

Dual Abandonment as Structural Violence in Intimate Labour: Migrant domestic workers in conflict zones

Sifat Aiman

Abstract

The abandonment of migrant domestic workers in conflict zones constitutes a distinct form of structural violence. This short article offers an initial exploration of *dual abandonment*—the violence produced when intimate labour relations break down as employers withdraw support and states fail to protect during armed conflict. Drawing on Johan Galtung’s framework of structural violence and foregrounding intimate labour as a key site of harm, it argues that armed conflict does not create this violence but exposes the gendered structural violence already embedded in care labour and migration governance.

Suggested citation: S Aiman, ‘Dual Abandonment as Structural Violence in Intimate Labour: Migrant domestic workers in conflict zones’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 27, 2026, pp. 153-159, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201226278>

Introduction

Armed conflict is often visibilised through extreme violence such as bombings, destruction, and mass displacement. However, it also interacts with existing labour and migration systems to create less visible and more normalised harms for migrant domestic workers in sites of conflict. Migrant domestic workers, predominantly women from the Global South, occupy a distinctive position as providers of *intimate labour*—work performed within private households where access to housing, mobility, and legal status often depends on the employer. Notwithstanding labour law frameworks, their safety and security are largely contingent on the continuity of these employer–worker relationships that are often framed as ‘familial ties’. When conflict disrupts these social relations, workers experience a distinctive form of harm, conceptualised here as ‘dual abandonment’: a two-stage process in which employers withdraw support, followed by states’ failure to provide protection.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY). Under the CC-BY license, the public is free to share, adapt, and make commercial use of the work. Users must always give proper attribution to the authors and the Anti-Trafficking Review.

Cases of abandonment have been reported during armed conflicts in Libya,¹ Syria,² and, more recently, the 2024 Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon.³ However, rather than through visible violence, migrant workers' harm in armed conflicts arises instead through the withdrawal of employer responsibility and state protection. These absences remain outside of anti-trafficking thresholds. Dual abandonment excludes cases where basic protections remain available or harm is effectively mitigated by state intervention.

While abandonment occurs across sectors, migrant domestic workers experience distinct risks due to the live-in nature of their work and the resulting dependence on their employers. Crucially, dual abandonment is not simply a governance failure but a form of violence that is produced through the intimate labour relation itself, which becomes particularly pronounced in armed conflict. Using Johan Galtung's theory of 'structural violence'⁴ as a theoretical lens, this article argues that armed conflict does not create this violence but instead exposes gendered power relations embedded in care labour and migration governance. The analysis combines academic literature, documented accounts from international organisations, and journalistic investigations.

Dual Abandonment as Structural Violence in Intimate Labour: A Galtungian Analysis

Dual abandonment, as conceptualised here, is a distinct manifestation of structural violence arising from the organisation of intimate labour under conflict. Drawing on Johan Galtung, this article shows how the dual abandonment of migrant

¹ MRRORS, 'Migrant Workers Caught up in Libya and Iraq Conflicts', MRRORS, 14 August 2014, <https://www.mrrors.org/2014/08/migrant-workers-caught-up-in-libya-and-iraq-conflicts>; Voice of America, 'Thousands of Migrant Workers Stranded in Conflict-Ridden Libya', *VOA News*, 7 June 2011, <https://www.voanews.com/a/thousands-of-migrant-workers-stranded-in-libya-123459619/158265.html>.

² C Healy, *Targeting Vulnerabilities: The Impact of the Syrian War and Refugee Situation on Trafficking in Persons – A Study of Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna, 2015, pp. 177–179.

³ A Ekanayake, 'How Prepared is Sri Lanka's Foreign Employment Sector for a Sudden War in the Middle East?', *The Migrant*, 6 October 2025, <https://themigrant.data.blog/how-prepared-is-sri-lankas-foreign-employment-sector-for-a-sudden-war-in-the-middle-east/>; E Madi and J Campbell, 'Lebanon's Migrant Workers Stuck in Limbo as Thousands Flee Conflict', *Reuters*, 5 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-migrant-workers-stuck-limbo-thousands-flee-conflict-2024-10-05>.

⁴ J Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 6, issue 3, 1969, pp. 167–191, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>.

domestic workers constitutes a patterned form of such violence.

During Israel's 2024 bombardment of southern Lebanon, a Kenyan caregiver was reportedly locked inside her employers' home after they fled; the intensity of shelling left her so traumatised that she could not recall how many days she remained alone.⁵ This account reflects Galtung's theory that violence can extend beyond bodily injury.⁶ It can also be psychological, taking the form of isolation, fear, uncertainty, helplessness, loss of agency, and deep insecurity. More broadly, it shows how harm occurs not only through direct force but through the withdrawal of support. When employers abandon their workers while fleeing armed conflict, workers lose housing, income, and legal status, which restricts their ability to change employers or seek safety. For example, during Yemen's 2011 uprising, Somali and Ethiopian cleaners dismissed without severance pay became jobless overnight as Yemen's labour law required written contracts for compensation.⁷ This highlights how states and employers extract care when workers are useful but deny them safety once they become a 'burden'. As Galtung suggests, this withdrawal is violent because it systematically suppresses life chances and prevents an individual from reaching their full potential.⁸

However, this harm transcends individual choices; it is built into the migration regime that binds workers to employers and denies them state protection. Specifically, dual abandonment is not an occasional failure but a patterned form of structural violence, built into the nature of intimate labour that is merely exposed during armed conflict.

Intimate Labour as a Site of Structural Violence

Migrant domestic work is a common form of intimate labour, as it entails both entry into the intimate sphere of the home and awareness of its inhabitants' habits.⁹ Workers often live and work in the same space, which blurs the distinction

⁵ M Khalil and E Shalaby, 'My Employers Locked Me in the House and Left When the Bombings Started', *BBC News*, 10 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn7y8pz4jrvo>.

⁶ Galtung, p. 169.

⁷ N.A., 'Unrest Leaves Foreign Female Casual Workers High and Dry', *The New Humanitarian*, 19 April 2011, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2011/04/19/unrest-leaves-foreign-female-casual-workers-high-and-dry>.

⁸ Galtung, p. 170.

⁹ E Boris and R S Parreñas, 'Introduction', in E Boris and R S Parreñas (eds.), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Redwood City, 2010, pp. 1–12, p. 5.

between their status as employees and as residents of the household.¹⁰ Work responsibilities also extend beyond clearly defined tasks into expectations of loyalty, availability, and emotional engagement. These expectations are rooted in the gendered nature of domestic work—women are positioned as naturally caring, adaptable, and self-sacrificing—a framing that obscures the labour involved and normalises informality. For a migrant domestic worker, access to shelter, mobility, communication, and legal status is often tied to a single employer who may act simultaneously as supervisor, landlord, and migration sponsor. This dependency is institutionalised in systems such as the *kafala* regime in parts of the Middle East, where legal status is directly linked to the employer and workers face severe restrictions on changing jobs, leaving the country, or accessing independent protection.

These intersecting conditions produce a distinct form of economic dependency, relational constraint, and spatial confinement for migrant domestic workers. For them, the workplace, home, and legal presence in the host country converge in a single physical location—the employer’s household. Within this confined space, relations are often framed by a discourse of fictitious kinship, in which workers are sometimes described as ‘one of the family’.¹¹ The fragility of this relationship becomes visible when employers withdraw or flee, as the household is abruptly transformed from a site of care into a space of danger, where workers are immobilised. In this way, fictitious kinship reveals its instrumental function—workers are family and part of households only while they are useful. When a crisis strikes, they are abandoned without accountability, revealing how ‘family-like’ intimacy serves as a tool for exploitation. Unlike in other sectors, the collapse of the employer-worker relationship in care work simultaneously leaves workers unemployed, displaced, and immobilised. The abandonment during armed conflict makes visible how proximity and dependency are mobilised to extract labour, thus exposing the structural violence inherent within intimate labour relations.

Fragmented Responsibility, Intimate Labour, and the Governance of Abandonment

Responsibility for migrant domestic workers is fragmented across employers, as well as receiving and sending countries. Employers do not merely evade responsibility towards workers but deliberately abscond with passports¹² that

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; P Nadasen, ‘Power, Intimacy, and Contestation: Dorothy Bolden and Domestic Worker Organizing in Atlanta in the 1960s’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 204–216, p. 207.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² M Edwards and J Sousa, ‘Lebanon’s Migrant Workers Left Stranded and Homeless by Israeli Attacks’, *The New Humanitarian*, 26 September 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/09/26/lebanons-migrant-workers-left-stranded-homeless-israeli-attacks>.

they routinely confiscated during peacetime,¹³ thereby complicating repatriation and prolonging the process indefinitely.

The failure of sending and receiving countries to protect migrant domestic workers is further amplified during armed conflict. Receiving states apply a hierarchy of protection based on citizenship, race, and geopolitical value. For example, during Israel's 2024 airstrikes in Lebanon, migrant domestic workers from Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, and Bangladesh were reportedly turned away from shelters, with more than seventy women expelled from a Tripoli school under a ministerial order because they were 'not Lebanese'.¹⁴ A similar incident was documented in March 2026, when African migrant domestic workers in Lebanon were denied access to shelters, excluded from emergency assistance, and abandoned by employers, forcing many to sleep outdoors or rely on informal networks for survival.¹⁵ This organised irresponsibility exemplifies structural violence where harm occurs because no actor is legally obliged to protect, resulting in systemic vulnerability even without a direct physical attack or an identifiable perpetrator.¹⁶ From an intimate labour perspective, this fragmentation reflects the selective construction of family boundaries. Migrant domestic workers are treated as 'inside' the family for labour purposes (care, intimacy, co-residence) but 'outside' the family for protection purposes (evacuation, survival, rescue).

This exclusion is compounded by sending states that ensure citizenship yet lack the mechanisms to enforce protection abroad. Specifically, there is documented failure to regulate recruitment agencies, ensure safe migration, or facilitate timely repatriation. Evacuation and repatriation are further complicated by resource constraints. First, a lack of consular presence creates protection gaps, as seen

¹³ R Jureidini and N Moukarbel, 'Female Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Lebanon: A Case of "Contract Slavery"?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 30, issue 4, 2004, pp. 581–607, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830410001699478>; N.A., 'Saudi Arabia: Migrant Domestic Workers Face Severe Exploitation, Racism and Exclusion from Labour Protections', Amnesty International, 13 May 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/saudi-arabia-migrant-domestic-workers-face-severe-exploitation-racism-and-exclusion-from-labour-protections>.

¹⁴ A Kelly and R Michaelson, "'Thrown Out Like Used Washing Machines": Lebanon's Migrant Workers Bear Brunt of Displacement Crisis', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/oct/11/thrown-out-like-used-washing-machines-lebanons-migrant-workers-bear-brunt-of-displacement-crisis>; Khalil and Shalaby.

¹⁵ N.A., 'Africa's Abandoned Workers in Lebanon', *Al Jazeera*, 23 April 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/africa-now/2026/4/23/africas-abandoned-workers-in-lebanon>.

¹⁶ Galtung, pp. 170–171.

when Nepalese workers were trapped in Syria and Iraq.¹⁷ These risks led Nepal to ban employment in several conflict-prone countries after a deadly 2016 Taliban attack.¹⁸ Second, Global South states often lack the financial capacity to fund crisis repatriation, as illustrated by Bangladesh's reliance on a World Bank loan in 2020 to repatriate workers from Libya.¹⁹ These failures reflect a 'cycle of mutual deferral' among employers, states, and markets. This creates a systemic zone of non-responsibility where migrant abandonment becomes a predictable outcome, not an isolated accident.

International law does not impose a general duty on states to repatriate their nationals during armed conflicts or emergencies; instead, repatriation remains a discretionary consular function. Consequently, evacuation and repatriation become 'uneven and arbitrary',²⁰ shaped by political will, diplomatic capacity, and strategic priorities rather than enforceable duties. Yet receiving states may still incur responsibility where migration and labour regimes expose workers to foreseeable harm—through due diligence violations under human rights law, for example. Although the conditions enabling abandonment (confiscated passports, *kafala* dependence, exclusion from shelters) are frequently produced by private actors, states may be responsible where they facilitate, tolerate, or fail to regulate these practices—through deficient legal frameworks, non-enforcement of existing protections, or discriminatory emergency policies. In such cases, the wrongful act lies not in the failure to evacuate as such, but in states' own contributions to the structural conditions that render migrants vulnerable during crises.²¹

¹⁷ P Pattison, 'Nepalese Women Trafficked to Syria and Forced to Work as Maids', *The Guardian*, 1 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jan/01/nepal-women-trafficked-syria-forced-domestic-labour>.

¹⁸ G Sharma, 'Nepali migrants banned from working in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria', *Reuters*, 25 June 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/asia-pacific/nepali-migrants-banned-from-working-in-afghanistan-iraq-libya-and-syria-idUSKCN0ZA2X8>.

¹⁹ T Siddiqui and M R A Bhuiyan, *Emergency Return of Bangladeshi Migrants from Libya*, NTS Working Paper no. 9, RSIS Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, 2013, p. 33. <http://www.migratingoutofpoverty.org/files/file.php?name=nts-working-paper9.pdf&site=354>.

²⁰ T Mulder, R Jefferies, and J McAdam, 'Is There a Duty to Repatriate in International Law?', *EJIL: Talk!*, 2 July 2025, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/is-there-a-duty-to-repatriate-in-international-law>.

²¹ See generally: International Law Commission, *Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, with Commentaries*, Doc. A/56/10, art. 49 (2001).

Conclusion

Galtung's framework challenges the idea that abandonment is simply a by-product of conflict by focusing on patterns rather than intent.²² It reveals the structural violence embedded within the intimate nature of domestic work and how migrant domestic workers' exclusion from evacuation and assistance is a result of hierarchical protection regimes rather than isolated coordination failures. This conceptualisation shifts accountability for dual abandonment from isolated events to recognising it as a form of structural violence. When migrant workers are repeatedly left without shelter or legal status, it points to institutional failure rather than individual misfortune. This harm is temporally layered: peacetime 'latent' violence, such as confiscated passports or denied labour rights, simply becomes 'manifest' during conflict. Recognising dual abandonment as structural violence necessitates moving beyond emergency-based protection toward a care-work governance framework that no longer conditions workers' safety on their continued labour or on the political stability of the host country.

Sifat Aiman is an Advocate of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. She holds an LLM in international law from South Asian University, New Delhi, India. Email: sifataiman@yahoo.com

²² Galtung, pp. 171–172.