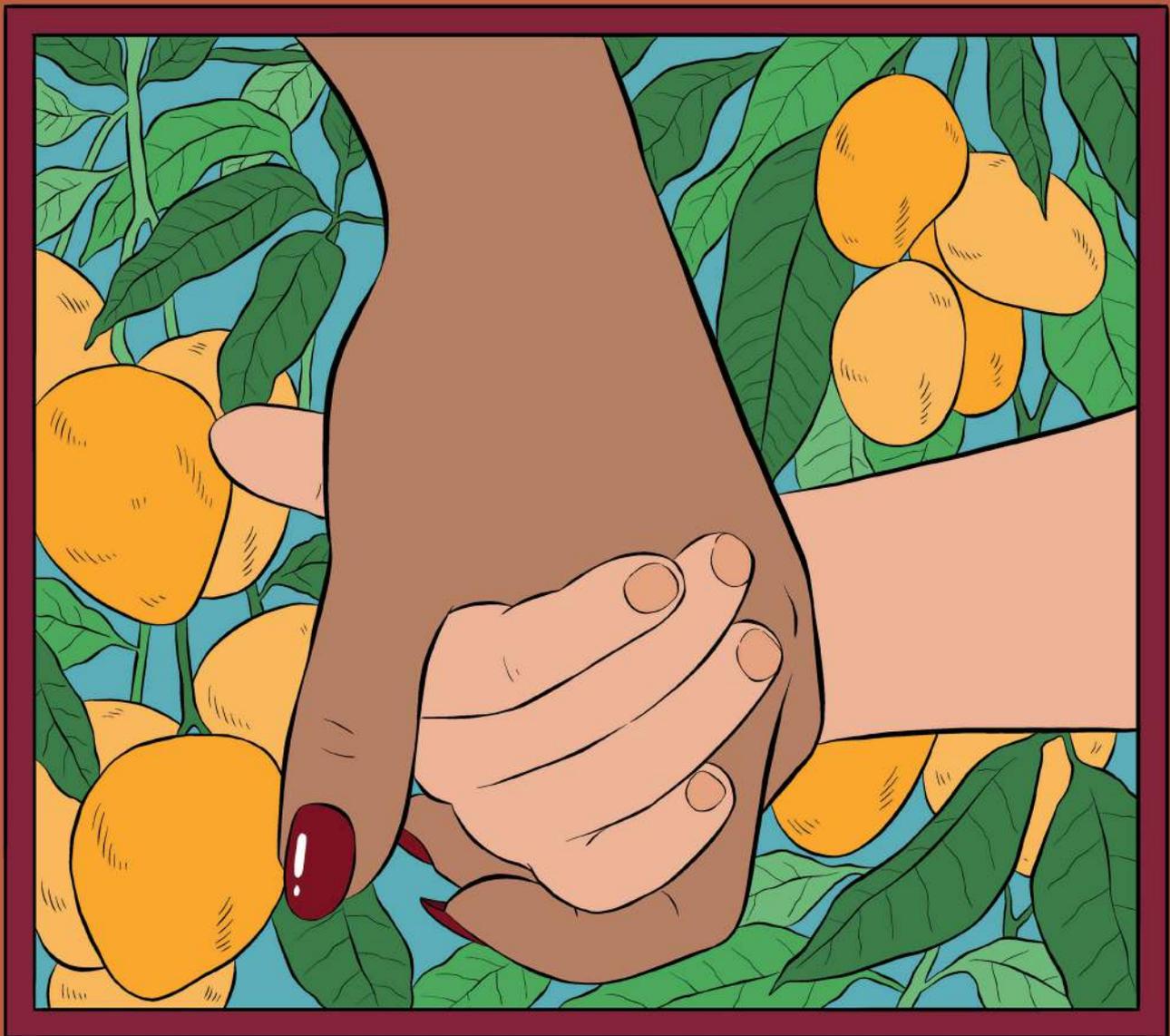


THANK YOU OOOOO

UNHEARD VOICES OF KAFALA: SEEKING HEALTHCARE UNDER THE KAFALA SYSTEM



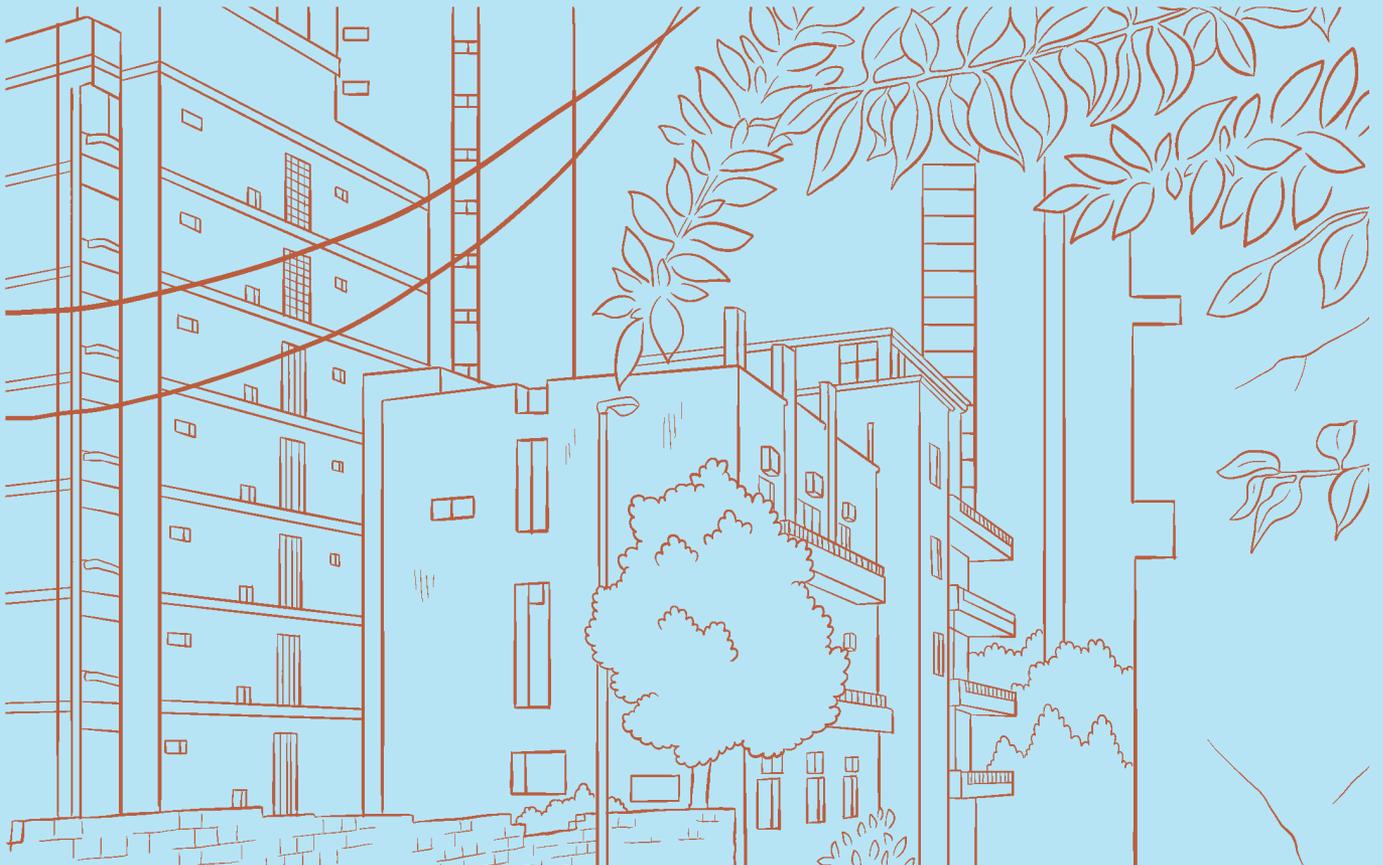
ILLUSTRATIONS AND STORY BY
RAPHAELLE MACARON

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) opened a clinic in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, providing general health consultations and specialist mental health support, free of charge, to migrant workers.

In these consultations, our patients – most of them women – have described to our staff the poor living and working conditions experienced by them under the Kafala system. This system is currently the only legal option for migrants to work in Lebanon since they are excluded from Lebanese Labour Law.

Despite the medical and mental health needs of migrant workers in Lebanon, they face multiple obstacles when trying to access health services, including discrimination, not having the right documents, a shortage of translators, the high cost of care, and gaps in health insurance coverage.





Their vulnerabilities were heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic crisis. With employers struggling to pay their salaries, many workers suddenly found themselves without a job. Some were simply dropped off in front of their embassies and left to fend for themselves.

The very nature of the Kafala system, which ties contracts to residency status, means that as soon as migrant workers lose their jobs, they are deemed to be living in Lebanon irregularly, making it even harder to access basic services. Most find themselves living in overcrowded or unsafe housing and many resort to harmful behaviours to cope.



It was in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that MSF was asked to provide urgent medical and mental health support to migrant workers. Some of them had severe mental health disorders due to the extremely precarious situation in which they suddenly found themselves.

Two years after MSF's clinic in Beirut first opened its doors, patients continue to describe the impact on their health and wellbeing of living and working conditions under the Kafala system. Our patients seek care for a range of medical conditions directly linked to the tasks they are required to perform, while restrictions on their movements and their lack of autonomy deeply impact their mental state.



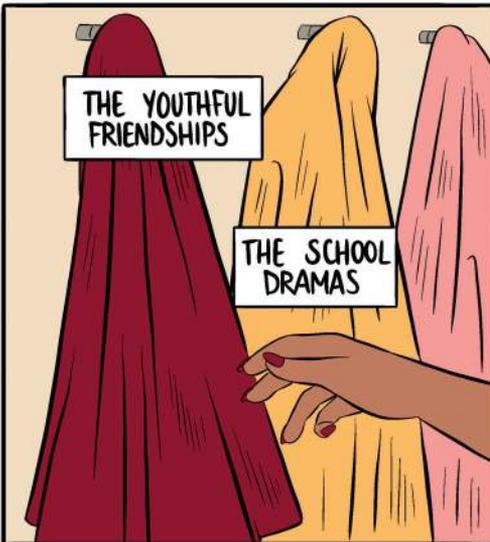
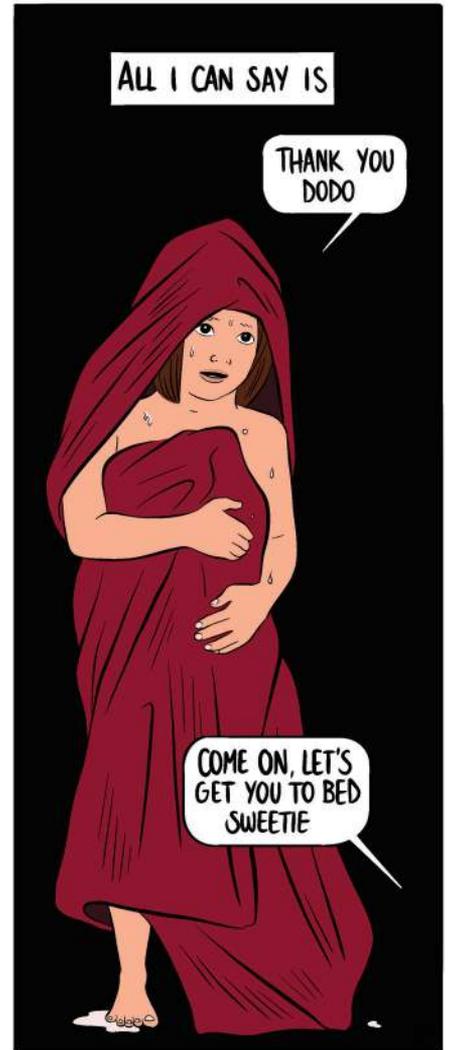
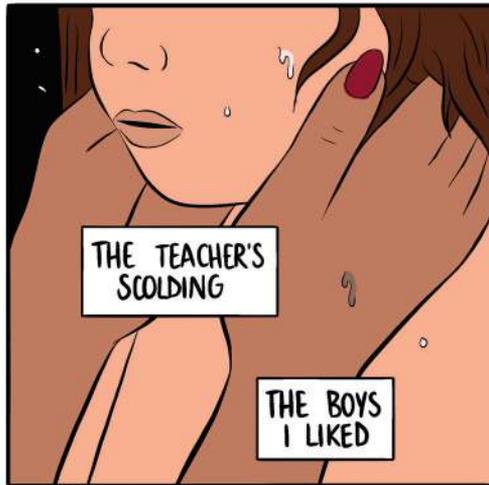
In 2022, the UN estimates that 135,000 migrant workers reside in Lebanon, mostly in Beirut and Mount Lebanon governorates.

This graphic novel is based on interviews with MSF patients and staff who have been personally affected by the Kafala system. Their stories demonstrate how the current system creates physical and mental suffering for the migrant workers providing Lebanese families with much-needed services, including childcare and care of the elderly. Our teams can treat the symptoms of the Kafala system, but to see a tangible improvement in the health and wellbeing of migrant workers, the system needs to be reformed.

All names have been changed to protect the identities of those in the story.



1.





MILLIONS OF CHILDREN ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD ARE RAISED BY MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS.

I WAS ONE OF THEM



GOODNIGHT HABIBI

REGARDLESS OF THE DEEP LOVE WE SHARED, DODO AND ALL THE OTHER FILIPINO, ETHIOPIAN, AND SRI LANKAN WORKERS



NIGHT DODO

WERE RECRUITED THROUGH THE SAME SYSTEM

THE KAFALA SYSTEM

MIGRANT WORKERS ARE EXCLUDED FROM LABOR LAW. CURRENTLY, THE KAFALA SYSTEM IS THE ONLY WAY TO GET HIRED AND WORK IN LEBANON



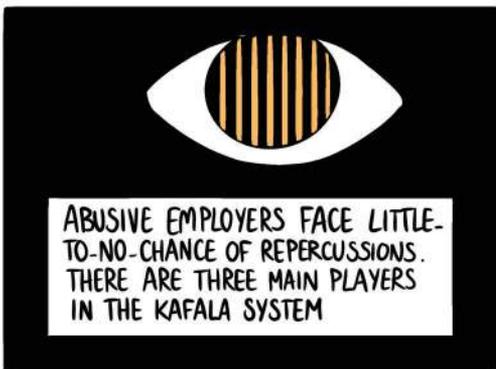
WITHOUT A "KAHEEL" OR SPONSOR, THEY ARE REGARDED AS ILLEGAL AND CAN FACE PROSECUTION.



EACH ONE NEEDS AN IN-COUNTRY SPONSOR, USUALLY THEIR EMPLOYER, WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR LEGAL STATUS

WORK CONTRACTS ARE EXTREMELY VAGUE AND CONTAIN A POWER IMBALANCE BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES, MAKING IT EASY FOR EMPLOYERS TO EXPLOIT DOMESTIC WORKERS

THEY CAN'T LEAVE THE EMPLOYER OR END THEIR CONTRACTS, WITHOUT THE EMPLOYER'S APPROVAL, EXCEPT IN CASES OF SEVERE ABUSE WHICH IN PRACTICE ARE VERY HARD TO PROVE



ABUSIVE EMPLOYERS FACE LITTLE-TO-NO-CHANCE OF REPERCUSSIONS. THERE ARE THREE MAIN PLAYERS IN THE KAFALA SYSTEM



FOREIGN RECRUITERS WHO RECRUIT WORKERS IN THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, OFTEN PROMISING A VERY DIFFERENT JOB

THE LEBANESE AGENCIES

AND THE EMPLOYERS



CONTRACTS ARE OFTEN WRITTEN IN ARABIC. MIGRANT WORKERS ARE PRESSURED INTO SIGNING A DOCUMENT THEY OFTEN CAN'T EVEN READ

JUNE 2022

I AM INVITED BY MSF TO BE ARTIST-IN RESIDENCE FOR ONE WEEK AT THEIR CLINIC IN BEIRUT

THE CLINIC PROVIDES FREE MEDICAL CARE, MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND SEXUAL HEALTHCARE TO MIGRANT WORKERS

THE FIRST PERSON I MEET IS RULA

SHE PROVIDES SUPPORT TO PATIENTS AND TRANSLATION WHEN NEEDED

SHE HERSELF CAME TO LEBANON AS A DOMESTIC WORKER

SHE REMEMBERS THINKING THAT LEBANON WOULD BE A "MONEY TREE"

BUT THAT WAS FAR FROM THE TRUTH

SHE RAN AWAY FROM THREE DIFFERENT EMPLOYERS

WHO OVERWORKED HER, ABUSED HER PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY AND FORCED HER TO LIVE IN ABJECT CONDITIONS

SHE HAS IMPORTANT REMINDERS TAPED TO HER DESK

You are awesome
Thank you for your contribution
Thank you for your dedication
You are valuable
You are a hard worker
We acknowledge your great impact
No great achiever ever those who
Succeeded with

THIS TYPE OF ABUSE WOULD NEVER BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE KAFALA SYSTEM

THEY CAN DO WHATEVER THEY LIKE TO US, AS THE CONTRACTS DON'T EVEN MENTION WORKING HOURS, HOLIDAYS OR SALARIES

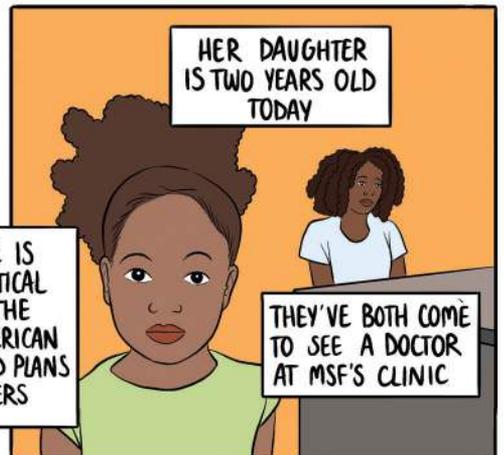
SOME OF OUR PATIENTS DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHICH COUNTRY THEY WERE IN

THEY END UP COMPLETELY CONFUSED AND DISORIENTATED

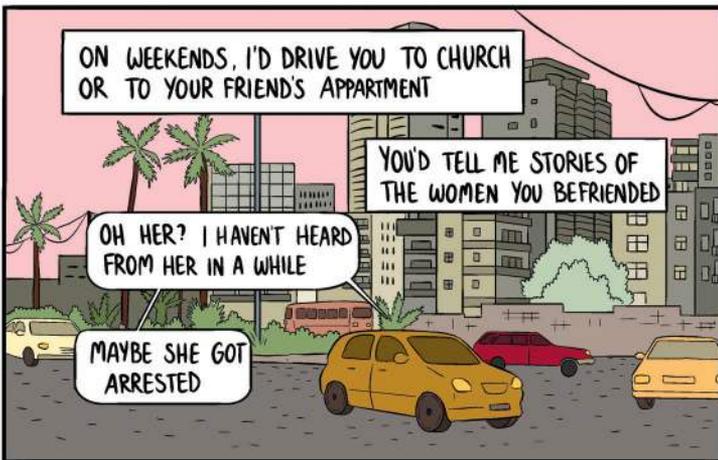
BECAUSE THEY NEVER GET TO LEAVE THE EMPLOYER'S HOUSE

RULA'S FINAL EMPLOYER CONFISCATED HER PASSPORT WHEN RULA RAN AWAY. THE EMPLOYER DEMANDED US \$1000 TO RETURN IT. RULA PAID HER AND ASKED FOR A RECEIPT

I MADE HER WRITE DOWN "RULA PAID ME"

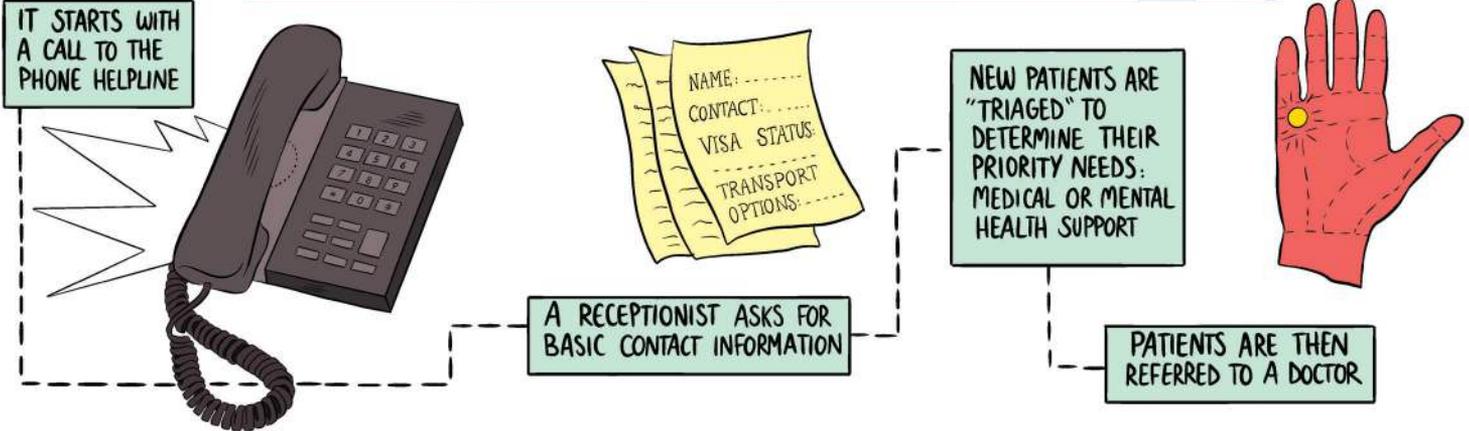


2.





SHE TALKS ME THROUGH THE JOURNEY TAKEN BY PEOPLE WHO SEEK HELP FROM THE CLINIC





WHEN WE SET UP THE CLINIC, WE THOUGHT THE MAIN FOCUS WOULD BE MEDICAL NEEDS IN THE MIGRANT COMMUNITY

GHADEER



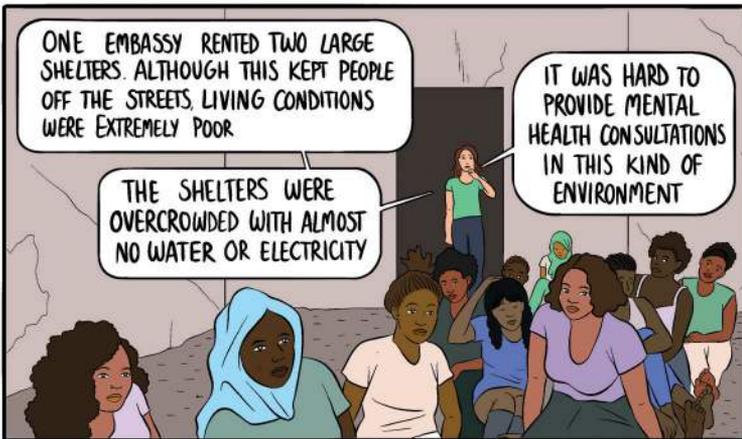
THEN THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS HIT AND THE PANDEMIC BEGAN. EMPLOYERS WERE DROPPING OFF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN FRONT OF THEIR EMBASSIES

AS IF THEY WERE THROWAWAY OBJECTS



MOST SLEPT ON THE STREETS. WE STARTED GETTING MORE AND MORE CALLS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCIES

FINDING SHELTER FOR THEM BECAME A MATTER OF URGENCY



ONE EMBASSY RENTED TWO LARGE SHELTERS. ALTHOUGH THIS KEPT PEOPLE OFF THE STREETS, LIVING CONDITIONS WERE EXTREMELY POOR

THE SHELTERS WERE OVERCROWDED WITH ALMOST NO WATER OR ELECTRICITY

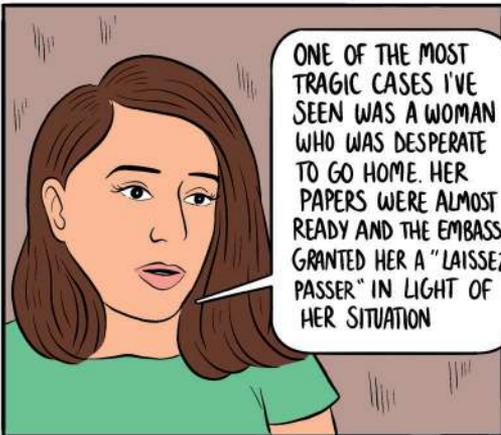
IT WAS HARD TO PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTATIONS IN THIS KIND OF ENVIRONMENT



WHEN THEY COULD, THE EMBASSIES SENT THE MIGRANT WORKERS BACK TO THEIR COUNTRIES. BUT THERE WERE TWO MAIN OBSTACLES

MOST HAD NO PASSPORTS OR TRAVEL DOCUMENTS AS THEY HAD BEEN CONFISCATED BY THEIR EMPLOYERS

MOST COULD NOT AFFORD TO PAY THE FINE FOR OVERSTAYING THEIR VISAS - A DIRECT RESULT OF BEING STRIPPED OF THEIR PASSPORTS



ONE OF THE MOST TRAGIC CASES I'VE SEEN WAS A WOMAN WHO WAS DESPERATE TO GO HOME. HER PAPERS WERE ALMOST READY AND THE EMBASSY GRANTED HER A "LAISSEZ-PASSER" IN LIGHT OF HER SITUATION



BUT WHEN SHE REACHED THE AIRPORT SHE WAS ARRESTED BECAUSE SIX YEARS EARLIER HER EMPLOYER HAD FILED A COMPLAINT AGAINST HER FOR STEALING MONEY



THIS IS COMMON PRACTICE. IF A MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKER RUNS AWAY, HER EMPLOYER ABNEGATES RESPONSIBILITY FOR HER BY CLAIMING SHE WAS A THIEF

THIS WOMAN SPENT THREE MONTHS IN JAIL WITH HER CHILD



WE HAD TO DO SESSIONS WITH HER BEHIND BARS. SHE WAS COMPLETELY DISORIENTATED

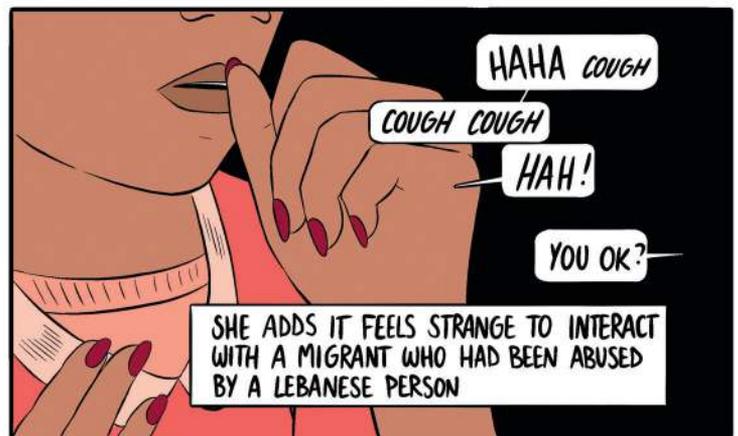
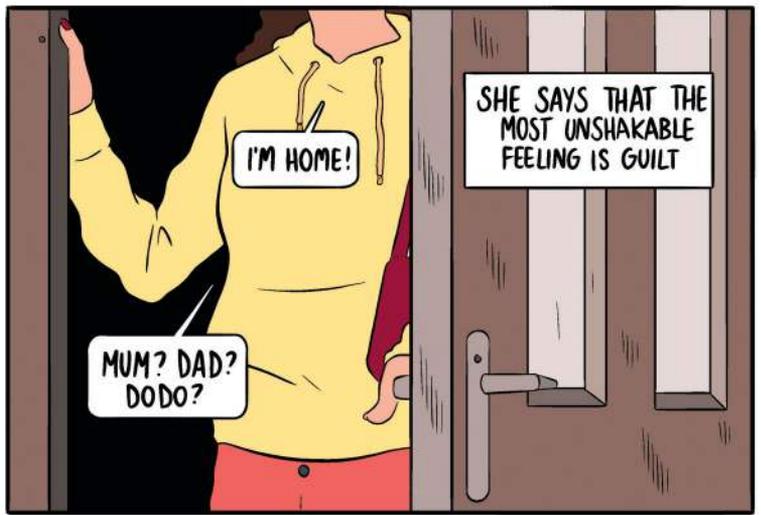
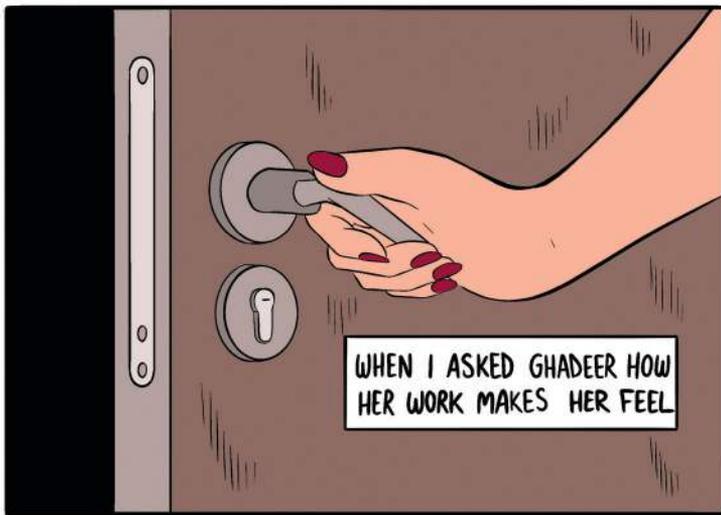
EVENTUALLY, THE EMBASSY INTERVENED AND SENT HER HOME



SOME WOMEN HAVE SUCH SERIOUS MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES THAT THEY CAN'T EVEN BOARD THE PLANE

THE TWO MAIN CAUSES OF DEATH IN THE MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKER COMMUNITY ARE REPORTEDLY SUICIDE AND "FALLING FROM HIGH PLACES"

3.





CATALIA ANSWERS THE CALLS TO THE MSF HELPLINE

I WAS 15 WHEN I ARRIVED IN LEBANON



I CAME HERE THINKING I WAS VISITING MY SISTER...

...WHO WAS A DOMESTIC WORKER HERSELF



IN FACT HER EMPLOYER HAD SET ME UP, WITH THE HELP OF MY MOTHER AND SISTER. THEY EVEN CHANGED MY AGE ON MY PASSPORT SO IT WOULD BE LEGAL FOR ME TO WORK

WHEN CATALIA ARRIVED, A DRIVER PICKED HER UP FROM THE AIRPORT AND TOOK HER TO THE HOME OF HER SISTER'S EMPLOYER



FOR 15 DAYS, WHILE PRETENDING TO SHOW HER AROUND, HER SISTER WAS ACTUALLY TRAINING HER UP FOR HER NEW JOB

BY THE TIME CATALIA REALISED WHAT WAS HAPPENING, SHE'D BEEN PUT TO WORK AT THE EMPLOYER'S BROTHER'S HOUSE

SHE WAS THERE EIGHT MONTHS BEFORE RUNNING AWAY. HE'D BEEN HARASSING HER



MY OWN FAMILY LED ME INTO A TRAP. NO ONE CARED THAT I WAS UNDERAGE

I CAME HERE AND MY LIFE WAS RUINED

IN FACT, IT'S STILL RUINED, BECAUSE I HAVEN'T LEFT THE COUNTRY SINCE 2012

I WAS FORCED TO GROW UP HERE



AFTER THAT, SHE JUGGLED JOBS - AS A BARISTA, AN AT-HOME CARER, A DOMESTIC WORKER ... BUT IT WAS ALWAYS DIFFICULT GETTING HIRED BECAUSE HER PAPERS TIED HER TO HER FIRST EMPLOYER

PAY ME AND I'LL MAKE YOU LEGAL!



THEN SHE GOT PREGNANT BY HER LEBANESE BOYFRIEND.

SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HER SON IN SOUR - THE CHEAPEST HOSPITAL, AS WELL AS THE ONLY ONE WILLING TO TURN A BLIND EYE TO HER EXPIRED PASSPORT

IT IS TECHNICALLY ILLEGAL TO GET PREGNANT UNDER THE KAFALA SYSTEM



THINGS GOT CHAOTIC WHEN SHE DECIDED TO LEAVE HER BOYFRIEND HE THREATENED HER WITH VIOLENCE IF SHE TOOK HER SON

HE'S STILL ISSUING THREATS TO THIS DAY



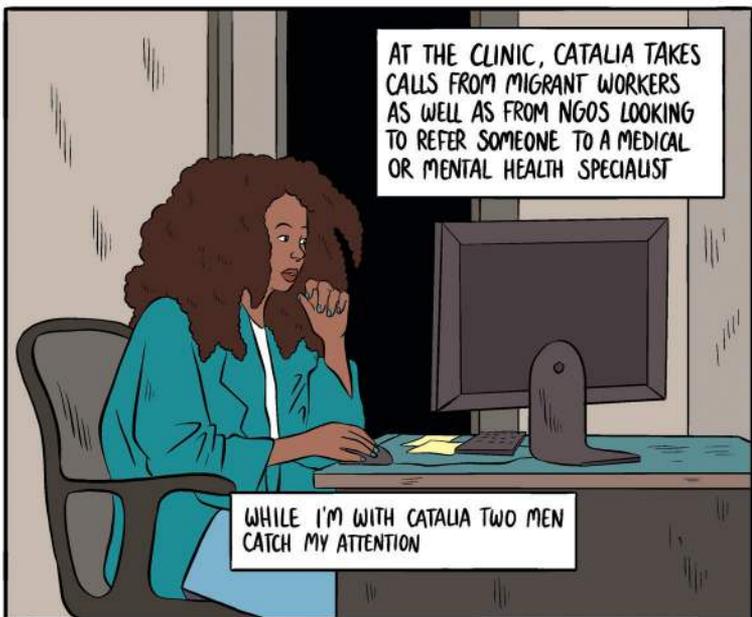
IN LEBANON, A WOMAN CAN'T OFFICIALLY CLAIM HER CHILD WITHOUT THE FATHER'S CONSENT

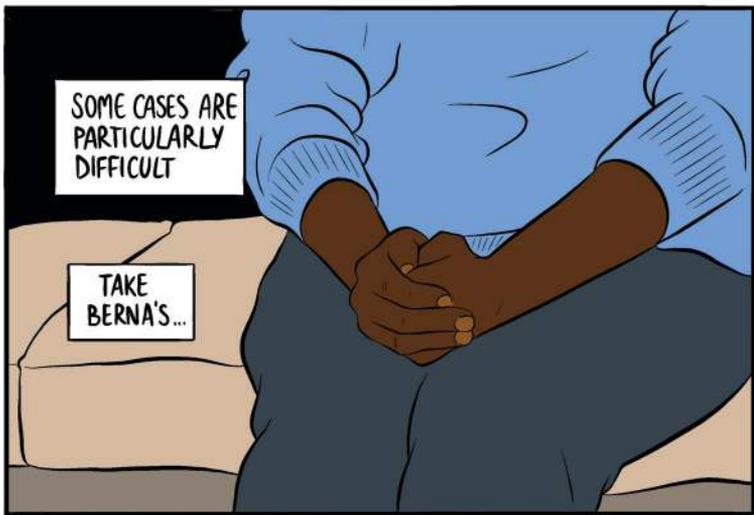
IMAGINE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A BLACK FEMALE MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKER



CATALIA FOUND SUPPORT THROUGH NGOS AND MIGRANT COMMUNITY CENTRES SUCH EGNA LEGNA

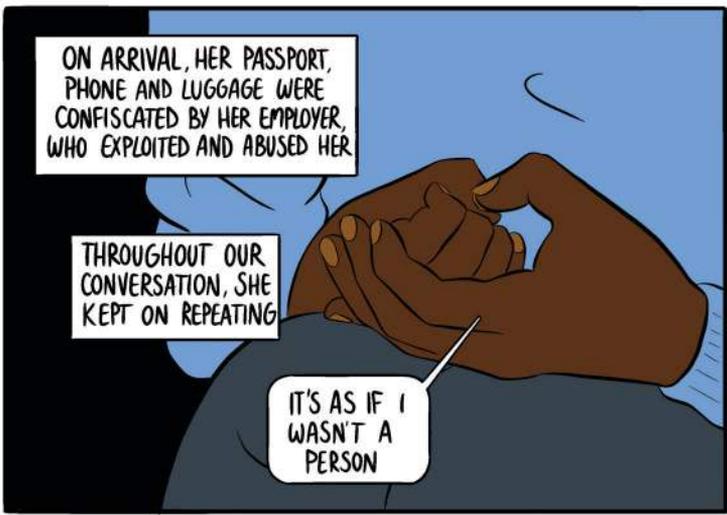
THESE EMPOWERED HER, EDUCATED HER ABOUT HER RIGHTS AND LED HER DOWN THE ROUTE OF ACTIVISM





SOME CASES ARE PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT

TAKE BERNA'S...



ON ARRIVAL, HER PASSPORT, PHONE AND LUGGAGE WERE CONFISCATED BY HER EMPLOYER, WHO EXPLOITED AND ABUSED HER

THROUGHOUT OUR CONVERSATION, SHE KEPT ON REPEATING

IT'S AS IF I WASN'T A PERSON



FOR MORE THAN A YEAR, SHE WORKED IN A HOUSE WHERE SHE WAS OVERWORKED, ISOLATED, BEATEN, ABUSED AND HALF-STARVED

SHE DIDN'T HAVE A ROOM TO SLEEP IN. INSTEAD SHE SLEPT ON THE BALCONY



SHE WASN'T ALLOWED TO CONTACT HER FAMILY. AS THINGS GOT WORSE, BERNA CONTEMPLATED SUICIDE

ONE DAY, HER EMPLOYER KICKED HER IN THE HEAD

AFTERWARDS, SHE REMEMBERS IRONING CLOTHES AND BEING SCARED SHE'D STAIN THEM WITH HER BLOOD AND BE PUNISHED



SHE ESCAPED WITH THE HELP OF A NEIGHBOUR.

BUT SHE HAD TO LEAVE HER PASSPORT AND BELONGINGS BEHIND

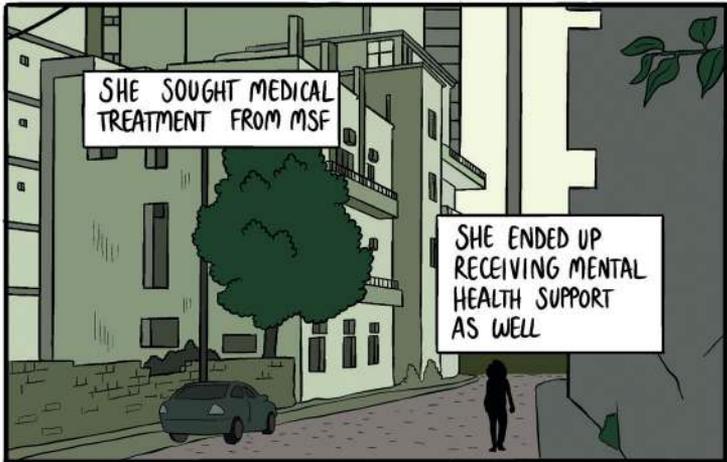
THE EMPLOYER FACED NO CONSEQUENCES



THE ONLY THING SHE'D MANAGED TO KEEP WAS HER MOTHER'S PHONE NUMBER

SHE CALLED HER IMMEDIATELY

I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD!



SHE SOUGHT MEDICAL TREATMENT FROM MSF

SHE ENDED UP RECEIVING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AS WELL



AS WE SPEAK, I CAN SEE HOW REASSURING SHE FINDS THE PRESENCE OF MARYAM AND LARA, THE SOCIAL WORKERS WHO WERE INVOLVED IN HER CASE

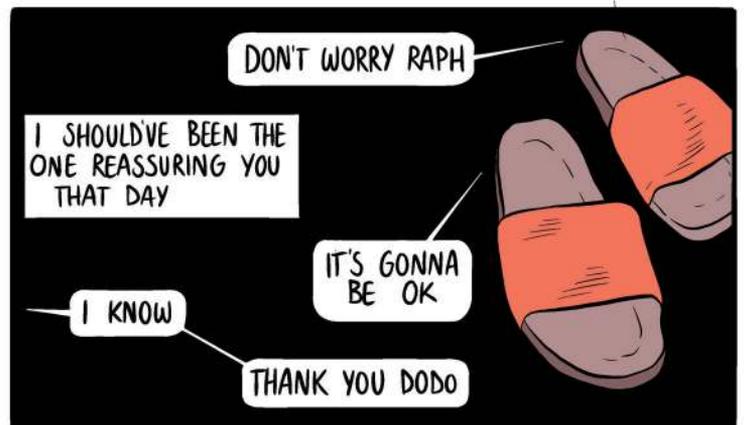
THEY KEEP REPEATING

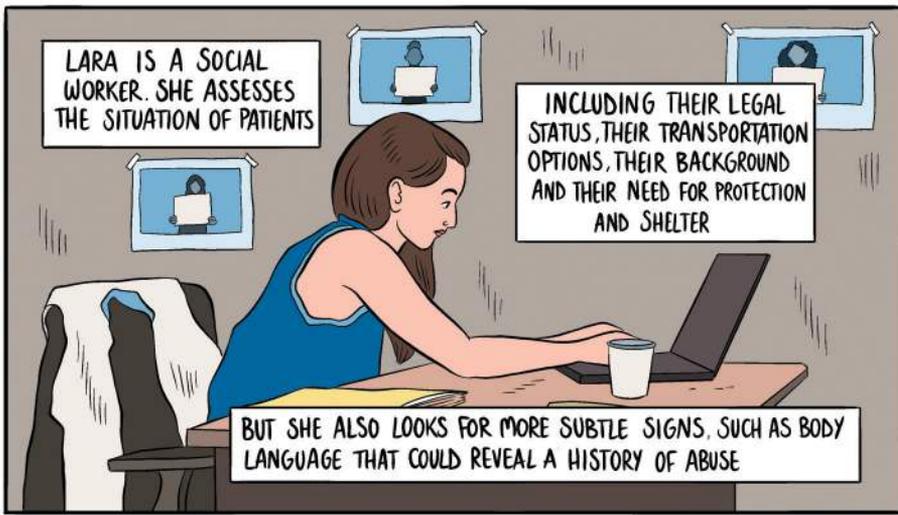
WHAT YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH IS SO HARD

NO ONE SHOULD EVER EXPERIENCE THAT

I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE TO SAY

4.





LARA IS A SOCIAL WORKER. SHE ASSESSES THE SITUATION OF PATIENTS

INCLUDING THEIR LEGAL STATUS, THEIR TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS, THEIR BACKGROUND AND THEIR NEED FOR PROTECTION AND SHELTER

BUT SHE ALSO LOOKS FOR MORE SUBTLE SIGNS, SUCH AS BODY LANGUAGE THAT COULD REVEAL A HISTORY OF ABUSE



IF THE STORIES WE HEAR WERE ABOUT ABUSE INFLICTED ON A WHITE PERSON BY ANOTHER WHITE PERSON, THEY'D BE SEEN AS A BREACH OF HUMAN RIGHTS!



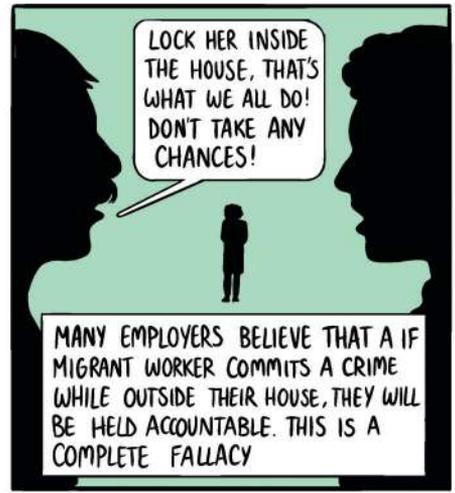
AND BECAUSE IT OFFERS NO LEGAL PROTECTION TO THE WORKER

THE ABUSE GOES UNPUNISHED AND THE EMPLOYERS ARE NOT HELD ACCOUNTABLE

IT'S EASY FOR THEM TO GET AWAY WITH IT



WHILE SOME INSTANCES OF ABUSE ARE DUE TO RACISM, OTHERS STEM FROM SIMPLE IGNORANCE

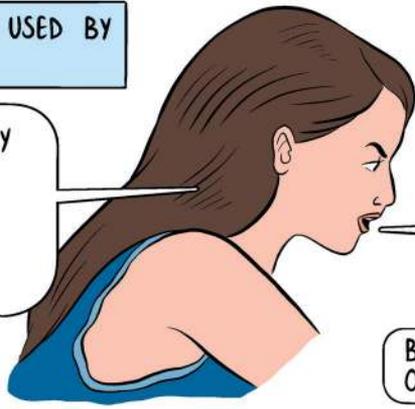


LOCK HER INSIDE THE HOUSE, THAT'S WHAT WE ALL DO! DON'T TAKE ANY CHANCES!

MANY EMPLOYERS BELIEVE THAT IF A MIGRANT WORKER COMMITS A CRIME WHILE OUTSIDE THEIR HOUSE, THEY WILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE. THIS IS A COMPLETE FALLACY

LARA HAS AN INTERESTING TAKE ON THE WORDS USED BY EMPLOYERS TO DESCRIBE MIGRANT WORKERS.

FOR FEAR OF SOUNDING RACIST, PEOPLE OFTEN SAY **HELPER**



BUT SHE ISN'T **HELPING** SHE CAME HERE TO **WORK**

BY USING THIS TERM, WE REPLACE THE CONCEPT OF LABOUR WITH ONE OF BENEVOLENCE



FOR ME, IT'S NOT ABOUT ABOLISHING THE KAFALA SYSTEM COMPLETELY - THAT WOULD TAKE AWAY THE POSSIBILITY OF MIGRANTS TO COMING TO WORK HERE LEGALLY

IT SIMPLY NEEDS TO BE REGULATED WITHIN LABOUR LAW LIKE ANY OTHER FORMS OF WORK



OF COURSE, NOT ALL EMPLOYERS ARE VIOLENT OR EXPLOITATIVE.

BUT WE OFTEN HEAR THEM SAY

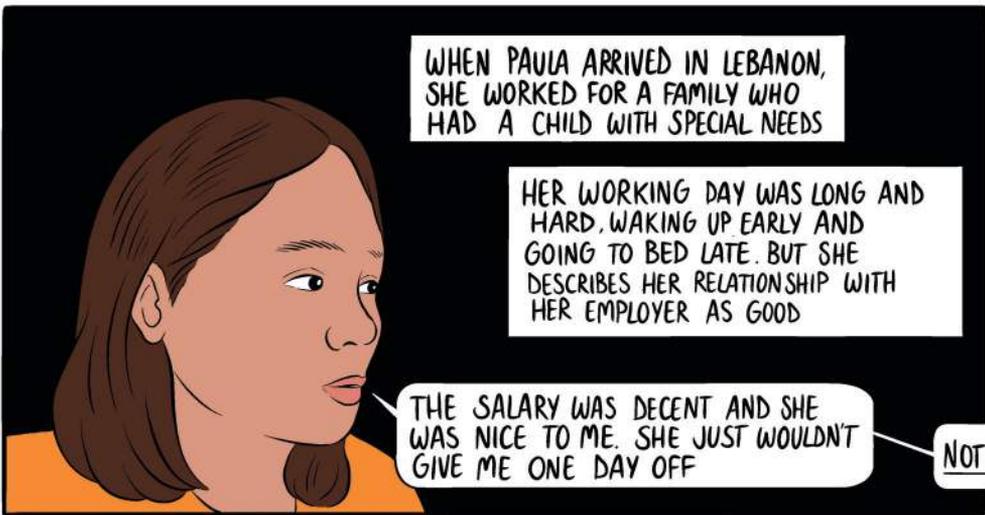
SHE EATS

DRINKS

HAS A ROOF OVER HER HEAD!

IN THIS CRISIS!

WHICH ARE THE MOST BASIC OF HUMAN RIGHTS



WHEN PAULA ARRIVED IN LEBANON, SHE WORKED FOR A FAMILY WHO HAD A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

HER WORKING DAY WAS LONG AND HARD, WAKING UP EARLY AND GOING TO BED LATE. BUT SHE DESCRIBES HER RELATIONSHIP WITH HER EMPLOYER AS GOOD

THE SALARY WAS DECENT AND SHE WAS NICE TO ME. SHE JUST WOULDN'T GIVE ME ONE DAY OFF

NOT ONE

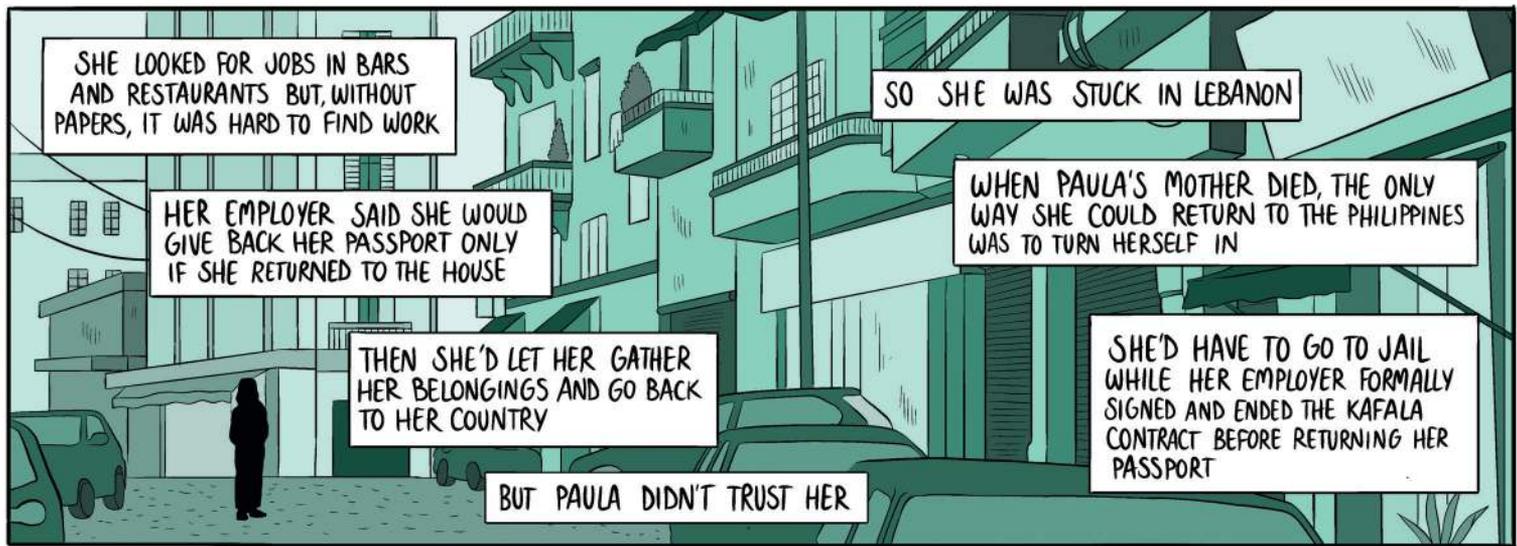


PAULA ASKED AGAIN AND AGAIN TO BE ALLOWED SOME TIME OUTSIDE THE HOUSE

HER EMPLOYER SAID NO

I WAS JUST SO EXHAUSTED

I RAN AWAY WITH JUST MY CLOTHES - I HAD TO LEAVE MY PASSPORT BEHIND



SHE LOOKED FOR JOBS IN BARS AND RESTAURANTS BUT, WITHOUT PAPERS, IT WAS HARD TO FIND WORK

SO SHE WAS STUCK IN LEBANON

HER EMPLOYER SAID SHE WOULD GIVE BACK HER PASSPORT ONLY IF SHE RETURNED TO THE HOUSE

WHEN PAULA'S MOTHER DIED, THE ONLY WAY SHE COULD RETURN TO THE PHILIPPINES WAS TO TURN HERSELF IN

THEN SHE'D LET HER GATHER HER BELONGINGS AND GO BACK TO HER COUNTRY

SHE'D HAVE TO GO TO JAIL WHILE HER EMPLOYER FORMALLY SIGNED AND ENDED THE KAFALA CONTRACT BEFORE RETURNING HER PASSPORT

BUT PAULA DIDN'T TRUST HER



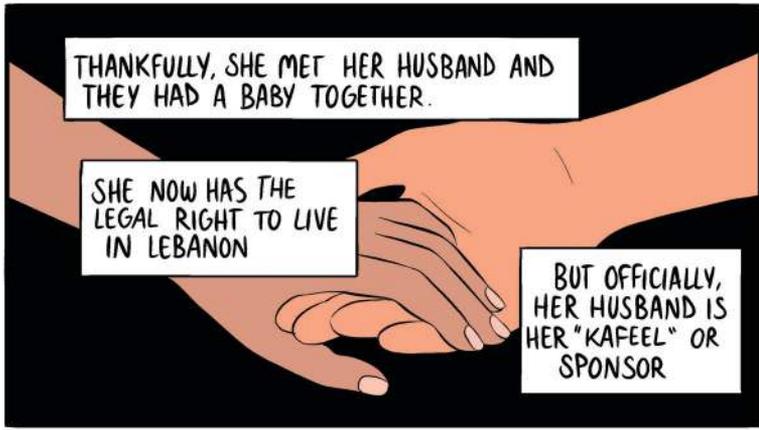
WHEN SHE CONTACTED HER EMBASSY, SHE WAS TOLD SHE'D HAVE TO PAY FOR HER RETURN TICKET, ON TOP OF THE FEE FOR OVERSTAYING HER VISA, WHICH CAME TO US\$600

I COULDN'T AFFORD HALF OF THAT!



SHE ENDED UP GOING INTO HIDING FOR 10 YEARS, WITH NO LEGAL PAPERS

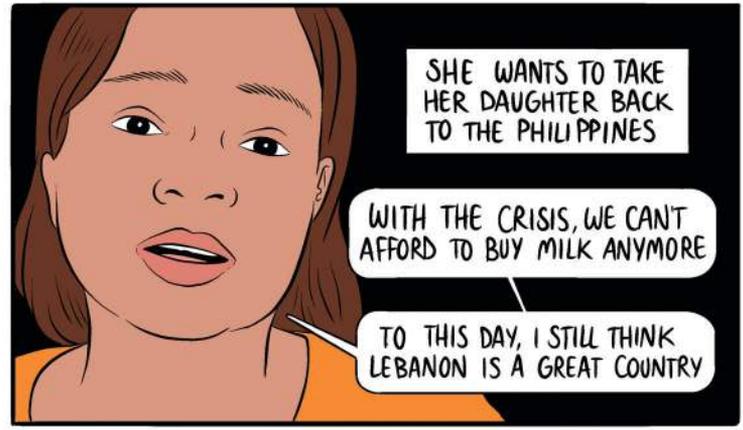
SINCE THE REVOLUTION AND THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS, LIFE HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY HARD



THANKFULLY, SHE MET HER HUSBAND AND THEY HAD A BABY TOGETHER.

SHE NOW HAS THE LEGAL RIGHT TO LIVE IN LEBANON

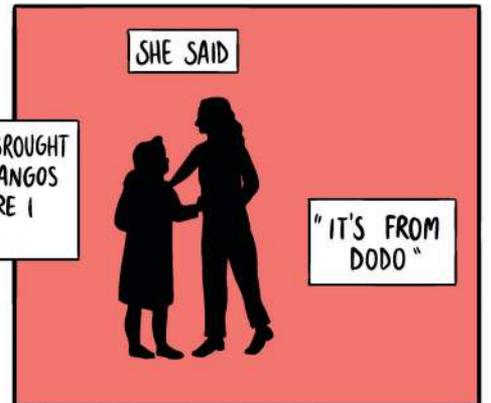
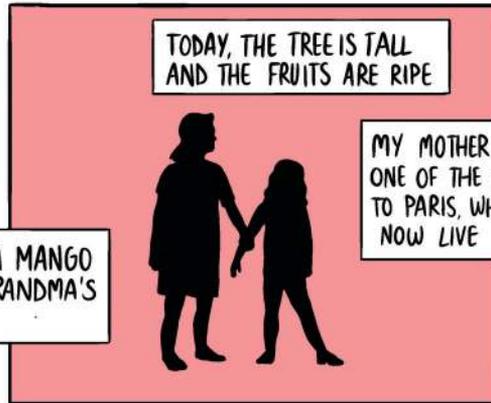
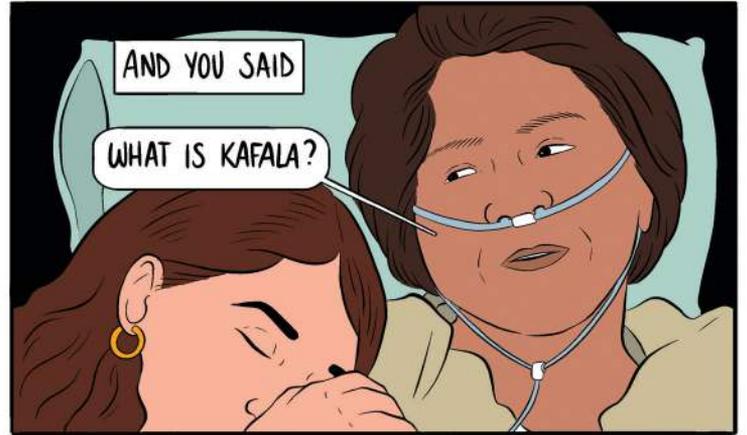
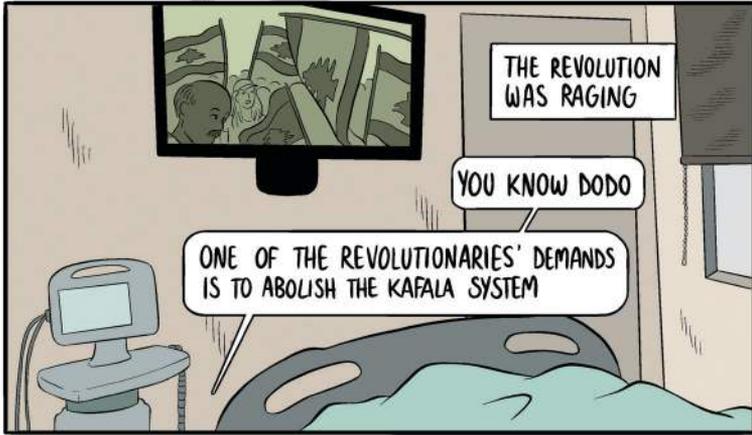
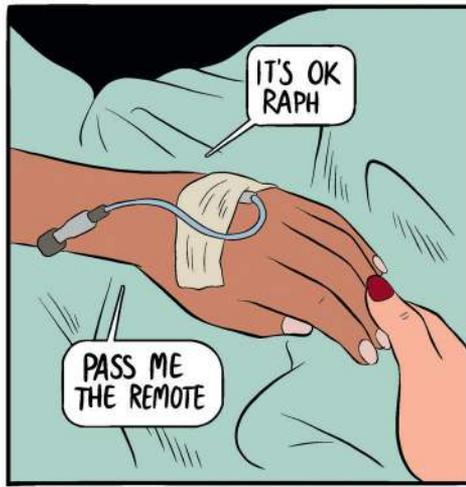
BUT OFFICIALLY, HER HUSBAND IS HER "KAHEEL" OR SPONSOR



SHE WANTS TO TAKE HER DAUGHTER BACK TO THE PHILIPPINES

WITH THE CRISIS, WE CAN'T AFFORD TO BUY MILK ANYMORE

TO THIS DAY, I STILL THINK LEBANON IS A GREAT COUNTRY



CREDITS

Illustrations and story by Raphaëlle Macaron.

www.raphaellemacaron.com

This book wouldn't have existed without the engagement of the MSF staff and patients who accepted to participate in the project and trust me with their stories.

Special thanks to Melek Zertal and Joseph Matick for their precious help.

Designed by Raphaëlle Macaron and Sunra Thompson





Thank you, Dodo.