

# THANK YOU DOOOO

## UNHEARD VOICES OF KAFALA: SEEKING HEALTHCARE UNDER THE KAFALA SYSTEM



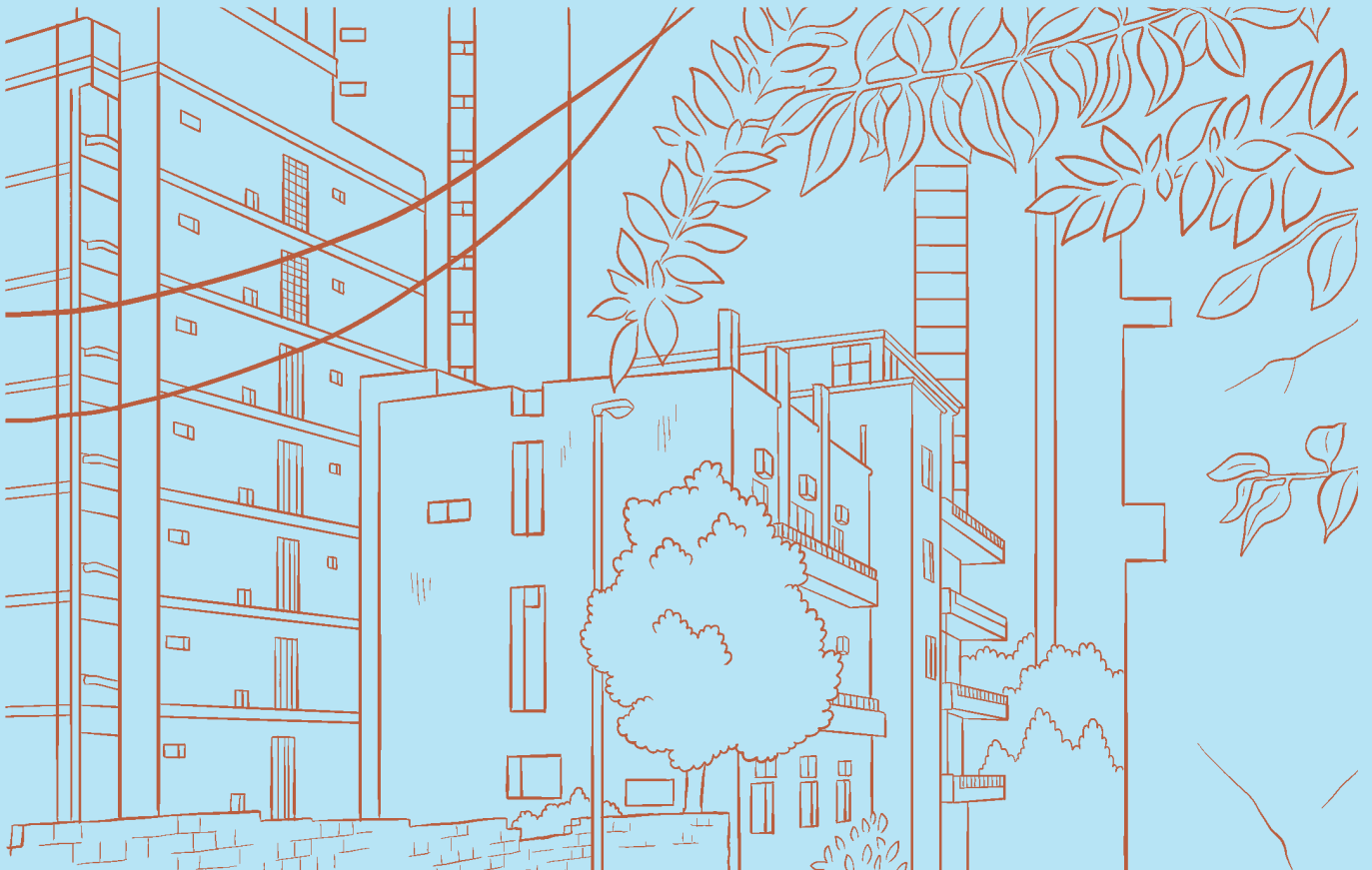
ILLUSTRATIONS AND STORY BY  
RAPHAELLE MACARON

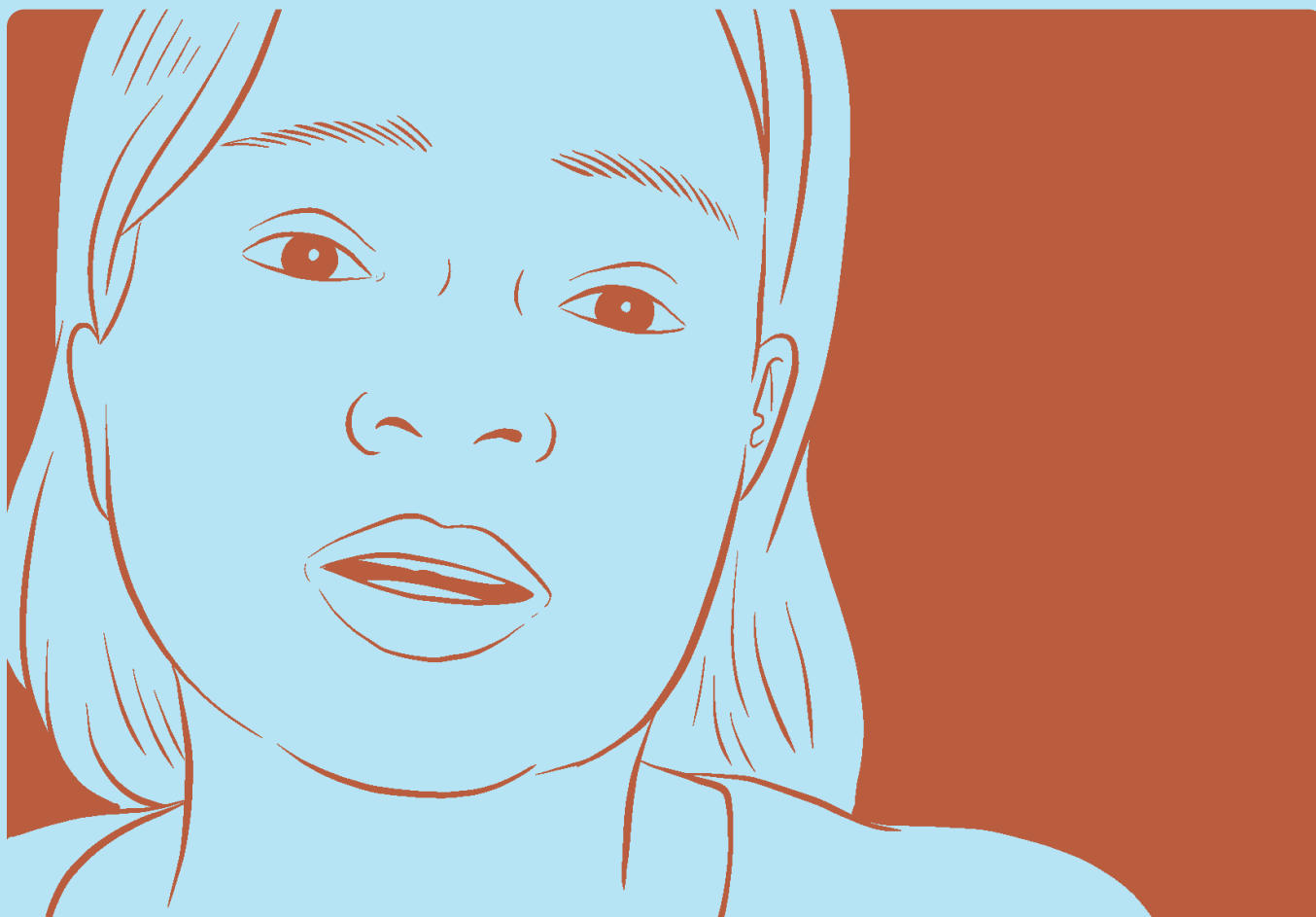
# INTRODUCTION

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.

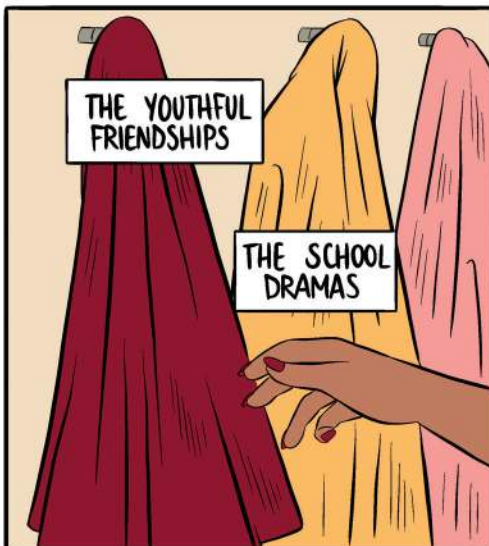
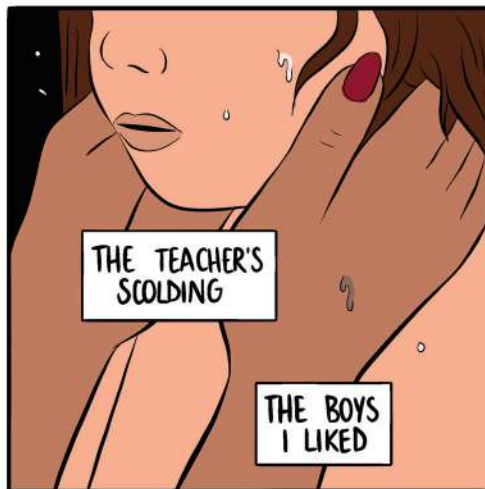
This graphic novel is based on interviews with MSF patients and staff who have been personally affected by the Kafala system. Their stories demonstrate how the current system creates physical and mental suffering for the migrant workers providing Lebanese families with much-needed services, including 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.

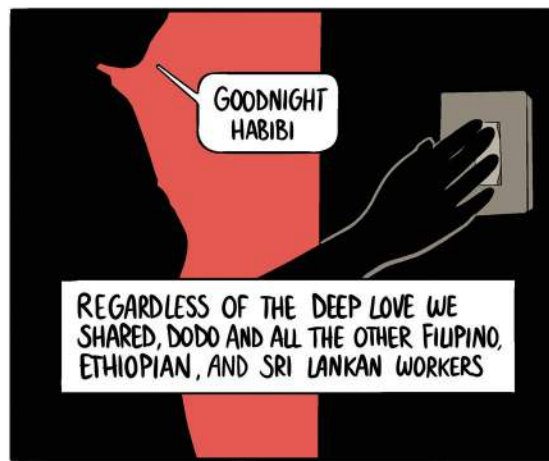


1.









# 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



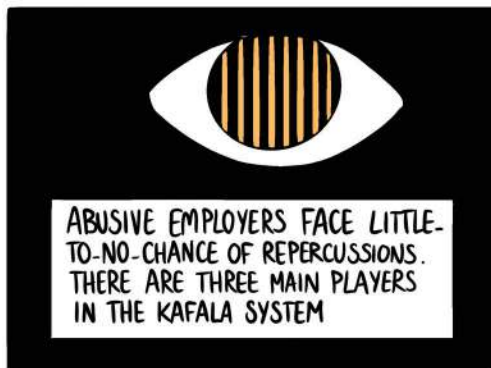
WITHOUT A "KAFAEL" OR SPONSOR, THEY ARE REGARDED AS ILLEGAL AND CAN FACE PROSECUTION.



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





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

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

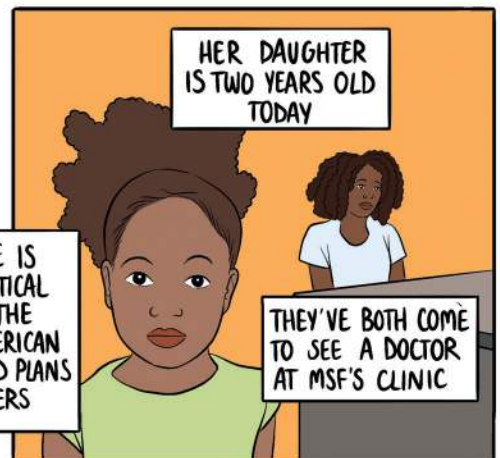
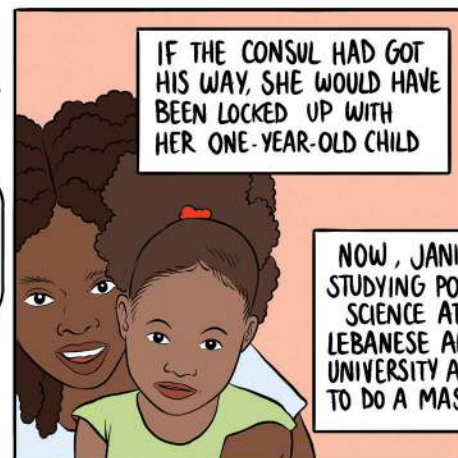
THEY END UP  
COMPLETELY  
CONFUSED AND  
DISORIENTATED

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.





WHEN I WAS SICK,  
YOU'D SOAK A TOWEL  
IN ICE AND VINEGAR  
AND PRESS IT AGAINST  
MY FOREHEAD TO BRING  
DOWN THE FEVER



I DON'T KNOW HOW YOUR  
HANDS STAYED SO SOFT  
WITH ALL THE SCRUBBING,  
THE BLEACHING, THE COOKING



WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER  
YOU ALWAYS SAID YOU LOVED  
MY NAILS



SOMETIMES I'D PAINT YOUR  
NAILS WHILE WE CHATTED



WONDERFUL!

YOU USE THAT  
THING LIKE A  
PAINTBRUSH!

YOU'RE GOING TO BE AN  
ARTIST ONE DAY!



ON WEEKENDS, I'D DRIVE YOU TO CHURCH  
OR TO YOUR FRIEND'S APARTMENT

YOU'D TELL ME STORIES OF  
THE WOMEN YOU BEFRIENDED

OH HER? I HAVEN'T HEARD  
FROM HER IN A WHILE

MAYBE SHE GOT  
ARRESTED



YOU'D SAY IT LIKE IT WAS THE  
MOST NORMAL THING EVER

GETTING ARRESTED. NOT  
HAVING THE PRECIOUS  
PAPERS. I NEVER FOUND  
OUT WHAT HAPPENED TO  
THOSE WOMEN

YOUR STORIES OFTEN ENDED  
WITH A SMILE OR A WAVE

BYE RAPH!  
THANKS FOR  
THE LIFT!



YOU'D ALWAYS  
WORRY ABOUT ME

WHAT? ARE YOU  
GOING OUT LIKE  
THAT?

YOU STAY RIGHT HERE,  
THAT SKIRT IS WAY  
TOO SHORT!

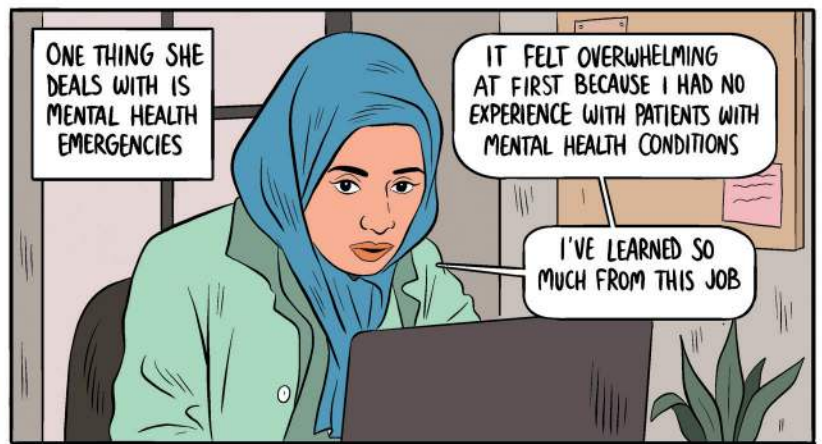


WHEN I REMEMBER THIS

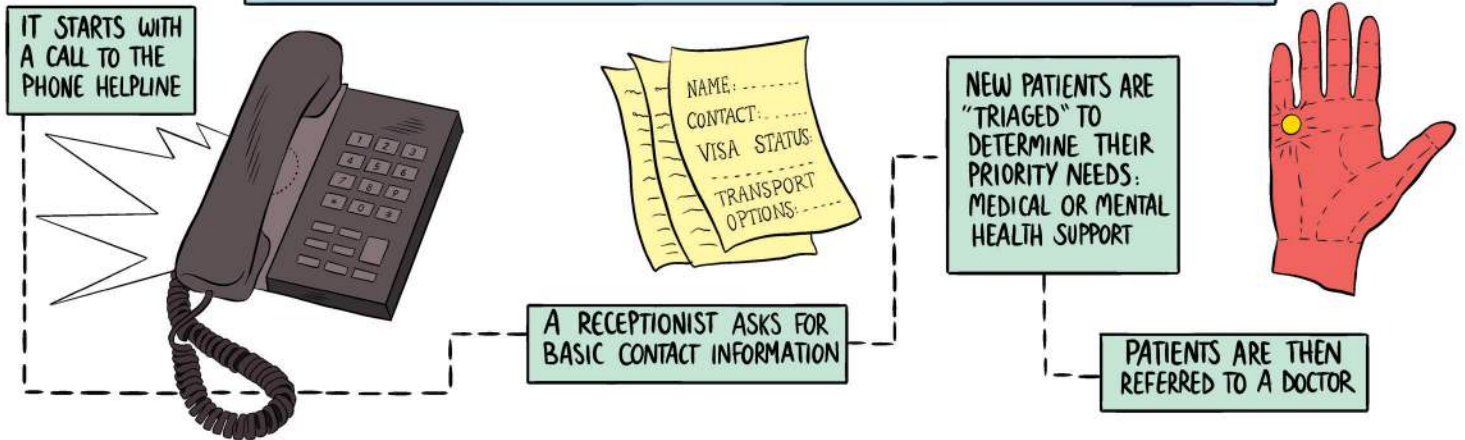
I CAN'T HELP BUT REPEAT  
THE WORDS

THANK YOU  
DODO





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



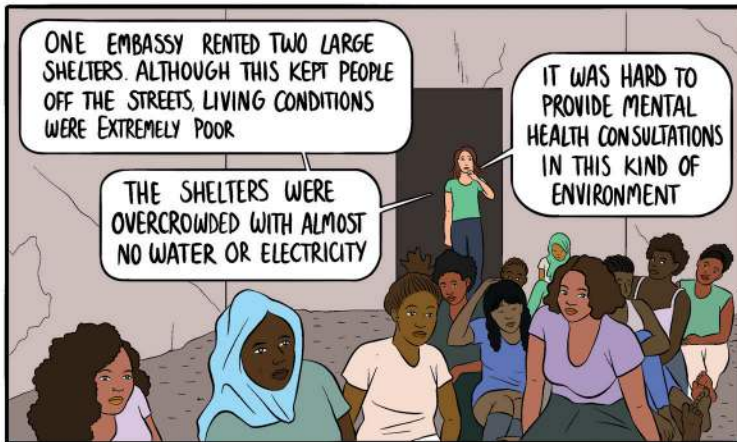
THEN THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS HIT AND THE PANDEMIC BEGAN. EMPLOYERS WERE DROPPING OFF MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS IN FRONT OF THEIR EMBASSIES

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

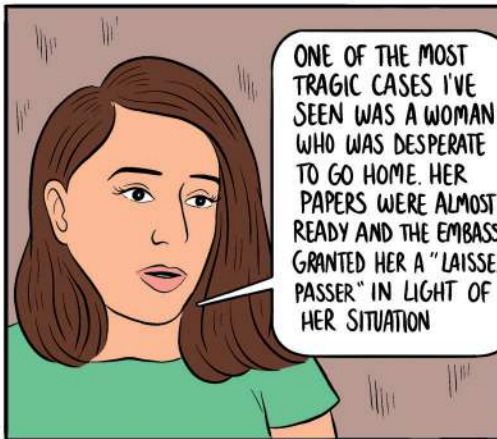
IT WAS HARD TO PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTATIONS IN THIS KIND OF ENVIRONMENT



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

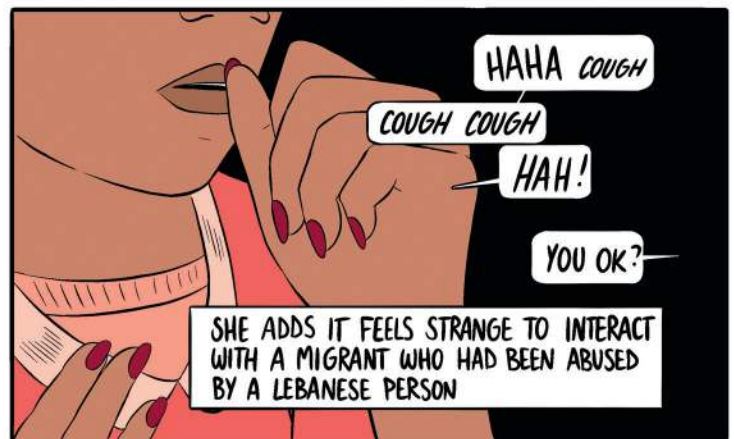
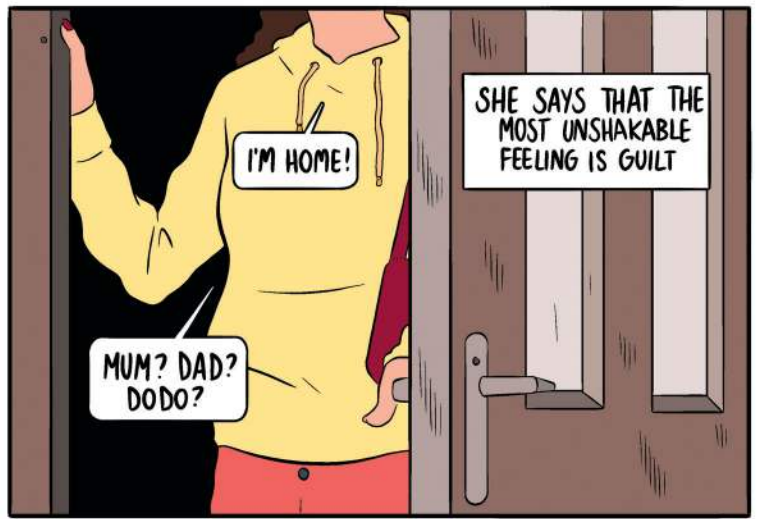
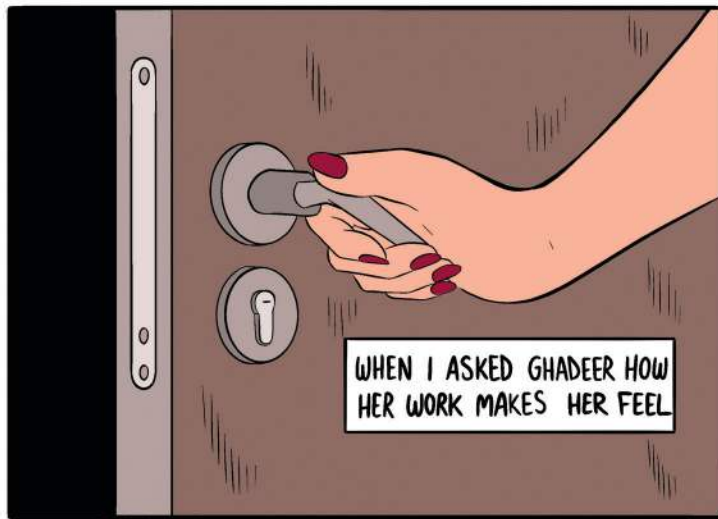


SOME WOMEN HAVE SUCH SERIOUS MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES THAT THEY CAN'T EVEN BOARD THE PLANE

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

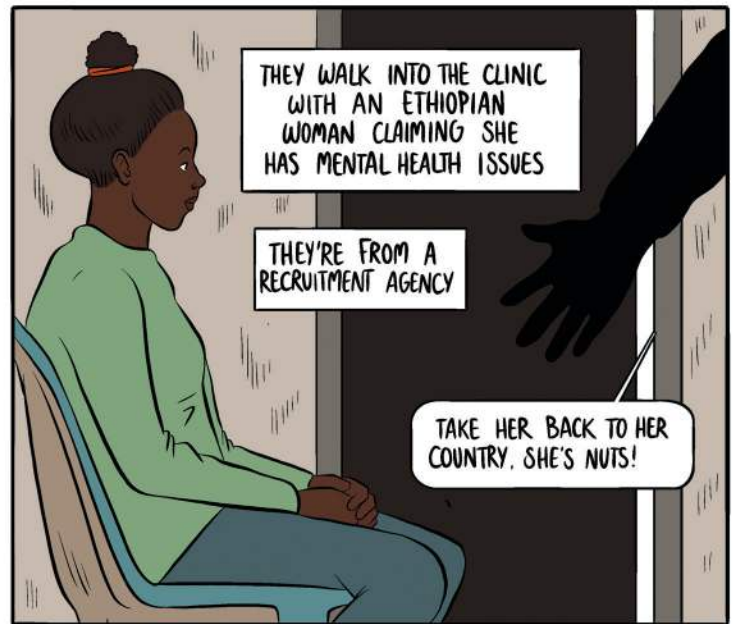
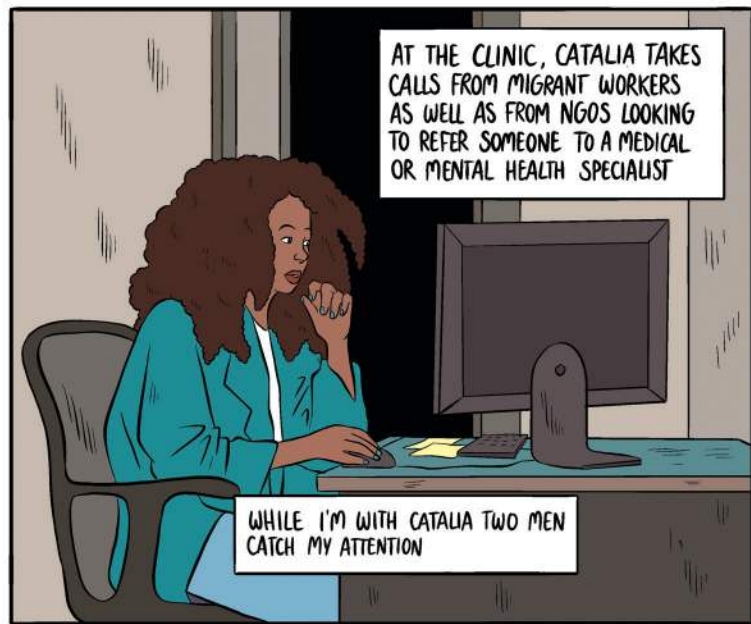
IMAGINE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A BLACK FEMALE MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKER



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

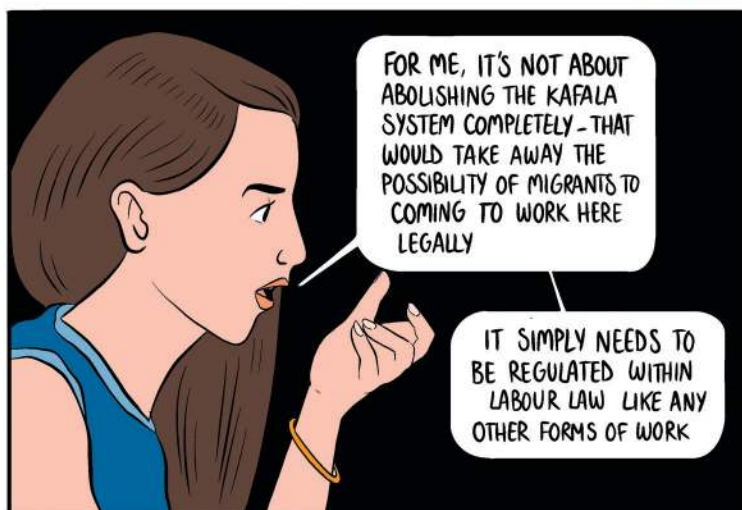
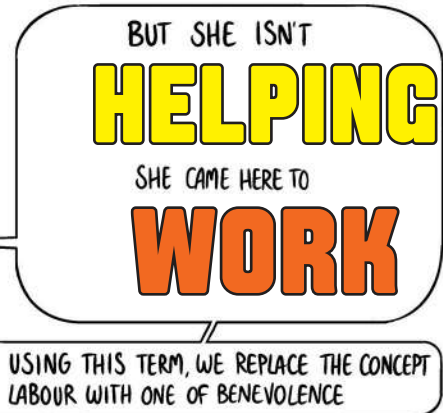
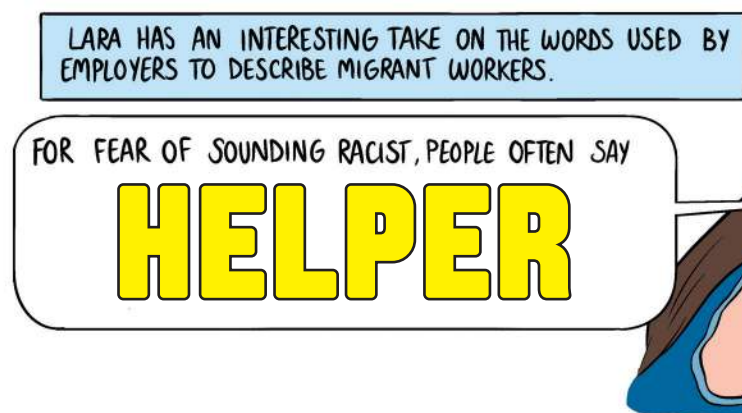
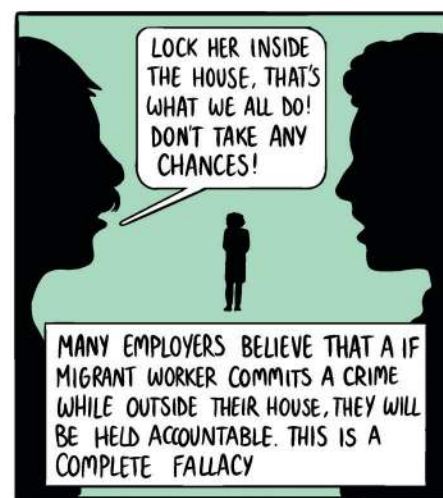
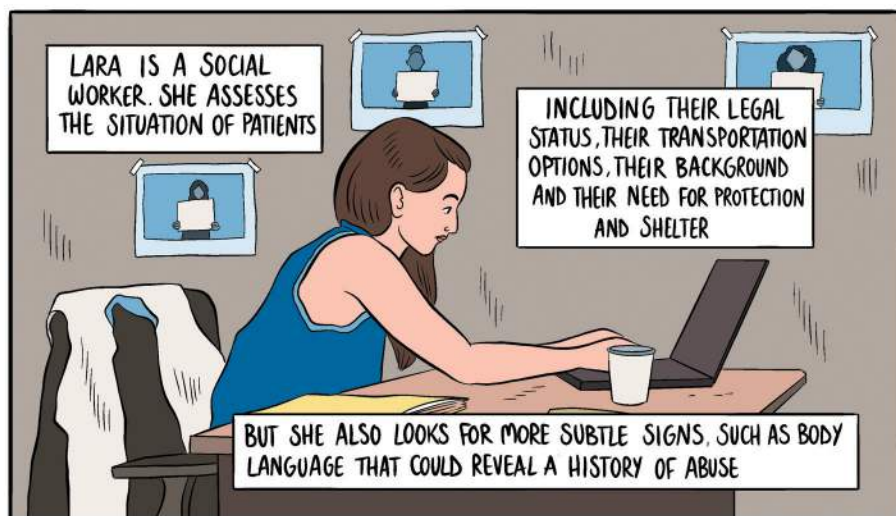
I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE TO SAY

4.













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

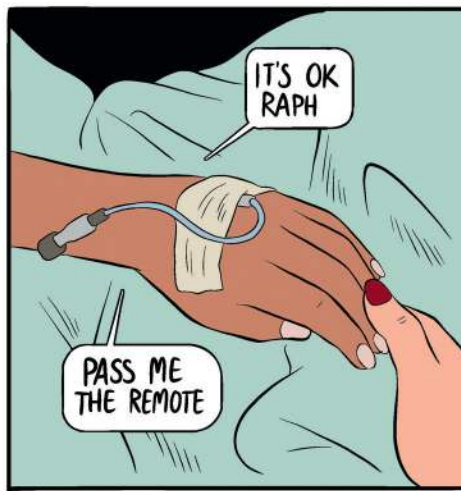
TO THIS DAY, I STILL THINK LEBANON IS A GREAT COUNTRY





SORRY DODO

DIDN'T MEAN TO  
WAKE YOU UP

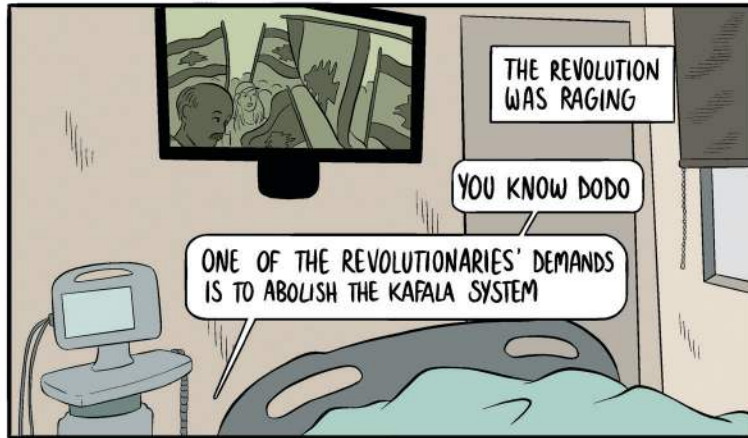


IT'S OK  
RAPH

PASS ME  
THE REMOTE



I REMEMBER THAT DAY  
AT THE HOSPITAL. WE  
WERE WATCHING THE  
NEWS FROM YOUR BED



THE REVOLUTION  
WAS RAGING

YOU KNOW DODO

ONE OF THE REVOLUTIONARIES' DEMANDS  
IS TO ABOLISH THE KAFALA SYSTEM



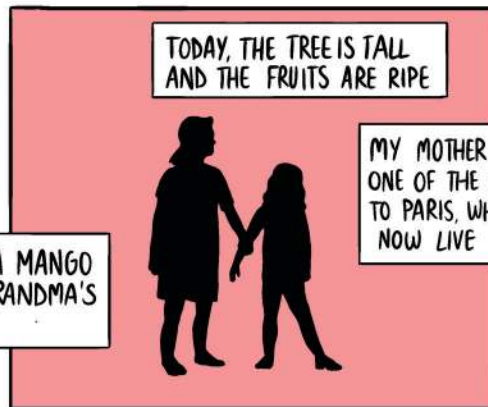
AND YOU SAID

WHAT IS KAFALA?



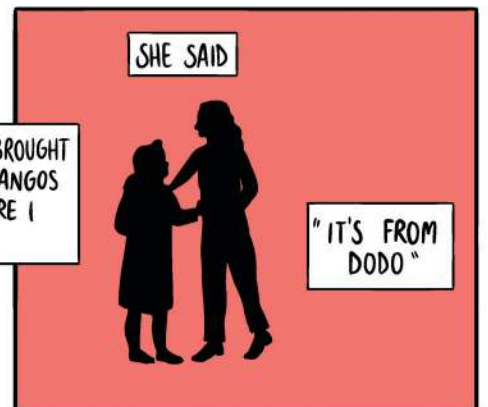
WHEN I WAS  
A BABY

YOU PLANTED A MANGO  
STONE IN MY GRANDMA'S  
GARDEN



TODAY, THE TREE IS TALL  
AND THE FRUITS ARE RIPE

MY MOTHER BROUGHT  
ONE OF THE MANGOS  
TO PARIS, WHERE I  
NOW LIVE



SHE SAID

"IT'S FROM  
DODO"



I'M JUST GONNA  
CLOSE MY EYES FOR  
A LITTLE BIT, OK?

I SWEAR DODO, WHENEVER  
I THINK ABOUT YOU



THE FIRST WORDS THAT  
COME TO MIND ARE

THANK YOU  
DODO

# CREDITS

Illustrations and story by Raphaëlle Macaron.

[www.raphaellemacaron.com](http://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.