

# Portraits of Lebanon's domestic workers confront social prejudices

---

**Lebanese artist Chaza Charafeddine explores the dreams and discrimination of domestic workers by making them dress up as their heroes.**

**November 12, 2018**

**URL: [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/lebanese-artist-chaza-charafeddine-explored-the-dreams-and-d.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/lebanese-artist-chaza-charafeddine-explored-the-dreams-and-d.html)**

**Author: Sam Brennan**

---

“If you are a maid in Lebanon, everyone sees you as inferior. Others don't think that you may have dreams of your own,” Hana, a 23-year-old domestic worker from Ethiopia, said.

But, for an entire month, Hana felt herself turn into a “star,” when she became one of the 10 models in a photography exhibition titled “Maidames” at Beirut's Agial Art Gallery.

The exhibition, by Lebanese artist Chaza Charafeddine, portrayed 10 domestic workers in clothes and poses of the figures they admire, from Madonna and Shakira to Jackie Kennedy. The exhibition, with its tongue-in-cheek play of words with “maids” and “madams,” meaning female employers, aimed to challenge the societal prejudices around those employed under the controversial kafala, the sponsorship system to monitor migrant workers.

The figures the domestic workers were portrayed as, such as Marilyn Monroe and Marlene Dietrich, were held in reverence not only by the domestic workers themselves but by their employers, the so-called “madams,” Charafeddine told Al-Monitor.

This resulted in an exhibition that explored the complex interplay of power, hierarchy, discrimination and culture between a domestic worker and her employer.

Cameroonian domestic worker Vera dressed as Jackie Kennedy in the "Maidames" exhibition, photo by Chaza Charafeddine, 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

Charafeddine said, "We never talk about [a domestic worker] as a woman, how they feel, [and] what they think."

The exhibition, which was on display Oct. 10 through Nov. 10, also provided a platform for domestic workers to express themselves in a medium usually inaccessible to them.

"I was very happy, you know. I love to be photographed!" Hana told Al-Monitor on condition her full name not be used. "I love the arts, especially fashion. That's why I was so happy. You know how you dream of doing something? That's how it felt!"

Hana was the subject of multiple portraits at the exhibition, one of which was "Girl with a Pearl Earring" by Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer, a work believed to be of a servant and as such depicted in a play, novel and film.

"This [photograph] is a remake of the maid star," Charafeddine said, "because there is no [other] painting or picture of a maid that has become this famous. It is always a princess or duchess."

She added, "[The employers] were a little apologetic. They came to me saying, '[The exhibition is] beautiful, [I am] so happy for them. They must be very happy to do this.' Then they [continued], 'You know I am very good to my maid, I give them my clothes.'"

Comments such as these highlight the tensions around migrant workers in Lebanon, employed under the Kafala system.

The Kafala system, practiced in many Middle Eastern countries, refers to foreign workers being sponsored by individuals, often an employer, on whom the worker's visa and legal status is dependent. Many of these migrant workers end up working as a servant for a single family.

Rahaf Dandash, coordinator at the Migrant Community Center, told Al-Monitor, "The Kafala system limits migrant workers in Lebanon by tying them to a sponsor ... a person who has full power and full control over your existence, your movement, your freedom. This is why we call the kafala system a system of [modern] slavery."

The kafala system is not a law, but a practice that affects some 200,000 domestic workers in Lebanon, the majority of whom are from

## Ethiopia, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

Such structural discrimination has led to social inequalities, according to Dandash. She said, “[Domestic workers in Lebanon] face racism on a daily basis from the small to big things. ... Many domestic workers are abused — psychologically, verbally, physically and sexually [with no legal recourse].” Dandash explained that two domestic workers die every week [in Lebanon], either from suicide, murder or under suspicious circumstances.

Due to these conditions, domestic workers and activists have protested the kafala system demanding governmental and institutional change, through legal protection and government recognition of Lebanon's Domestic Workers Union.

While civil society groups do not use the word maid to describe domestic workers, because of its “dehumanizing” connotations, Dandash said, “[Maidames'] is the first time we have seen domestic workers as the main characters of an exhibition. ... It highlights racism and the kafala system in a different way. Through these photos, you have to look at [domestic workers] as human beings.”

Charafeddine seconded this sentiment, saying, “We never talk about [domestic workers] as women — how they feel [and] what they think.”

While her exhibition focused on the interpersonal relationships between workers and their employers, she also highlighted the pervasive structural exploitation of domestic workers by their employers.

“One is in a powerful position, the other is dominated. It is difficult, it can't be equal — ever,” Charafeddine added. “[The domestic worker] is not equal under the law. Regardless of whether she is right or wrong, she is always wrong. Her madam can kill her, but when the madam says, ‘No, she jumped from the balcony,’ the police will believe her. The worker knows very well that she is not protected.”

---

©2018 Al-Monitor. All rights reserved.

Reprinted with permission