, I once threw a bag of fish at an old taxi driver.

Meriam: When my friends asked me where the noodles were, I told her that the taxi driver had eaten all of them.

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[5] You can read Gemma's testimony at: http://kohljournal.org/the-road-to-dissent/
[6] Residency permit
[7] "We are together together," an infantilized Lebanese expression, generally directed at migrant domestic workers to ask them for sex.
[8] Come on, come here

Julia: It is always the same story when you take a cab. The driver starts to touch your legs; once, one of them even touched the inside of my thighs. I shouted and wanted to beat him up. They think that because I am a migrant, a stranger to the country, I am available for them.

Gemma: It is up to us. If you strongly tell them to stop, they stop, and we have to stand by our words. When public transportation by bus was made available, I once offered my seat to a very old Lebanese man. In my head, I thought that maybe one day, my dad would be standing on the bus and there would be no available seats, but somebody would do the same for him. The old man groped my ass. I made a scene in the bus. I slapped him and shouted at the driver to let him off right then, so he kicked the man out. Old man. What a shame.

Julia: Whenever I went to Bickfaya before buses existed, I always changed the cab halfway. Every single time, drivers would tell me *enti w ana sawa sawa*?[9] So I got off and took another cab. I would take up to three cabs sometimes. When buses started operating, the harassment was not as systematic, but it was still very well present. Once, a Lebanese soldier kept pushing me against the bus window, taking so much space, and I couldn't understand why he was so close. Then he placed his military bag on his knees to block his hands from passengers' view, and he touched me. I screamed, went to the other side of the bus, and tried to explain to people what had happened. As I only spoke French, nobody understood me. The soldier would not look at me in the eye after that. But before I got off the bus, I stared at him for a good while so I could remember his face.

Mala: Even I, who turned sixty five years old last week, still experience sexual harassment. I don't want to sit in the back of a taxi at my age, so I just sit in front and clutch my handbag against my body. On a very rainy night, the taxi driver kept asking me to put my handbag down. Then he refused to drop me off in front of my front door; instead, he stopped the car much further than where I was headed, under a tree in a small alley, under the pretext that it was raining too much and that he would take me home when the rain subsides. I went down, covered my head with my jacket, and walked home under the heavy rain. I was soaking wet when I got to my "madam's"[10] house. They all think domestic workers are cheap. The "madams" think we are cheap labor. The taxi drivers think we are cheap sexual objects.

Rose: I remember the first Sunday I was allowed two hours of freedom. Those were my first moments of freedom after four years of living in Lebanon. I was so happy I could fly. I was planning to dress nicely and go to the movies with a friend as we used to do back home. On our way there, a well-dressed man stopped his car in front of us, and tried to negotiate a "price" with us. He lowered his pants and grabbed his…

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[9] "You and I are together together?"

[10] "Madam" and "mister" are the terms migrant domestic workers are asked to use to refer to their employers. Employers are rarely called by their names.

Julia: His penis.

Rose: Yes, with his hand. In broad daylight, at 13:30. When my friend saw his penis, she said "ouf, it is very very small, like that!" And she showed him her little finger. He turned his engine on and drove away as quickly as he came. Those are very traumatizing experiences. On a different Sunday, the same friend and I took a cab to Fanar. We did not know where it was, but we had to pick up another girl, and we had the directions written on a piece of paper. My friend sat in front of the taxi, and I was in the back. We drove for a long time, and the driver kept taking small turns and roads, until he got to a place where traffic was low. He stopped there, got out of the car, and started masturbating. Then he told my friend *habibi, a'tini Kleenex habibi*.[11]

Meriam: This reminds me of my first violent encounter. Whenever I took the stairs from Ain el Mraisseh to Hamra, there was a bunch of young men hanging out there who would tell me *yalla, Filippina, 5,000! 5,000!*[12] every time I passed. I never answered, because for me, I don't mind them talking, as long as they do not touch me. Once, they followed me up the stairs, and one of the men grabbed me from behind. I had an empty Corona beer bottle hidden in my bag, so I hit him with it on the head and he started bleeding. We were taken to the Hbeich police station and they called my boss.

Julia: Did they say it was your fault?

Meriam: Yes, they did, because I had a glass bottle and I used it to injure the guy. I explained to my boss what he did to me but the young man kept lying, insisting I had attacked him with the bottle for no reason.

Mala: So your "mister" did not take your side.

Meriam: He told me that it wasn't okay to carry a bottle around. I said it was self-defense, but he said I could kill someone.

Mala: They prefer you carry around a gun? A bottle is good! If you defend yourself, they might remember their lesson.

Rose: Learning to defend ourselves is key, because in a cab for example, it doesn't matter if you sit in the front or in the back. If you sit next to him, his hand systematically lands on your thigh. If you sit behind him, he's not on the wheel anymore, but touching you with his hand.

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[11] "Love, give me a tissue."

[12] "Come on, Filipina, 5,000 Lebanese Liras!" 5,000LL is the equivalent of 3.33$.

So I opted for a new system. I sit in front, and if he touches me, I scratch his hand with a razor blade. I always carry a small blade with me. You touch me, I cut you, you touch, I cut. I won't tell you a word, I won't even say no, but if you lay your hands on me, I will cut you. It is up to you. You either accept the wounds and the blood, or you drop it. That's what I tell all the girls, cut him twice, and he won't touch you ever again. It is funny to recount these anecdotes, but living them is something else. I remember once, in the house of my former employers, the building's janitor was called to retrieve some items from the attic, which happened to be above my small bedroom. As I was bending over to open the door when we were done, he grabbed my ass. I was physically strong at that time, not like now, so I turned around and punched him on the mouth. He immediately started bleeding and screaming. My "madam" came running and asked me what I had done. I replied: "Me? I haven't done anything. He hit his mouth on the door. Let him explain why he's bleeding."

Gemma: It happens a lot to domestic workers because we are perceived as domestic workers only. They label us as "low." Domestic workers are not protected in the labor law, in the labor code, so domestic work is not recognized as decent work, as work. This is why we need to change policies to better our situation.

Rose: It has to do with being a migrant domestic worker, with being a woman of color. Women with fairer skin are not subjected to such systematic harassment. But with us, they think that since we are here, we belong to them. In a way, we are their "play thing." We are objectified. As a woman, immigrant, and domestic worker on top of that, you have no voice. When Julia shouted in French in the bus, people surely understood, but they didn't say anything because the harasser was an authority figure.

Class Borders in the Public Sphere

Mala: When we ask for our rights, no one listens to us. If we are harassed on the streets, we cannot ask for help because we are looked down on as "street" migrant domestic workers and labeled as sex workers. If we put on a dress, they would say "the Sri Lankan is dressing up like a 'madam.'"

Gemma: If you have been to Hamra on Sundays, it is packed with Filipinos. And you can see young beautiful Filipinas, with flowing long hair, high heels, and make-up. Now we're used to seeing domestic workers like that in Hamra – it's the only day we can dress nicely and go out. But in other areas, people still say "what is she doing? She's a *sharmouta*."[13] It's like saying domestic workers are only supposed to wear a uniform.

[13] A derogatory Lebanese term for "sex worker."

Rose: I was shopping in Furn el Chebbak one day, and I saw clothes that I liked in a window shop. As I was trying to step inside, the saleswoman came out and said "no no no no no, we don't have your size here." I was skinny at that time, but she didn't want me to go in. I didn't say anything and continued doing my window shopping. As I was walking back carrying heavy bags – I bought a lot of clothes that day, I went back in that very same shop. I think she didn't recognize me because she let me in.

Gemma: Because you had bags with you.

Rose: Yes, and you know what I did? I tried every single piece of clothing in the shop, then put them on the table. I didn't buy anything, took my bags, and left her with the job of folding the clothes and putting them back on the shelves. Why did she do that? Because she thought that I couldn't afford to buy anything. Because I'm a domestic worker.

Gemma: I once wanted to buy a suit. The young saleswoman warned me before I even touched the fabric *la, heyda ghali*.[14]

Mala: Yes, I have been told this countless times.

Gemma: Meaning it's not up to the standards of a domestic worker. I looked at the price tag and saw that it cost 200$. I had 500$ in my wallet. I opened it, showed her the money, and asked "is this not enough?" Her attitude changed immediately and she urged me to try the suit on, but I refused. We face all of that on a daily basis. This is the reason why I think every one of us is an activist, and not only because it's inside our veins. It's a question of survival.

Rose: We want to change those mentalities. We want people to know that it's not because you're a domestic worker that you can't buy a dress or a bra. I have big boobs, see? I have to buy expensive bras because they have to be solid, and I know my body. Don't tell me it's too expensive because I know what I need. Before I came to Lebanon, I had no idea that life could be like that. I knew there were bad and good people in the absolute sense of the word, but I didn't know that a human being would be different from another.

Gemma: According to where you come from.

Rose: Exactly. But when I came here, wow. Who are those people? No, they have to change. They have to.

Julia: My "madam" once asked me if we had hairdressers in Madagascar. She was surprised that I was dry blowing and combing my hair. She also couldn't believe that I watched sports

[14] "No, this is too expensive."

tournaments on TV, and asked me how I knew the details of the games. They think we can't even comb our own hair. They categorize us as the lowest of the low in terms of social class. "Domestic worker" becomes our class, and it is as if we cannot go beyond a certain social standard.

Activism at the Borders of Institutionalized Racism

Gemma: There is also one thing that the Lebanese community and the employers should understand: they cannot expect the domestic workers to talk in Arabic or English or French from the first day; they might not talk these languages, but they have their own language. In many of the cases I solved, the employers called their domestic worker "stupid" or "idiot." I always ask them whether they would understand my language if they went to my country.

Rose: That is the problem.

Mala: We learned how to shout in Arabic, simply because we are shouted at all day. So we end up knowing every single insult in Arabic.

Julia: When I first arrived, kids on the streets used to follow me around and call me *hmara*.[15]

Gemma: These are the things that we need to say out loud to the community.

Mala: Not only do we not understand the language of the contracts that we sign, but we are not allowed to renew our residency papers on our own. We are told that if we do so, we would run away with the money. But nobody wants to be paperless and deported. We are here to work and send money home, so let us do our own papers!

Gemma: This is why we have to continue what we have started. That's the alternative to *kafala*,[16] and there is a lot to be done still. We need to produce knowledge, to come up with strategies so that we can influence policy-making and represent ourselves with our own voices. And for me, I don't care if a woman is black, if she is from Africa or from Asia, as long as I know that she's a migrant like me, and most likely a domestic worker. My heart has always fought for them. If they need anyone, I am here. This is my praxis. This is how I function. I don't categorize migrant domestic workers by nationality.

Julia: It's true.

[15] "Donkey," an expression used for stupid in Lebanese.
[16] The sponsorship system that ties migrant domestic workers to their employers in Lebanon.

Gemma: Whenever I am in reunited with my comrades in this room, I am filled with happiness and hope because I know that activism is in their hearts and heads. They're part of my life.

Meriam: I feel the same way.

Julia: We must understand that an immigrant is an immigrant, whether Bangladeshi, or Sri Lankan, or Malagasy. The moment we arrive here, we are subjected to the same politics of institutionalized racism, and we fight those systems for all migrant domestic workers for them to have the same salary and same rights. We do it for those of us who are locked up in houses with no food and sometimes only drink a cup of tea during the day. This is why we became activists.

Gemma: This is where it falls, the resistance. Racist categorizations and discrimination assume that the fairer your skin, the better you are. Why? We are all migrant domestic workers.

Meriam: I experienced blatant racism at Tamari Beach, where I went swimming with friends. Some "madams" looked at us and asked the lifeguard why there were a lot of Filipinas at the resort. In the end, we were not allowed to swim.

Gemma: Myrtle Witbooi, a former domestic worker and international activist, once went to a swimming pool in South Africa. The moment she dived into the water, someone said "oh, the water is becoming black already." Is our skin composed of dye? Even the wife of the ambassador of the Philippines in Lebanon was kicked out of a luxurious hotel's swimming pool in Beirut. The lifeguard gestured at her with his fingers to order her to leave the water. She didn't make a scene, but the incident was all over the newspapers. How could they not be ashamed? In their head, she looks Asian, and therefore she's a domestic worker.

Meriam: Because we're slaves, that's what they think we are.

Gemma: No, we're not slaves.

Julia: My sister was taken to the swimming pool by her employers to take care of their kids. She just wanted to cross to go to the kids' area, not even stay inside the water, and the lifeguards shouted at her *no no no mamnou'*![17] She called me crying after the incident.

Gemma: In one of the buildings where I used to work, there were three elevators: two big glass ones, renovated for the "madams," and one tiny elevator for the garbage and the "maids." But the dogs of the "madams" could use the beautiful lifts. My "madam" told me I could use the new lift because she had contributed to their renovation. I was in the elevator once, and two older

[17] "No no no, it's forbidden!"

women were talking about me in French: "Have you seen that? They let their domestic worker use our elevator." I could understand what they were saying, but they didn't know I spoke French. When we reached the ground floor, I pushed them out of the way and passed first. Then I looked back and said "I'm sorry madam, but my boss told me that I can use this new lift because she's paying."

Rose: Many buildings have this kind of racist spatial architecture. I never take the small, dirty, dark lift designed for "maids." When the security guards or janitors try to stop me, I go like "shhh! Shhh!" And I simply pass in front of them and take the regular elevator. Sometimes, we have to take our rights by force. Yes, by force.

Borders of the "Home:" Strategies of Resistance

Mala: If we don't try, we don't get anything. We are just like them, maybe not in terms of class and financial status, but our hearts are in the right place. In some cases, our hearts are even kinder than theirs.

Gemma: Kafa[18] did a survey about how many employers believe that domestic workers smell bad, that they're dirty. How can you say that the domestic worker is dirty when she takes her bath every morning before she starts her work? And how can you let a dirty person touch your food? How can you let a dirty person touch your bed, touch your clothes, touch your everything? They stop being dirty when there is work to be done.

Mala: Some girls are not allowed to use perfume. That is fine, but I know of cases where they have to wash their hair with detergent because their employers do not give them shampoo. And then they tell us "you are a family member."

Meriam: No, you're not.

Gemma: You're never a family member.

Julia: The sister-in-law of my "madam" has separate plates, forks, and knives for her Ethiopian domestic worker. She doesn't let her touch the family's plates and keeps asking her to wash her hands every hour.

Mala: The employers eat good pasta, but they give their domestic worker bad quality pasta. They eat Basmati rice, we eat Egyptian rice. We are treated very differently from other family members. And how can you say "you dirty girl" when you leave no water for your domestic

[18] An NGO that works on domestic violence in Lebanon.

worker? When all the family showers before she does, and when it is her turn, you ask her to start working? In that case, she can be dirty yes, because you leave her no time to take care of herself. The "madam" can shower whenever she wants, so she always smells very nice. You can kiss her at all hours of the day! And if she has a headache, she goes to a specialized doctor. If you have a headache, they give you Panadol.

Gemma: It's the wonder drug! Every domestic worker has been treated with Panadol. No matter how sick you are or what part of your body hurts, they would say *khodi Panadol, khalas*![19] This is what they don't understand. We don't need Panadol. We don't need medication. We need rest. We are fighting for our rest time.

Mala: Then you go back to your home country and you're unable to take any medication because you need Panadol. Your body is so used to that drug that it becomes Panadol.

Gemma: But we're the ones who have access to the outside world. From the first moment we were united, we said we were doing this job for the sake of the domestic workers who are locked inside houses, those who are prevented from even looking at, let alone talking, to their neighbors, because it's *mamnou'*.[20]

Mala: Before the garbage crisis, some domestic workers had a chance to meet while taking the garbage out.

Julia: Garbage bins were meeting points to exchange food, exchange letters…

Mala: And magazines.

Gemma: Walking the dog is another way as well.

Meriam: When one of my employers locked me up on the 8th floor with no food, the neighbors' domestic workers gave me noodles in a plastic bag from the back balcony.[21]

Gemma: These are the kinds of procedures that we have to do.

Rose: Usually in the buildings, every floor has a domestic worker. Maybe among them only one or two are allowed to go out, and we always used to have ropes and codes. The ones who could go out would bring back goodies and cut them in pieces. Every domestic worker would

[19] "Take Panadol and you'll be fine."
[20] "Forbidden."
[21] A balcony hidden from street view, usually used for hanging laundry and storing junk.

be standing on the back balcony in a column. You take your part, then push the rope down. The next person takes their share, then pushes it down, and so on.

Mala: Hearing water trickling from our neighbor's back balcony was the signal for us to go outside.

Rose: Or taps on the glass in a particular sequence.

Mutual Care as a Tool for Activism

Julia: I met Mala, Rose, Gemma, and Meriam through the activities organized by and for domestic workers. We went dancing on the streets with drums, and that's where I met Mala and Gemma. We were with Kafa back then, and we did flashmobs in some malls in Beirut.

Mala: It was against the *kafala* system. We paired one Lebanese person with one migrant worker and we tied their hands together.

Julia: It was great because we were on the streets, we danced, we drummed. We were even on TV!

Gemma: Nobody was expecting for this to happen.

Julia: We went to the malls, to Hamra, to Jounieh.

Gemma: To the Corniche as well.

Julia: Then Rose came with the whole African community. Since then, we have always been…

Mala: Like sisters. We share everything, happiness, bad moments.

Julia: We share our community problems, our personal problems.

Meriam: This group is for better and for worse.

Mala: Because even if we have a lot of work experience, this does not mean we can control our emotions all the time. Sometimes, even talking to one of these women solves my problems. It is much better than keeping them in and thinking about them constantly in a small, isolated room. We share everything.

Gemma: We are doing something good now. We are the founders of the union.

Rose: I hope we will continue chatting like that from time to time. Because it feels good, first. And second, I have the hope that maybe one day, some women like us will be sitting at this very table and saying "we are lucky because those who were here before us tried very hard."

Gemma: "They tried for us."

Rose: As we are sitting here, we are trying for the future migrant domestic workers. That is my dream. And I'm sure that God will grant us this grace.

Gemma: God is the heart, *habibi*.[22]

[22] "My love."