

**Speech of Hessen Sayah – Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center**  
**Press conference ILC June 9<sup>th</sup> 2011**

Good afternoon, I am Hessen Sayah from Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center.

We would like to congratulate the domestic workers on behalf of Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center and the Migrant Forum of Asia.

First, I would like to thank the organisers and our colleagues and partners at MFA for giving me the opportunity and chance to share with you the experience of Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center (CLMC) in ensuring effective protection for MDWs' rights. And what we are doing towards the ratification of the ILO convention.

CLMC is a MFA partner and this partnership with MFA give us more and more power in terms of lobbying and advocating and campaigning with the Lebanese Government and public.

The Migrant Center was created by Caritas Lebanon in 1994, to respond to the growing needs of migrant workers, asylum-seekers and refugees in the country, who are a marginalized portion of the society and strengthening and protecting the Human rights of Migrants , Refugees, and Asylum seekers in Lebanon.

CLMC a hand to support a person in need provides direct services adapted to expressed and identified migrants' needs, it has developed strategies to raise the awareness about migrants' situation in the country, in addition to advocacy and lobbying efforts deployed in favour of migrants' cause.

The majority of migrant workers in Lebanon are women originating from Asia and Africa, working as domestic helpers. According to the Lebanese ministry of labour in 2010 159 764 work permits were delivered to migrant workers among them 123 573 women migrant domestic workers. They are everywhere in the country, in nearly every household, factory, or business. Women migrant domestic workers are usually young and poor, living in fear of losing their jobs, having had to leave their families in their countries of origin. They often do not speak the language of the country of employment or a shared language with their employers and are unaware that they have rights that are being infringed.

For rather low wages and under very tough work conditions, migrant workers cope with their situation, with the sole hope of sending their remittances or going back home and improving their financial situation and their families'.

In November 2005, an “Awareness Raising Workshop on the Situation of Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon” co-organised by the ILO, CLMC, UNIFEM, OHCHR, and the Lebanese Ministry of Labour took place in Beirut and gathered over 60 participants representing UN Agencies, NGOs and CSOs, Embassies of major sending countries, and relevant Lebanese Ministries. As a result, in January 2006, a National Steering Committee (SC) was formed by a decree law in view of improving the protection of the human and legal rights of the domestic migrant workers in Lebanon. CLMC is part of this SC, alongside the Ministries of Labour, Justice, Interior, and Social affairs, in addition to UN agencies (ILO, OHCHR), relevant Embassies of sending countries, the Syndicate of recruitment agencies, and the Beirut Bar Association Institute for Human Rights. The SC mandate is three-fold:

- 1- Drafting a unified contract granting the protection of migrant domestic workers’ human and labour rights. The new text stipulates the minimum labour rights for migrant domestic workers.

This contract became official on 31 January 2009 through a Decree Law, and came into force as of 01 April 2009.

- 2- Amending the current Lebanese labour laws, thus extending them to cover migrant domestic workers.

- 3- Developing and publishing booklets on rights and responsibilities of 3 different populations: migrant workers, employers and recruitment agencies. All 3 booklets cover the rights and responsibilities of concerned parties, guidance for culture adaptation, guidance for treatment and respect of the rights of both parties migrant worker and employer, general information regarding recruitment procedures and questions to ask for before adhering to an overseas job or recruiting a migrant. The booklets include also additional information such as dictionary and services available for migrants and employers should they require assistance or clarifications/counselling.

## CHALLENGES

CLMC faces several challenges in accomplishing its mission aiming at strengthening and protecting the human rights of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in Lebanon.

Although involved in drafting the unified contract, the Centre has several reservations regarding the indicted version:

- The contract should be available in both Arabic and the migrant domestic workers' respective native language;
- The provision for a weekly day-off does not clearly stipulate if this day-off could be spent out of the house;
- The current contract duration is of 3 years, while before it was of 2 years 3 months;
- There are limited provisions enabling the migrant domestic workers to terminate the contract, while the employer can terminate it when it suits her/him.

**PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS THE ILO CONVENTION 'S RATIFICATION :**

- Continue lobbying with the government to put into force : 1 -the project law giving domestic workers the status of real workers and 2- the translated unified contract in the native languages of the migrant workers;
- National legislation should hold abusive employers accountable and ensure equality and justice in working rights and preventing discrimination ;
- Improving the regulations of recruiting agencies;
- Allowing migrant domestic workers to change their sponsor;
- Ratification of the CMW and ILO convention on Domestic Work that would ensure a better protection for migrant workers and adapting the Lebanese legislation accordingly.

In order for the Convention to enter into force, thereby becoming international law, 2 countries must adopt and ratify the convention text. The aim of the tripartite deliberations was to achieve a widely ratifiable convention that ensures that the rights of domestic workers are protected.

The members of Migrant Forum in Asia have much work to do, now that these international standards have been set. First and foremost, we will spread the news of this important Convention among our networks, raising awareness among domestic workers and those who advocate for their rights that this Convention exists and what it means for the protection of their rights.

We will be going back to our respective countries in the region to lobby hard for ratification and implementation. Through sustained dialogue with our governments, we will be persistent in our insistence that governments ratify and properly implement these important provisions.

We will continue to work to sensitize our communities – the general public and the media – to the issues faced by migrant domestic workers, and the important contributions they make to their home and host communities.

The Convention has been passed, but there is much work yet to come. We must not lose this moment, as it is a victory that will be a catalyst for significant and lasting change for domestic workers worldwide!

We would ask the Lebanese government to ratify this convention. Lebanon was and remains the country of liberty and democratise and hope also where domestic workers will have their dignity, their respect.

This convention means a new view of the domestic worker for their life, an eyes of the children looking to their mothers going abroad without tears, a liberty, a new life for them and their households.

It was the domestic worker's dream and hope. We all knew that the dream of the domestic worker is not at all far to be realised. The efforts of the Migrant Center of Caritas Lebanon unified with MFA Migrant forum of Asia helped to get to this final step of the convention and of course we still have a lot to do.

A lot was done and we should now do more than the "lot" that has been done. Lobbying for the ratification in order to improve the living conditions of migrant domestic workers such as the day off and their right to spend it where they want and so on...