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**Everyday Negotiations and Navigations: A Digital Study of Migrant
Domestic Workers**

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List of Abbreviations

Application Programming Interface	API
Cabinet Secretary	CS
Central Bank of Kenya	CBK
Commission on Administrative Justice	CAJ
Community of Practice	CoP
Human Rights Watch	HRW
Kenya Shillings	KES
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	KSA
Migrant Domestic Worker	MDW
National Employment Authority	NEA
Overseas Filipino Worker	OFW
Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars	PDOS
Principal Secretary	PS
Social Media Influencer	SMI

Glossary of Terms

Kafala system	Labour sponsorship structure that regulates transnational workers in Gulf and Middle East Countries
<i>Ku-passport</i>	Colloquially used by MDWs to describe surface cleaning
Jedids	Demotic term by MDWs for novice workers
Shagala and Kadama	I borrow the translation by Chee (2023) where she interchangeably uses both terms as servant and house worker. However, the terms are contentious. This will further be explained in chapter two

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Marginalized Speak via Digital Windows Mediated by TikTok

In the last decade, an interesting phenomenon has emerged – African Migrant Domestic Workers based in the Arab Gulf, joined the ranks of social media influencers. Engaging with content posted on digital platform as method, this dissertation explores what it means to be a Migrant Domestic Worker (hereafter MDW) mediated through social media platforms. My analysis borrows from feminist political economy and migration studies particularly Liberty Chee's (2023) groundbreaking study of counter conducts such as play, levity and humour among foreign domestic workers. Taking the content of MDWs seriously as a site of agency, as a political economy and as a form of negotiating their lived realities present interesting ways of thinking about transnational migration giving attention to how MDWs navigate their lived realities in all its complexities.

The study focuses on Kenyan MDWs in Saudi Arabia where the Kafala system¹ holds sway. Indeed, scholars have documented the significant power imbalances between MDWs, and their employers formalized through the Kafala system. This sponsorship-based labour system provides an unbridled power to the employer since the migrant worker is beholden to them (Parreñas 2021). Employers sponsor MDWs' right to reside and work in the labour receiving countries (Lori, 2019 and Chee 2023). Thus, the host countries delegate the responsibility of guest workers to employers as they are legally responsible for them. Despite reforms in the laws, enforcement remains weak and exploitation rampant (Amnesty, 2025). Part of the power play is physically confining MDWs in the houses, forcing them to simultaneously work and live in the same place.

With digital technologies, these particular transnational labourers are now visible. Online platforms become virtual windows where outsiders are invited to witness a marginalized group who we barely directly heard from in the past, especially about their day-to-day affairs. Thus, digital platforms such as TikTok have not only provided a medium for the subaltern to speak (Spivak, 1988) but have also led to the democratization of documentation processes (Sanya and Lutomia, 2015). TikTok offers itself as an accessible memorialization platform for MDWs. An archive with a small 'a' of some sorts which researchers can visit to study them.

Large number of videos posted under hashtags exclusively used by MDWs indicate they have been embedded themselves in this social media environment. As of 11 April 2025, there was a total of 518,200 and 52, 900 videos posted tagged with the terms 'kadama' and 'shagala'² respectively. Their use of these exclusive terms, hashtags and source materials of their videos shows that they are intentional in packaging their content for their fellow MDWs. This shows that MDWs have carved out an enclave where they are logging their everyday affairs. In these videos, MDWs are posting various genres of content including dancing, acting, storytelling as well as challenges such as 'a day in the life of a kadama'.

The rest of this introductory chapter presents a brief background on the emergence of this phenomenon. Chapter two discusses the methodological influences of the study. Chapter three, explores the emergent institutional framing of labour export as development in Kenya and the politics of comportment as a discursive panacea to the injustices of the kafala system evident in pre-departure trainings. In chapter four, I explore the role of humour in humanising and analysing the agency of MDWs. The final chapter investigates the power asymmetries between MDWs who are

¹ Kafala system, is the sponsor-based labour structure that regulates overseas workers across Gulf countries

² Kadama and shagala- Albeit contentious terms, I will use Liberty Chee's (2023) translation of interchangeable Arabic words that mean servant or housemaid

social media influencers (SMIs) and their less influential peers and followers. I will demonstrate how SMIs exploit their positionality to bolster their digital livelihood.

1.2 Background of the Study

This section of the dissertation will situate and contextualise the online study of overseas home-carers. I will do this by briefly providing a historiography of transnational labour in the Arab Gulf. I will then highlight existing internet mediated migration studies scholarship and compare it to older and newer offline migration research. Lastly, I will briefly bring attention to the rise of digital recruitment by the Kenyan government.

1.2.1 A brief history of labour export to the Gulf

Demand for foreign labour in the Arabian Peninsula goes as far back as the 19th century. Piore (1979) purports for one to have a better understanding of migration patterns, it is useful to focus on labour recruitment. Essentially the flow of migrants is in response to demand from labour receiving countries. Therefore, enslaved men and women from Africa were shipped to this region, to fulfill demand for productive and reproductive labour respectively. Huston (2016) notes that in the 19th century, enslaved concubines from Africa were imported to rear and take care of children, perform conjugal rights and maintain the household. Where women were domestic labourers, enslaved men were reserved to work in the then flourishing palm date and pearl industries (Lori, 2019 and Hopper, 2015). Opiniano and Asis (2024) note that as a result of the oil boom of the 70s, there was an increased need for guest workers in this region. In this epoch, there was demand for workers to assist in infrastructural development that came about as a cascading consequence of economic growth. The economic boom of the 70s and enslavement period demonstrate rentier countries in the Arab Gulf have relied on transnational workers for aeons.

As indicated in the previous paragraph, a confluence of factors influenced the flow of labour to this region. How then did the existing labour structure come about? Some scholars believe the Kafala system to have originated from the Bedouin traditions of Gulf countries. The culture being temporarily becoming the guardian of an outlander (Geilsdorf and Pelican, 2019). The guardian was expected to provide the stranger under their care with shelter, food and general protection. Other scholars have argued the Kafala system is rooted in the actions by the British empire³ to regulate flow of exogenous workers to this region. In order to control open labour migration⁴ in the 1930s, British authorities expected foreign workers to possess No Objection Certificates (NOCs). Employers were required to cover the repatriation guarantor fee in order to access the needed NOC (Lori 2019). Despite the contending origins of the Kafala system, both arguments make strong cases as elements of temporary guardianship, restricted labour mobility and sponsorship by the employer are indeed present in the current labour structure.

There was a period where labour in Gulf countries was predominantly provided by migrant workers from Arab countries. As Jureidini (2003) notes, Arab migrant workers from neighbouring countries were seen as disruptors of the notion of 'nation' and 'citizenship' due to then prevalent pan-Arab discourses. Hence transition to Asian labourers who were granted temporary status through the Kafala system (Fernandez, 2011). Baldwin Edwards (2011) in his research paper on immigration governance in Kuwait writes that, "the sponsorship system had the clear objective of providing temporary rotating labour that could be rapidly brought into the country in economic boom and expelled during less affluent periods" (p.37). This temporality ensured compliance of migrant workers. Exogenous workers were no longer considered destabilizing forces of nations as their pathways to citizenship was rendered nearly impossible. This also meant their working and living

³ This is during the time the British empire had control of this area as colonizers or through signed treaties

⁴ Where unemployed guest workers did not travel to look for work

status was made fickle, as it could be rescinded frivolously and easily by the employer. Moreover, Asian workers were also preferred as they were inexpensive. Additionally, while these countries were experiencing an economic boom, other countries were suffering from financial global shocks of the 70s making them cheaper sources of labourers as compared to those from neighbouring countries.

In the Kafala system, emigrant workers' residency and working rights are sponsored by their employers (Lori 2019 and Chee 2023). This formalized legal relationship in terms of sponsorship means the worker cannot switch jobs nor leave the host country without the consent of the employer. As Lori (2019) explains, labour receiving countries delegate the responsibility of the migrant worker to the employer. This creates a significant power disparity which then exposes workers to not only precarious conditions but also makes them vulnerable, ripe to be exploited. There have been efforts to reform this labour migration framework in various countries but this has not halted exploitation and labour violation. Similarly international efforts have not been fruitful. International labour conventions such as the United Nation's International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICMW) and International Labour Organization's (ILO) Domestic Workers Convention (C-189) were drawn up to protect the rights of MDWs (Torriente, 2017). Yet, much like the reforms at state level these international frameworks have failed to prevent exploitation and abuse faced by MDWs. This has been pinned to a myriad of reasons such as poor ratification and in some cases implementation as highlighted by Ogawa (2024).

1.2.2 Situating Digital Counter-Spaces in Migration Studies

Yeoh and Huang's (1998) paper on transnational domestic workers 'negotiating public spaces' in Singapore describe areas such as parks and churches as counter spaces. It is in such environments MDWs challenged normative practices expected of them in their employers' households. Public spaces became their 'private' spheres where they are comfortable and liberated enough to conduct themselves beyond social constraints imposed on them due to their identity as guest domestic workers. Similarly, sociologist Pei Chia Lan's seminal book, *Global Cinderellas* (2006) highlights physical spaces accessed by MDWs in Taiwan during their rest days as areas that facilitated opportunities to step out of the domain of control, this is being the employer's household. However, Lan (2006) notes that in these public counter-spaces, guest labourers not only reclaimed their freedom but also partook in counter-conduct activities. Activities such as gossiping about and mocking their employers therefore, it is in these counter-spaces where MDWs in Taiwan subverted social hierarchies.

Since Lan's (2006) fieldwork took place in the onset of mobile phones being more accessible, she was able to highlight how this communication device was used by foreign domestic helpers. Mobile phones, similar to virtual digital platforms, enabled MDWs to repel loneliness as it facilitated them to speak with their peers throughout the work week unlike previously where they only communicated during their rest days (Lan, 2006). Moreover, they were able to maintain social relations with their kin back home (Lan, 2006). Mobile phones were a double-edged sword for the labourers, as in some cases it reinforced control and surveillance (Lan, 2006). This remains the case for current MDWs whose phones are confiscated (Amnesty, 2025 and Chee, 2023), their access to the internet restricted and what they post also surveilled by their Madams.

Research where digital platforms are framed as counter spaces for migrants are growing. Migrant scholar, Bina Fernandez (2024) has delved into virtual activism for migrants by and for foreign domestic helpers. This activism Fernandez (2024) highlights not only advocates for better treatment but also challenges dominant practices of exploitation and ill-treatment of MDWs. Chee (2023) studies TikTok as a platform where counter-conduct practices are manifested albeit temporarily. It is

such practices as well as social media affordances such as hashtags, comment sections and direct messaging that enable MDWs able to form bonds, similar to the mobile phone in Luan's (2006) study. However, in the digital realm it is to a larger network. As much as digital mediated migration studies are increasing, scholars in the field have not abandoned to study physical areas as counter-spaces and counter-publics. An example of such offline research is Mikola and Mansouri's (2015) research on how migrant youth establish counter public spaces with the intention for political action. A second example is Nicholls and Uitermark (2016) study that unpacks how migrants spatially establish counter publics in urban areas.

It is important to note there are existing internet mediated migration studies that do not focus on counter-spaces. For example, Zoe Hurley's (2023) refreshing research explores affective digital placemaking of overseas domestic workers in Dubai. Hurley's (2023) demonstrates how MDWs use social media to post spatial based narratives that invoke emotions. While Lisa Blyades (2023) digital mediated research approaches the virtual to explore its affordances. Blyades (2023) conducts an online survey with a large sample size of 656 unique previous MDWs. The aim of the study is to hear back from more guest workers as opposed to what Blyades (2023) describes as small sample sized research often conducted by humanitarian organizations or sensationalized media reportage. With that explained, my research will be situated in approaching the digital streets of TikTok as both a counter-space as well as an area that reinforces hegemonic power dynamics.

In conclusion internet mediated research differs from offline research as it allows for casting a wider net of research subjects. Furthermore, before the prevalence of digital platforms, counter-spaces and counter-conducts could only be studied during rest days as illustrated by the works of Yeoh and Huang's (1998) and Lan (2006). On the other hand, online mediated research provides a more in-depth deep dive as these activities can be studied as everyday counter-conducts beyond spatial limitations. The aforesaid restrictions similarly apply to current research that study physical counter-spaces.

1.2.3 The Rise of Digital Recruitment and Labour Export as Development

Kenya has invested in structures and has facsimiled Philippines' migration governance in order to bolster transnational labour in the migration corridor of Kenya and Gulf Countries as well as Lebanon. Kenya's motive for doing this has been to increase remittances as well as address unemployment. Caroline Kimeu (2023), a journalist for the Guardian reports that in 2022, Kenyan migrant workers in Saudi Arabia were the third largest diaspora community to send back money to their dependents. Kimeu (2023) further notes, in the following year, Kenyan foreign workers based in the Gulf countries sent back approximately GBP 237 million to their families.

It is for above reasons that the current administration aims to export one million Kenyans as labourers. Driven by the intention of increasing remittances from KES 400 billion to KES 1 trillion in the next five years (Citizen TV Kenya, 2023b). Recently the Ministry of Labour, in its capacity as a recruitment agent, has cut out middlemen in their offline recruitment drives in different counties across the nation. On the other hand, in its online efforts, the same ministry has launched digital platforms to connect job seekers with recruiting agents. This has been done through the Cabinet Secretary's (CS's) X account, Kazi Majuu platform (Jobs Abroad) and National Employment Authority-Integrated Management System (NEA-IMS). On 28 April 2025, there were approximately 1,200 job listings posted on NEA-IMS; these postings are predominantly domestic worker positions⁵.

⁵ See figures 1 to 4

Foreign Active Jobs

#	Advert Number	Advertised By	Job Title	Number of Vacancies	Country	Date of Advert	Advert Close Date	View	Apply
1	952/2024	LIZDY MANPOWER AGENCY	HOUSE MAID	1500	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	01-02-2024	31-12-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply
2	944/2024	YASMIN RECRUITERS LIMITED	HOUSEMAID	1000	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	23-12-2024	31-12-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply
3	941/2024	PLOCS HOLDINGS LIMITED	Home tutor	50	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	01-08-2024	31-07-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply
4	926/2024	B-TRENCH AFRICA LIMITED	HOUSEMAID	1500	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	29-01-2024	31-12-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply
5	920/2024	Workforce Three Sixty	housemaid	1000	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	30-01-2024	31-12-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply
6	895/2024	PLOCS HOLDINGS LIMITED	Housemaid	200	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	03-07-2024	03-06-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply
7	885/2024	Workforce Three Sixty	DRIVERS	500	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	02-01-2024	31-12-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply
8	842/2024	DUETRA VENTURES LIMITED	HOUSEMAID	1500	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	23-01-2024	31-12-2025	View Job Details	Click to Apply

Figure 1 Job postings on NEA-IMS page

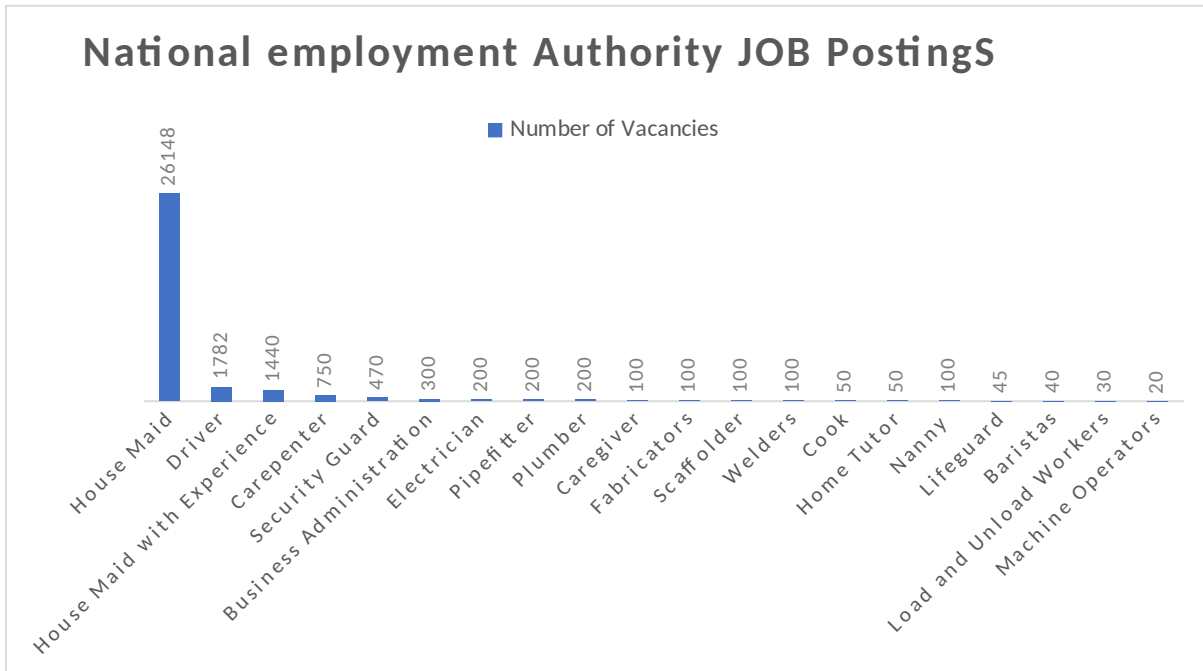


Figure 2 First 80 job postings on NEA-IMS.

*The chart above was created using data collected from NEA-IMS on 28 April 2025.

Type	
Technology and IT (1)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Engineering and Manufacturing (9)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Healthcare and Life Sciences (20)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Finance and Banking (2)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Marketing and Communication (3)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education and Training (6)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hospitality and Tourism (4)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Design and Creative Arts (4)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Construction and Real Estate (2)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Services and Nonprofit (3)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Airport Operations (5)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Casuals (2)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Services (3)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transportation (1)	<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 3 Screenshot from Kazi Majuu- Number of open vacancies in a certain field

Find the Right Job for You

General Nurse (Diploma Holder)

General Nurse (Diploma Holder):

Location: Afif, Saudi Arabia

Position: Cruise Ship Hospitality Manager


Posted: 1 year ago

Positions available: 3,000

Job Shift: Fulltime

Description: Embark on an exciting journey with our luxury cruise line. We are seeking a Hospitality Manager to oversee guest services and ensure a world-class experience.

Apply By: Jun 30, 2024



[View Details](#)

Personal Assitant/Health Care Assitant (Certific...

Personal Assitant/Health Care Assitant (Certific...:

Location: ar-Riyad, Saudi Arabia

Position: Cruise Ship Hospitality Manager


Posted: 1 year ago

Positions available: 500

Job Shift: Fulltime

Description: Embark on an exciting journey with our luxury cruise line. We are seeking a Hospitality Manager to oversee guest services and ensure a world-class experience.

Apply By: Jun 30, 2024



[View Details](#)

Figure 4 Example of a job posting on Kazi Majuu

2. METHODOLOGY, METHODS, POSITIONALITY AND NEBULOUS ETHICS

2.1 Methodology and Methods

This is a phenomenological study of Kenyan women living as domestic workers in Gulf and middle East countries. Van Manen (1990) in his seminal work on researching human science as a methodology makes the point, phenomenology foregrounds the experience of the subjects being studied and equally as necessary is interpreting these experiences. In this paper, the centered subjects of study are Kenyan MDWs in Gulf and Middle Eastern countries with Saudi Arabia being the main country. Kefale and Gebresenbet (2022) have argued that some transnational labour studies have tended to foreground structural factors. It is for this reason, the book they edited, 'Youth on the Move' center migrant labourers as agentic beings actively participating in the cog that is transnational labour. Kefale and Gebresenbet (2022) approach guest workers similarly to Chee's (2023) counter-conduct study of MDWs. Both scholarly works recognize migrant workers as agentic. Such scholarly works inspired me to research MDWs beyond their aggrandized suffering and passivity. I therefore set out to investigate MDW's day to day lives as Chee (2023) did. By using TikTok as a site to study their everyday negotiations and navigations to their exploitation, abuse and expected behaviour. Additionally, I borrow from Bryan Austin's (2021) work, particularly where he recognized that although digital spaces can serve as counter-spaces, they can also reinforce dominant power dynamics within a marginalized community. This approach inspired the last empirical chapter of this thesis as I look at how MDWs who are social media influencers hold power and authority over their followers who are also MDWs.

Furthermore, I also conducted interviews with MDWs to gather information on their day to day living experiences. According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenological work involves asking interlocutors about their lived experiences of the particular phenomena being studied. In my study it is both asking about their experiences through interviews alongside triangulating what I observed online. Circling back to Van Manen's (1990) point on interpreting experiences as being crucial for phenomenology, I conducted an internet mediated study with the aim to "interpret and construct the qualitative aspects of (MDW's) experiences" (Du Plooy, 2009, p. 30). Through thematic analysis, this study followed an interpretive research paradigm with the goal of meaning making MDWs daily affairs. This was done by situating MDWs within and beyond their subject positions of liminality, precarity and overall vulnerability facilitated by the Kafala system.

I conducted five virtual interviews with: three active migrant workers based in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), one repatriated worker and, a rescuer. The rescuer works in a local non-governmental organization that offers psycho-social and financial support to repatriated workers. Her legal background allows for close collaborations with Kenya's Ministry of Labour in influencing policy beneficial to both repatriated and active MDWs. The purpose of the interviews was to complement and triangulate my observations of the online content with the interlocutors' interpretations.

I approached the digital field using netnography with TikTok as my focal field site. I borrow from Robert Kozinet's (2020) simple definition of netnography "...as the... study of human relations with and through digital technologies" (p.16). This means I observed both patterns of engagement and online activities through features afforded by TikTok as a digital platform. Some scholars have made the argument that non-participatory observations "miss opportunities for ongoing co-creation in online communities and social media spaces. If researchers were more engaged in active, real-time participation in their netnographies, they could also contribute to important online social narratives" (Costello, McDermott and Wallace, 2017, p.1). While this does work for non-sensitive research, I felt it would be insensitive to actively partake in the content posted by MDWs. Since it often revolves

around their work and identity as transnational domestic helpers navigating and negotiating their exploitation, oppression and maltreatment.

Data collection was initially inhibited as I did not qualify for the [requirements needed](#) for accessing TikTok's Research Application Programming Interface (API). At the time of application, the conditionalities were either to be a professional researcher linked to an institution or a PhD student. Through a post on a Reddit page dedicated to Computational Social Science, I was directed to the extension Zeechuimer to access TikTok's API's. Zeechuimer is a digital method initiative set up by the University of Amsterdam. I downloaded Docker Desktop to run 4CAT which is a containerized web-based research instrument also set up by the University of Amsterdam. I imported the data collected using Zeechuimer to 4CAT. This was particularly useful in my data coding and analysis. I ensured data protection by having a local private server that only I have access to.

2.2 Navigating Nebulous Ethics in Internet Mediated Research

Internet mediated research is relatively nascent compared to offline research. Therefore, ethical guidelines on digitally approached research are not canonized and often nebulous. The challenges are particularly evident when attempting to navigate the boundaries of public and private domains. For example, the university's ethical guide limits public data to profiles owned by government officials. However, Townsend and Wallace's (2016) internet mediated research guideline as well as Chee (2023) have taken the approach that posts where users have public profiles are to be considered public data.

Further, other scholars note that those who take the extra step of making their posts easily discoverable by using trending or popular hashtags are categorized as public data (Karekwaivanane and Mare, 2019). In my data collection, when searching the three terms, 'shagala', 'kadama' and 'kenyansingulf', amongst the top 30 hashtags were terms and words along the lines of: (1) 'go viral', (2) 'trending' (in case someone searches for what is trending on TikTok they can come across their video) and (3) 'fyp' which is a way of getting on the for you page of users on TikTok even if they do not follow the person posting which is how TikTok's recommending algorithm mainly works as explained by Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey and Rodríguez-Vázquez (2021).

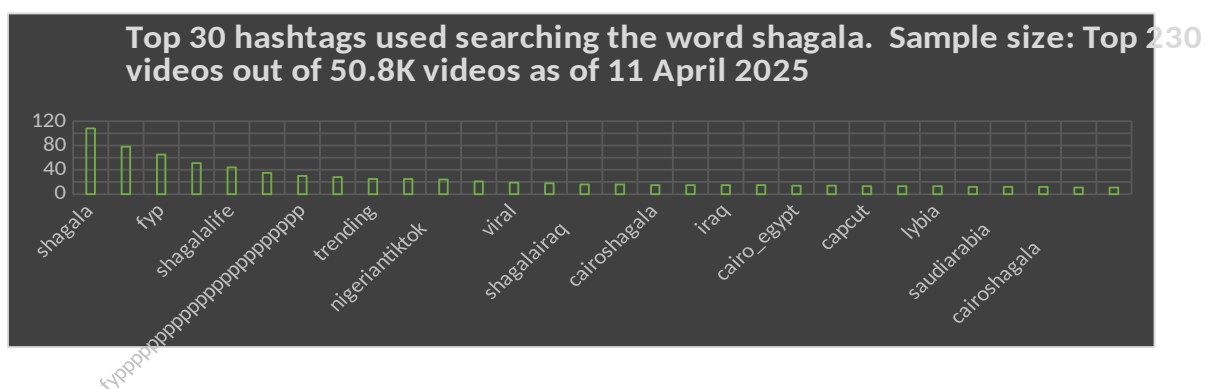


Figure 5 Top 30 hashtags under the searched term 'shagala'

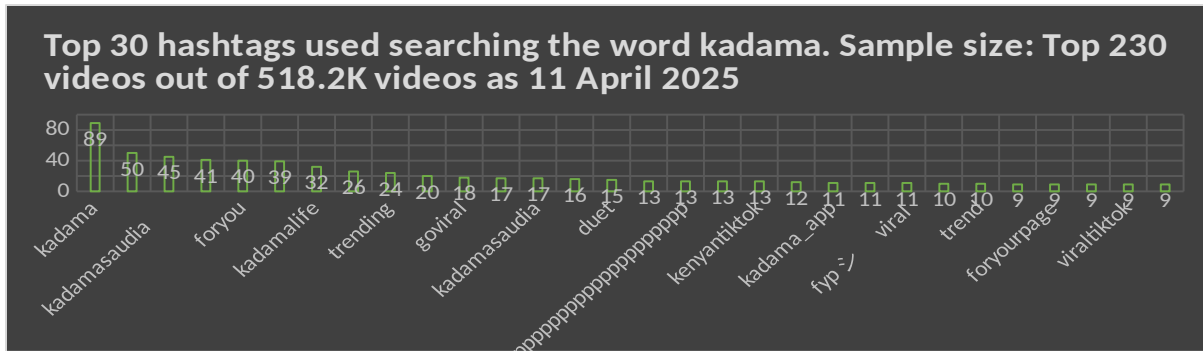


Figure 6 Top 30 hashtags under the searched term 'kadama'

By conducting an internet mediated research, I was cognizant of digital divide and that people online are a “subset of a subset” (Nyabola, 2018, p.101). Considering the fact that MDWs phones are often confiscated (Amnesty, 2025, Chee 2023), it is pertinent to note that this study does not encapsulate the totality of the experience of all MDWs. Even those who are online have intermittent access to the internet as some are not allowed to connect to the home Wi-Fi of their employers where they live. One interviewee noted that her request to procure internet data using her own money was denied by her employers. Her friends purchases it for her surreptitiously. Although online interviews took less than an hour, as a small token of appreciation, I bought each MDW a thirty Riyals (equivalent to \$ 8) data package that according to them, would last two months.

2.3 Conundrum in Searching Up Contentious Terms

To obtain a holistic view of what MDWs post on TikTok, I searched the terms 'kadama' and 'shagala'. While there are contentious meanings of these terms and who can use it, I eventually decided to deploy them in this study since MDWs use it as a way of self-identification. This is evident in hashtags attached to their content. Additionally, they have also used phrases with these words in the videos they post, “Only a kadama can understand”, “kadama life”, “shagala life” and “kadama challenge”. These terms are contentious because it derives from the demeaning manner their employers refer to them. As such, it has become both a way of expressing disdain for their employers satirically and also a form of inside joke between fellow MDWs.

Consider a recent video post on 11 April 2025 that amassed 800,000 views. The video contains the background sound of a child shouting commandingly in Arabic, “Shagala! Come open the milk!” The MDW content creator dramatically does a cartwheel, lands on the ground and kicks the imaginary child while uttering in Swahili, “Who is the Shagala?” The caption of the post reads, “Who else is tired like me?” Comments flooded the post echoing similar sentiments as to the demeaning undertones of these terms. While Chee (2023) unquestioningly translates the terms from Arabic and interchangeably uses them as translated Arabic terms of servant and housemaid. I thought it prudent to recognize the sensitivities around both words and clarify that I only used them as a means to find and collect videos posted by MDWs rather than I as an outsider referring to them using these terms.

Out of the 518, 200 and 52, 900 videos (as of 11st April 2025) under the terms kadama and shagala respectively, I collected the top 230 videos for each term. As my study is focused on Kenyan MDWs, I also gathered data by searching the term 'Kenyans in Gulf' and coded a total of top 70 videos under this hashtag. Finally, for granular investigations, I closely monitored the following accounts owned and run by Kenyan MDWs and collected data using 4CAT. I selected these accounts using the following criteria, MDWs who post regularly at least one video in 3 days, have over 50,000 followers, are located in different countries, have monetized their presence online and to an extent have different content niches. I did a content analysis using the larger data sets from the three searched

terms. This helped me to classify the data into groups to the point of recognizing emerging themes and make meaning of them (Burnard 1996) which informs the three empirical chapters of this thesis.

2.4 Selecting Profiles to Closely Monitor

The following accounts seen in table 1 were identified as the profiles to closely monitor. I randomly selected accounts from the larger data set collected by searching up the term 'Kenyan in Gulf'. I then picked the first seven public accounts that fit the criteria highlight in the previous paragraph to closely observe. I used the approach of selecting from a larger data set and pseudonymizing the accounts in order to be within the ethical guidelines of the university. The pseudonymized usernames are Kenyan local names and have no connection to ethnic backgrounds of MDWs selected nor does it reflect their content niche. Therefore, these pseudonymized names cannot be traced to the selected accounts despite them being public.

Table 1 Profile of the 7 selected MDWs to be closely observed

Pseudonymized usernames	Followers as of 27 Mar 2025	Total likes on her account	Country of work
Bivra	175,000	1,900,000	KSA
Bosodo	102,200	731,200	Qatar
Buti	65,400	1,100,00	Lebanon
Binya	137, 600	1,800,00	KSA
Bosire	206,300	3,100,00	Oman
Boina	59,500	675,000	Oman
Benta (has now returned to Kenya without finishing her second contract)	1,200,000	10, 200,000	Lebanon

2.4 Reflexivity in Intersecting Identities: Balancing Insider and Outsider Positionalities

By having similar intersecting identities (gender, race and nationality) with the research participants afforded me an insider positionality. This insider status made the research participants feel comfortable to disclose information beyond what I had expected. Moreover, being a native Swahili speaker, I was able to communicate with MDWs in the language they felt most comfortable in. However, the positives of this insider positionality were mitigated by the participants presuming I have insider knowledge (Hastings, Sheppard and Davenport, 2025). In an effort to avoid making assumptions to what they were inferring to, I would interject and ask them to be specific on what exactly they meant. In some instances, these interruptions and asking for clarity felt what Munthali (2001, p. 122-3) explains as individuals perceived to have insider status asking "silly questions" for what is deemed to be common knowledge amongst each other.

Through introspection, I was also cognizant of my outsider status: where MDWs interviewees are living in perilous and vulnerability conditions, while the repatriated worker labelled her experience as modern-day trafficking and slavery; and finally, the rescuer disclosed the mental fatigue and anguish that came with her occupation. All the aforementioned I have not endured and made sure to be mindful of their current circumstances while navigating the interview process. I reiterated before and during the interview that they were not obliged to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with, and we could take breaks if required. In the case of the repatriated MDW, she requested for draft

questions beforehand to know if she could handle the interview. As for the MDWs I rescheduled interviews a handful of times as per their request due to lack of set hours assigned for work and rest.

2.5 Limitations of the Study

This research would have benefitted from a larger sample size of research participants yet due to the sensitivities of this research it was difficult in securing interlocutors in a relatively short period of time. As a result of the timeframe of this study, it was difficult to identify and establish rapport with participants. Online MDWs I reached out to, did not respond to interview requests. To offset this limitation, I collected large data sets as demonstrated earlier in this chapter. As for speaking with government representatives, I was able to secure three interviews with personnel from NEA, Directorate of Immigration Services and Ministry of Labour. However due to the timing of a well circulated investigative piece published by the New York Times (Scheck & Dahir, 2025) coinciding around the dates I was to conduct the interviews resulted in these interviews falling through. The article which was picked by other media houses highlighted the ongoing abuse and increase in death cases of MDWs with the backdrop of government officials owning some placement agencies as well as the state failing to bargain for better pay and working conditions (Scheck & Dahir, 2025). I addressed this limitation by using existing interviews from relevant government officials as primary data.

3. “SAFETY BEGINS WITH US”: THE POLITICS OF COMPORTMENT

Bivra, in one of her YouTube videos addressing prospective MDWs and incoming workers, shares tips on how to thrive in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) despite the negative stories surrounding MDWs. She opines:

“Upon my arrival, I assessed the situation and realized that these people like it when we act stupid. If I am told to go south, I go south. I am rewarded for making myself stupid. Every month I get at least 100 or 200 riyals [\$ equivalent 27 or 53 respectively] for being well behaved. I can act stupid for 2 years [the duration of contracts]. If I am asked about my experience, anyone can come act stupid for 2 years and you will survive.”

Elsewhere in a different video, A subscriber to her YouTube channel asks why she thinks she is treated well by her employer and appears to be having an easy time. Bivra responds with conviction:

“Let arguments arise after you have done your part. Safety begins with us. My boss is happy with me. I do not want this to change so I will keep doing my work [well]. I came to the conclusion that I have control whether I will be treated well or not. Avoid trouble at all times and be obedient [repeats the last sentence three times].”

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is essentially an interrogation of the responses to expected comportment from guest workers. The responses being both institutionally, through government rhetoric and socially from the perspective of the guest labourers. As argued in their article on the ramifications of culture in influencing authoritative control of leaders, Blair and Bligh (2018) note that in cultures where low power distance is the default social arrangement, power inequality is uncommon. In such societies positional power is not revered. On the flip side, cultures nested in high power distance, power inequality is encouraged (Blair & Bligh, 2018). For these communities, disobeying those who occupy higher in the hierarchy is unusual. Therefore, insubordination against authoritative positions is viewed as deviant behaviour.

Kenyan MDWs have been accused of being uninformed about cultural expectations of domestic workers in labour receiving countries that are perceived to be high power distance cultures. In 2022 Moses Kuria, previous Cabinet Secretary (CS) for Investment, Trade and Industry in an interview speaking on the opportunities in the migration corridor of Kenya and Gulf countries made a distinction between Kenyan and other Asian countries exporting MDWs (Citizen TV Kenya, 2023a). He highlighted MDWs from Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh as exemplars. He argued, “they [aforesaid countries] do not have the same problem as us. We need to re-look at how we train our people, the way we prepare our workers to go there, maybe the cultural orientation”. Here Kuria identifies Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh as high-power cultures. Therefore, they elude maltreatment as their cultural orientation of expected comportment from domestic workers reconciles with those of labour receiving Gulf countries.

Kuria’s above statement encapsulates the sentiment that one of the formalized responses pursued by the Kenyan government (in addressing and mitigating cases of maltreatment) is to teach obedience to MDWs. To discuss counter-responses to comportment by MDWs I will illustrate how they reject this expected behaviour. Their rejection of hegemonic norms through agentive capacities is viewed as behaving unorthodoxly. For that reason, I study rejection of comportment as a praxis of resistance.

In this chapter I will interrogate the rhetoric of some senior government officials mainly from the docket of Labour, Foreign Affairs and Trade to show how Kenya as a labour exporting country has commodified its citizenry by ensuring it aligns with the demands of the market. The demand being, comportment of MDWs should correspond with the cultures of host countries. I will also explore assiduous solutions to this formalization process. Thirdly, I will provide insights of how MDWs navigate and negotiate this demanded behaviour. Furthermore, I will make the point comportment sensibilities in MDWs are not unitary. I will conclude this chapter by highlighting the significance of MDWs capitulating and rejecting comportment as well as reiterate the inimical effect of government's rhetoric of comportment as a mitigator of ill-treatment. Yet there are better formalized solutions they could pursue.

3.2 Comportment as Panacea to Maltreatment

Compliance remains one of the crucial comportments expected of current MDWs in Gulf and Middle East countries. This is mainly conducted through a formalized system of learning often referred to as pre-departure trainings. In the Philippines this training was introduced following the aftermath of an infamous death of an MDW worker, Flor Contemplacion (Guevarra, 2006). Pre-Departure Orientation Seminars (PDOS) were envisioned to smoothen out what was believed to be causing tensions between Madams and Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) (Battistella, 2004). Labour exporting countries have embraced the trainings as a panacea to maltreatment faced by MDWs in host countries. A precautionary measure to working in perilous environments. Examples of countries that have made these courses mandatory include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka (Watanabe, 2014), Indonesia (Chee, 2020) and Kenya (Commission on Administrative Justice (CAJ), 2022).

PDOSs have come under criticism. Ratha and Sirkecci (2010) note that for labour exporting countries the intended outcome for these trainings is to ensure deployment is undisrupted in order to ensure remittance sent back home is uninterrupted. For example, the main aim of PDOS' trainers in the Philippines is to guarantee deployed OFWs complete their contracts (Chee, 2020). Therefore, these trainings focus in producing 'good Filipino domestic workers.' On the other hand, in Indonesia the course is viewed as a form of insurance in the labour market (Chee, 2020) that by producing good workers then they can ensure the continuation of labour supply. Remittances from Filipino and Indonesia OFWs have significantly contributed to their countries' economies earning them the moniker 'new national heroes' (Encinas -Franco, 2013) and 'national remittance heroines' (Killias, 2018) respectively. Similarly, to the two aforementioned countries, Kenyan migrant workers substantially contribute to the country's economy largely through remittances (CAJ, 2022).

Statistics from a survey carried out by Central Bank of Kenya (CBK) shows that in 2019 48% of Kenyan migrant workers remitted a monthly average of \$ 500 (CBK, 2021) which is slightly above twice the monthly average income of Kenyans (Mwaniki, 2022). Moreover, recipients of remittances are prevalently non-earning citizens, 68% (see figure 8) therefore the government can arrive to a conclusion that economic inactive citizens can contribute to the country's economy thanks to the cash sent to them by their kin who are migrant workers.

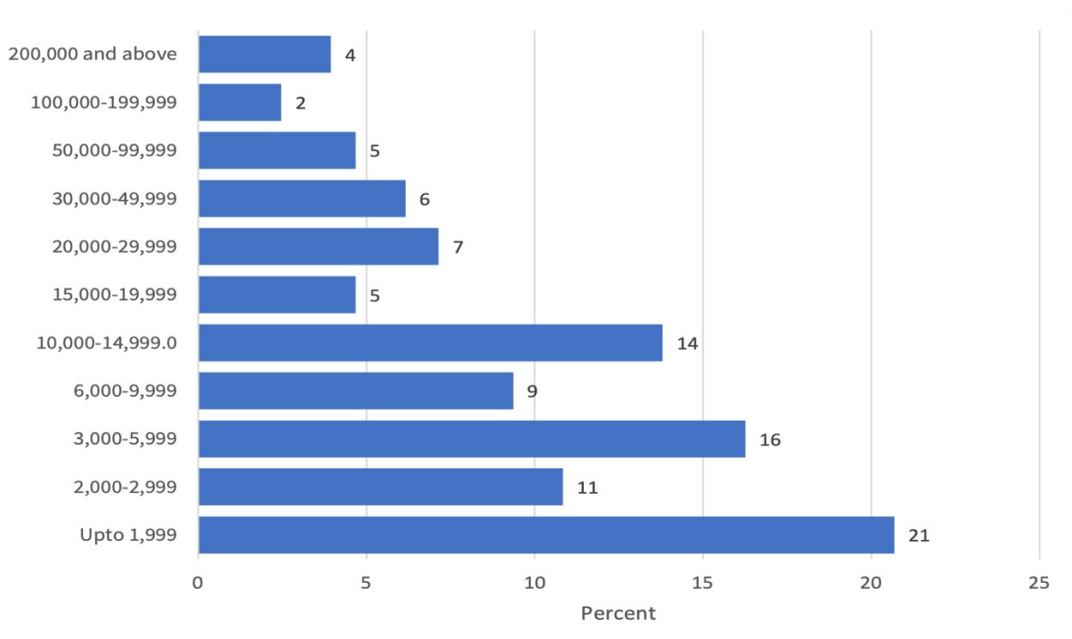


Figure 7 Cash remittances by migrant workers

Source: (CBK, 2021)

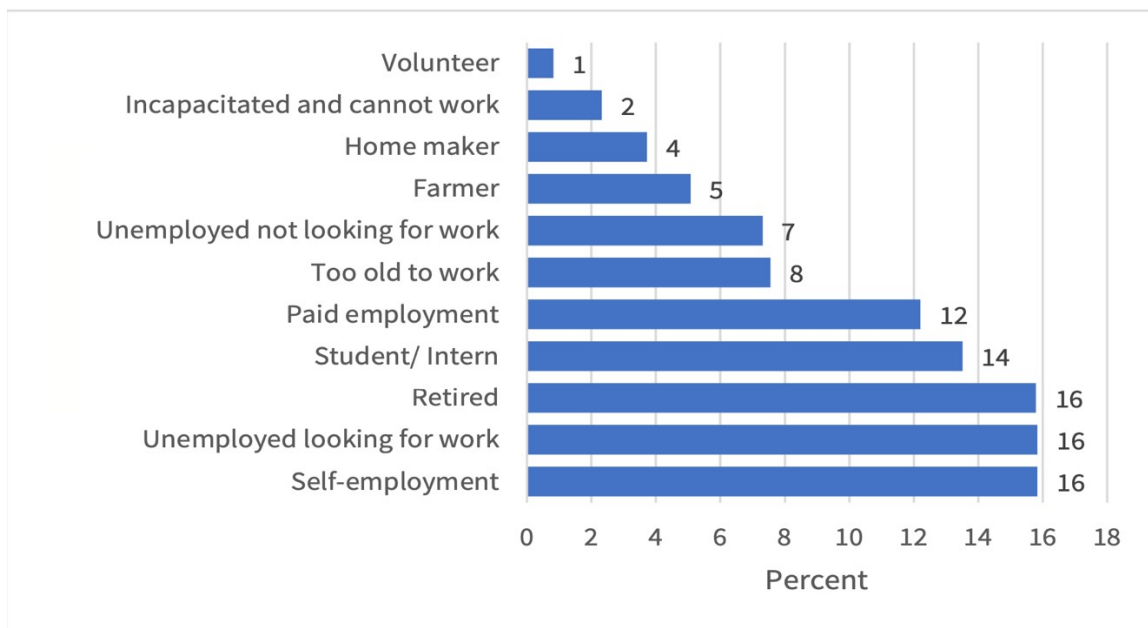


Figure 8 (Un)employment status of receivers of remittances

Source: (CBK, 2021)

Remittances from Kenyan migrant workers have now surpassed cash crop farming and tourism (SpiceFM, 2025). The current administration has not shied away from mass labour exportation driven by a few agendas but most noteworthy being remittances. President Ruto in the launch of the Kazi Majuu (Jobs Abroad) platform expressed, “You know the intention of this government is to make sure we take our remittances from [KES]400 billion [equivalent of \$ 3,074,788,000] to a trillion [equivalent of \$ 7,686,970,000] (Citizen, 2023b). Even relatively critical offices of government such as office of ombudsman views this migration as a win-win scenario (CAJ, 2022). Where Kenya as a labour

sending country benefits from the remittances contributing to the economic development of the country. While the host countries demand for labour is fulfilled.

3.3 “Humility Needed Is Not Found Among Our People”: Government Rhetoric

In 2022, then Principal Secretary (PS) of Foreign Affairs, Macharia Kamau tables an explanation (in Swahili) as he addresses death cases of Kenyan MDWs, “*unyenyekavu ambao unaohitajika [katika] kazi zingine kama kazi za nyumba sio unyenyekavu unaopatikana sana kati ya watu wetu*” (Citizen, 2022). Translating to, “humility needed for some types of work such as house work is not found among our people”. He then continues in English:

sometimes our people will not be so subservient. ...a country like Saudi Arabia, their traditions around housework are very ancient. So, you find the people who suffer terrible beatings... the people who suffer abuse are usually people who are... house helps. ...we have to ask ourselves are we exporting the right category of personnel? Do they have the right capacity and training to understand that culture before they leave and go work there? (Citizen TV Kenya, 2022a)

The same sentiment of teaching comportment was recently repeated by the current CS of Labour and Social Protection, Alfred Mutua speaking in a senate debate on 25 March 2025. CS Mutua proudly reports, “We are forming a system with attitude training to teach our young people who have grown up in an activist system. So that we train them to leave their activism *nyumbani* (home) ...” (The Nairobi Senate, 2025, p.7)

Dutch social psychologist Gerard Hofstede (2001) notes that societal cultures are grounded in certain preferred and known values. Rhetoric from above government officials make the case for inculcating comportment to MDWs going to work in high power distance cultures where subordination is expected. For them tensions arise between the Madam and MDW as a result of cross-cultural misalignment, where the former comes from a high-power culture and the latter (according to government officials) are socialized in low power cultures.

The labour market in this migration corridor is competitive. Nationalities that are organized through high power distance could be perceived to have a competitive advantage due to their assumed compliance. During the recruitment process, among other characteristics such as age and marital status, employers also show interest in the domestic workers’ nationality (Jones, 2021). This is with the aim of employing workers with familiar cultural pillars (Jones, 2021 and De Regt 2009). Philippines is considered a high-power distance culture and hence power disparity due to one’s status or position is not unusual (Hofstede 1984, 1991). Therefore, according to Blair and Bligh (2018) insubordination is uncommon in high-power distance cultures. This echoes Kuria’s rhetoric of why Overseas Filipina Workers (OFWs) are spared abuse and mistreatment. For him, OFWs are socialized to accept top-down power relations embodied in the madam-domestic worker dynamic.

In an effort to inculcate obedience in potential Kenyan MDWs as a protective measure, the Home Care Management Course has been made mandatory. This course has a lesson called ‘Pre-Departure training’. In this unit one of the topics covered is “cultural and religious issues in countries of destination” in order to prepare, “migrant workers to adapt to the new environment in the destination country” (NEA 2022 p.11). The training is to dispel the Kenyan attitude of being *kichwa ngumu* (hard headedness). As an interviewee disclosed, acquiescence is instilled in MDWs. They are taught how not to think for themselves but rather do as they are told. She further notes, prospective MDWs are instructed to be well behaved which includes dressing respectfully, avoiding looking employers in the eyes, not to steal, not to have any kind of relations with the Madam’s husband nor speak aggressively as Kenyans do. This shows the intention of the training is to teach MDWs how to

work and live in a high-power society where communication is one way and that there is no room for negotiations. Those in subordinative positions such as the MDWs are to act upon the bark of commands from authoritative persons in higher hierarchical positions, in this case the Madam. MDWs are taught that it is inconceivable to be disobedient. The intended outcome for the pre-departure training is to have Kenyan MDWs unlearn socialized low-power distance behaviour; and instead learn how to be an obedient domestic worker as culturally expected in the labour importing countries they are sojourning to. The intent for this unit is to instill what Nicole Constable (2007) refers to as preferred characteristics of docility and submissiveness. In the Kenyan context it is to instill the missing 'unyenyekvu' (humility).

Conversely to comportment being diffused culturally, there is the question whether obedience is an inherent personality trait. Zimbardo (2015) and Fromm (1969) agree that acquiescence to authority is innate to some humans. For such humans it is their personality to be obedient. In labour mobility even in countries that are identified as rigid cultures with high power distance, we see them approaching comportment as an individualized matter. For example, in the Philippines, the selection process of potential MDWs involves evaluating their behaviour, those who display pride as well as talk back or ask questions about their potential employers are rejected (Chee, 2020). Similarly, placement agencies in Indonesia shared that they chuff prospective MDWs by assessing their personalities. Potential MDWs who showed signs of acquiescence personality are selected while those who displayed to have a strong will personality were not picked (Chee, 2020). Additionally, Philippines is deemed to be a high-power society yet it provided the blue print for compulsory trainings intended to prepare a good domestic worker. The PDOS sessions provided by the Philippines cover a gamut of expected comportment from MDWs (Constable 2007, Watanabe 2014 and Chee 2020).

3.4 Why Learning Comportment as a Panacea to Maltreatment is a Dangerous Rhetoric

Government rhetoric discussed in the previous subsection should be repudiated. This because it justifies inimical sentiments such as, "MDWs are deserving of mistreatment" as "it happens only to those who are ill-behaved". In some scenarios abuse levied against MDWs are not due to misbehaviour. Rebecca Chesang, a repatriated MDW and survivor of abuse dismisses the narrative of ill-treated MDWs as deviants (Citizen TV Kenya, 2022b). She opines in Kiswahili, "We are not going there to be hard-headed. She pauses, sighs and holding back tears dolefully says, "I have buried 6 friends who went to work in Saudi Arabia". In a cracked and sorrowful voice, she poses the question, "Did all of them do mistakes for them to be murdered?" (Citizen TV Kenya, 2022b). Moreover, even when MDWs do engage in deviant behaviour it does not warrant mistreatment. Neither does it justify inflicting physical, mental and sexual abuse on them. Yet the current Kenyan administration would rather continue to instill docility (Chee 2020, Watanabe 2014 and Constable 2007) and have MDWs embrace precarity (Wee, Gog and Yeoh, 2019) as long as they can ensure flow of labour remains undisrupted.

Yet, completely banning this trade would result in a spike of illegal trade in this migration corridor exposing MDWs to other hazardous situations. While there have been calls of dismantling the Kafala system this is a long-term arduous goal. Thus, more immediate and realistic solutions should be explored by the Kenyan government. As a safeguarding measure, the government should significantly invest in posting capable labour attachees in all host countries alongside operational 24/7 hotlines. Furthermore, they should push for MDWs to have access to online platforms such as Musaned in KSA and TAMM in the United Arab Emirates where they can directly raise their grievances. As an interlocutor shared often recruitment agencies have access to MDWs accounts on these platforms since they do their registration. Host countries that lack such platforms, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection alongside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should lobby for them to launch such

platforms. Finally, in the process of updating bilateral trade agreements, relevant ministries should negotiate pathways to enforcing fining and/or reprimanding employers with documented reports of abuse. All the above could be approached through collective bargaining. Should the Kenyan government have hesitations in being blackballed by making such demands. The bargaining could be done through regional bodies such as the East African Community.

3.5 Comportment as Agency and Performative Politics

3.5.1 Capitulating to Comportment

There are instances where MDWs capitulate to comportment out of fear of being abused. As seen in Ueno's (2009) anecdote of an OFW in Singapore passively following instructions in fear of being verbally abused. Ueno (2009) further adds, by directly addressing employers and much so furiously might expose vulnerabilities of employees as their contracts could be terminated (consequently get deported). Both of Ueno's points demonstrate why some Kenyan MDWs would use their agentive abilities to capitulate voluntarily to avoid getting deported and worse be part of increasing statistics of cases of death which had doubled last year compared to the preceding year (Scheck & Dahir, 2025 and Amnesty, 2025) and distress calls by MDWs (CAJ 2022).

Returning to the opening vignette of this chapter, Bivra is the epitome of what the pre-departure trainings set out to do. She believes MDWs have control of their safety by how they behave. Her belief being contentions with the Madam should not be the expected relationship, rather obedience should be the starting point. For Bivra, complaints by MDWs are justified when the MDW has done her work and behaved as expected and yet has faced some form of ill-treatment. A straightforward interpretation is that Bivra is passive as she has capitulated to comportment. Bivra does not mention mandatory PDOS as part of her learning rather she does heuristically by observing and evaluating what type of behaviour is expected of her. She too has become a teacher of comportment by advising incoming MDWs what is expected from them. Yet, parts of her advice also disclose that her comportment is strategic. Bivra emphasizes playing stupid (demotic to mean strategic obedience) is necessary as an MDW for survival. Additionally, by her highlighting it is only for 2 years she needs to act stupid, indicates that it is not inculcated in her but rather practicing temporal comportment. One research participant recalls that she had to put on her best behaviour for a month in hopes of getting back her confiscated phone. Both Bivra and interlocutor use strategic obedience to cope in the environment they find themselves in. They are aware how they act in their present time has an effect in what they experience in their future. Their behaviour echoes Biesat and Tedder (2006) explanation of agency, as they note that "agency should...be understood as something that has to be in and through engagement with particular temporal-relational context for action" (p.136). That both Bivra and the research participant are not blindly compliant in their (present) but rather are using their agentive abilities. Bivra primarily for her future self by securing her survival and secondary the monetary rewards she receives for her good behaviour. For the interviewee, she was subservient for that one month with the intention of accessing her phone.

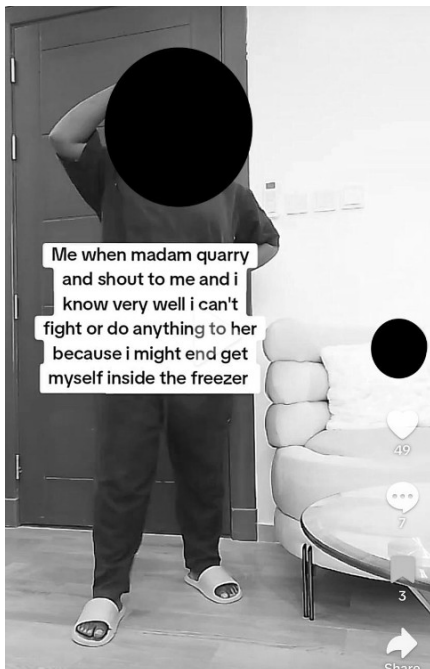


Figure 9 MDW demonstrating strategic comportment to secure her survival

3.5.2 Rejecting Comportment as a Form of Resistance

Despite MDWs undergoing, “virtually the same homogenizing process (standardized mandatory training) intended to produce a single product, a hardworking submissive and obedient domestic helper” (Constable, 2007 p.69); the unlearning processes do not result in homogenized acceptable transgressive behaviours amongst MDWs. Thus, variegated rejected practices of resistance become a point of contention between MDWs due to the lack of an agreed demarcation of what is ‘acceptable transgressive behaviour’ vis a vis ‘unacceptable transgressive behaviour’.

When monitoring MDWs, I witnessed that there is no tacit line of comportment consequently causing tensions within the community. Delay in emolument or not receiving their salary is an issue that has been raised by several human right organizations (Amnesty 2025). A point of contention amongst MDWs is how to ask for their salary. Some reinforce what they have learnt as the expected comportment of domestic workers is to be polite in their speech (Constable, 2007). Therefore, they should ask for their salary in a respectful way despite it being delayed or denied. Within this group are those who have indicated that their respectful tone is strategic, by performing to be respectful they have a better chance of receiving their salary rather than asking for it aggressively. Others reject this learned practice. Their reasoning being, if they show a modicum of docility, it will invite the Madam to walk all over them. In a livestream Boina shares her own protest story of how she demanded to be paid. Boina refused to work and stayed in her bedroom since her payment was delayed for three weeks. Her transgressions of refusing to work being a form of resistance, “intended to correct an unjust, exploitative (and) oppressive situation” (Lindio-McGovern, 2013, p.16).

Boina as a case study provides interesting insights in this matter as her practices and non-practices of comportment show that heterogeneity at an individual level. As stated in the previous paragraph, Boina has partaken in transgressive behaviour. Yet Boina recursively records her preparations going to work in another household as per the orders of her Madam. Such duties are rejected by some MDWs as it is not part of their contracted labour. This resistance is a form of push back from their

own exploitation (Lindio-McGovern, 2013). However, a 'good domestic worker' will unquestioningly comply to extended duties without compensation. Boina shows how comportment is practiced in fluidity, where MDWs have their own demarcations of when to be obedient and what are acceptable 'transgressive behaviours'

A crucial point to raise is how comportment and transgressions are approached online. Hidden transcripts shared on a public platform make the transcript ambiguous and complex. Whereas this was straightforward for migration scholars who studied comportment of MDWs offline. As Lan (2003) notes that the spoken offline resistance of MDWs occur in the hidden transcript (Scott, 1990). This is because MDWs, "in front of employers mostly follow the work transcript of deferential performance, exercising linguistic resistance with disguise and caution" (Lan, 2003, p.154). This sentiment too is echoed by Constable (2007) as she posits, "By and large resistance remains on a discursive level expressed quietly as a form of personal release" (p.210). Despite blocking their Madams and her immediate relatives, yet there are chances of their Madams coming across their videos as they could have second accounts or a relative of the household could find them online. Therefore, MDWs have to be conscious of what they share online. Instances where MDWs perceive content as repugnant result in some MDWs reacting in frustration with the repeated term, "then we ask why some of us end up in freezers". This shows that some MDWs have learned the problematic rhetoric of murder to be a justified disciplinary action when extreme rejected practices of comportment are exercised.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter interrogated, comportment as a tabled response peddled to mitigate maltreatment. I do this by focusing on the responses at two levels, at the macro level by focusing on government rhetoric and actions and at the micro level, socially from the viewpoint of overseas workers. While there are cases of MDWs exhibiting acquiescence as taught in the compulsory pre-departure trainings. Yet, this docility could be perceived as a form of coping to survive in perilous working and living environments. In some cases, MDWs make strategic decisions with the intention of being rewarded for their capitulation, whether it is monetarily, better treatment or more important their survival. Nevertheless, learning practices through formalized training along with strategic obedience reinforce orthodox conceptions of power and obedience between an employer and employee. The distinction between the two being whether it is agentive or passive obedience. Meanwhile, there are MDWs who reject comportment, which is a form of resistance. Nonetheless, their resistance is not a homogenized. Demonstratively by the tensions amongst MDWs who partake in acceptable transgressions and non-acceptable transgressions.

Despite the emphasis on these trainings, fatalities and abhorrent ill treatment of MDWs have not stopped. Thus, the trainings have failed in their expected role of being a panacea of maltreatment. Countries where pre-departure trainings are compulsory continue to report trails of abuse and death (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2018 and CAJ 2022). Moreover, by countries and international organizations tabling trainings as a solution to halting endemic abuse justifies rhetoric with inimical consequences. Failure to be a good domestic worker is an invitation to being devalued as both as an employee and more importantly as a human being.

4. “LAUGH AT YOUR OWN RISK”: HUMOUR AND AGENCY

4.1 Introduction

A viral TikTok video posted in November 2024 by a Kenyan domestic migrant worker I shall call Binya, garnered over 1.1 million views with 72, 800 thousand likes and counting. In what has become her signature comedic uniform, Binya lip syncs to the song ‘Welcome to Saudi’ which had been popularised by another MDW. Slightly crouched, Binya moves her head from side to side as she mouth the lyrics:

“Welcome to Saudi. There is no sleeping. You work until 1 am. You will lose weight and be done for.”

Binya takes a dramatic pause and resumes the lip sync.

“Your soul will say better you return to those who birthed you. Saudi will tire you. You will eat bread daily and you will lose weight. Saudi will tire you.”

The accompanying text caption on the video reads, *“Laugh at your own risk.”*

As if on cue, laughing emojis flood the comment section with various statements like:

“So creative and can relate”;

“I have watched this ten times (followed by laughing emojis)”;

“It’s true but just endure slowly dear”;

One user asks, *“I am coming soon, how bad is the situation? (followed by crying emojis).*

Binya responds to this comment with laughing emojis and asks her audience, *“should we tell her the truth?”*

The opening scene above exemplifies the popular maxim of humour as an essential part of human experience (Berger,1997) even in dire circumstances. I opted to study humour to counter the normative of severe suffering linked to MDWs. This is due to two reasons, firstly I did not want to contribute to knowledge production where departure points of studying a marginalized African community are confined to the paradigms of ‘damage centred’ and ‘deficient centred’ (Myers, 2005). That although I am studying MDWs experiences which includes their suffering and exploitation, it is done in a reflexive way by avoiding centering their experience in a parochial framing of damaged human beings in perpetual suffering without a modicum of agentic capacities. Secondly, engaging with comedic content allows me to study MDWs in a palatable way (Murray et al, 2024) since they address their maltreatment and exploitation in light hearted manner.

It is pertinent to note that humour can be purposive and not limited to mere playfulness as this narrowed framing has been used to pathologize ‘othered’ groups of people. For instance, enduring evidence of this fallacy is evident in the work of pre-modern sociologist and historian, Ibn Khaldun who noted “we have seen that Negroes are in general characterized by levity, excitability and great emotionalism. They are found to dance wherever they hear a melody. They are everywhere described as stupid” (cited in Hunwick, p. 128). Therefore, to avoid reproducing such pejorative studies, I will capture how humour is purposefully utilized by MDWs.

Humour in this chapter is approached as a decolonial praxis while being mindful of nuance and context specificities. The context being TikTok as an online space used by MDWs as a medium to share and engage with each other through hidden transcripts as a form of relief as well as a

manifestation and communication of their everyday resistance. Dancing and lip syncing are one of the most ubiquitous activities uploaded by MDWs in the large data set I collected. In this chapter I make the case for approaching humour as a coping strategy, a form of social critique and, humour as resistance deployed by MDWs

4.2 Theorising Humour: Approaching Humour Through Existing Frameworks

Prominent philosophers (e.g., Aristotle, Bergson, Hobbes, Hume, Kant) and various disciplines have grappled with humour and its essence in the human condition. For instance, relief theory of humour is common in the psychological field. This theory makes the argument that laughter plays the role of alleviating tensions (Morreall, 2020 and Ermida 2008). French philosopher, Henri Bergson (1924) encapsulated the role of laughter by describing it as a pressure relief valve. Hence, laughing becomes an integral part of surviving in harrowing conditions by providing relief as well as a coping mechanism. In political contexts we see countries in the continent such as Nigeria (Obadare, 2009) and Cameroon (Murray et al. 2024) use humour as a cognitive escape for the sorry state of their countries' economies and socio-political devastations. On the other hand, superiority theories philosophized by Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes view this form of humour as a communicative practice to ridicule those perceived to have failed (Keith-Spiegel 1972, Clark, 1970), incompetent or ridden by misfortune.

Hidden transcripts created by MDWs with the intention of it being consumed by other MDWs at times escape who they are intended for. With a boost from the algorithm, they end up on the for you pages of Madams who are unintended spectators. Some scholars argue that an outsider collective might find jokes made by the insider collective as unfunny since it is not relatable to them (Chernobrov 2022, Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 2018 and Kutz Flamenbaum, 2014). Where MDWs as audience members react with affirmations of relatability and appreciation for providing laughter. On the other hand, employers and their families as the outsider group reactions range from finding the content funny to most of them finding it unfunny. Some Madams leave comments to defend their collective. Employers who find the content unfunny because this humour is doused with truth, "... a truth which is so violent... that (they)... choke with fury" (Gros, Ewald and Fontana, 2010 p. 54) and respond irately in the comment section attempting to give a sanitized version of their side. While in some cases Madams double down on their actions rather than be convinced or persuaded by the content posted by MDWs.

Literature that focuses on political humour with the purpose of destabilizing institutions are bountiful (Murray et al. 2024) with emphasis in authoritarian countries such as in Egypt (Winegar, 2021). This type of humour is identified as anti-hegemonic humour. Which can doubly be purposive, first it lends itself in laughing at those in authoritative positions by disclosing their shortcomings and stereotypical beliefs. Secondly it can be utilized to present non-normative positions (Santa Ana, 2009). I will orient analysis of my empirical evidence using anti-hegemonic theory where TikTok as a digital platform provides a counter space for a subaltern community. Most of the humorous content posted by MDWs is inspired by power-relations dynamics. Thus, rhetoric of resistance against hegemonic authorities will be highlighted in the following empirical sections of this chapter. Their resistance different from scholar of culture, media and politics, Marwan Kraidy's concept of 'gradual creative insurgency'. Kraidy explains this concept as an, 'incremental and cumulative' way of 'subverting the insurgency' (Kraidy, 2016 p.18). The anti-hegemonic humour displayed by MDWs is not 'gradual' nor 'incremental' as it is not contributing to a moment of rupture. Although creative, MDWs' anti-hegemonic humour portrays temporary subversive practices and critiques of subjugation.

4.3 “Let’s Laugh Together”: Curating Content from Lived Experiences

Some MDWs as observed from the larger data set collected, stick to the type of content that is laced with playfulness with its main purpose being to elicit laughter and as a form of stress relief. Such MDWs barely post content that reflect on the precarious and vulnerable conditions they work in. This is not to say that this type of content is banal and rather the opposite, as two interviewees noted, that they watch content on TikTok as a stress reliever. Here this content serves the role of imparting positive psychology of life. As seen in one of her videos Binya walks into the frame dancing joyously to the lyrics of Flavour’s afrobeat: “Time to party”-Everyday na party. Everyday na jolly oh. Oh, ya move your body. No time for story.” In response to their lethargy as exploited labourers who work uncompensated long hours and no rest days, dancing to songs such as Flavour’s prompts happiness and enjoyment. MDWs are rejecting their social suffering enabled by the system they work in by creating and consuming content for levity with the emphasis of invoking joy.

Binya’s niche is to evoke laughter through humorously choreographed dances. Her signature look includes a pair of mismatched shoes, scruffy trousers with a leg rolled up and a broom stick as her makeshift microphone. The comment section under her videos serves as a suggestion box where viewers suggest songs she should dance to. Her Followers describe her page as the go-to profile for stress relief. A notable comment reads, “When I open TikTok, the first thing I do is search up your name.” This type of humour falls into Krefting’s (2014) categorization of ‘uncharged humour’. Uncharged humour does not have the agenda to collectively mobilize MDWs to lead to action against the socially dominant group, the employer, but rather it focuses on eliciting laughter. As highlighted in Binya’s funny theatrical videos perform songs that are appreciated by their targeted MDW audience as seen with comments expressing how they seek out such genres of content. This type of humour offers both the MDW content creator and the consumer a pastime with the aim of entertaining, here laughter becomes a medium for offering peer support to one another.

4.4 “If I Do Not Laugh, I Will Cry”: Vulnerabilities and Maltreatment

In Kenya, the popular saying, “If I do not laugh, I will cry” although it is not directly uttered in the videos often is present in the sardonic humourous content MDWs post. This type plays a compound role where it not only encourages resilience amongst the MDWs but also provides social commentary in their everyday experiences.

Binya tours her bedroom, with a laughing track behind it. She demonstrates how she sleeps on a thin mattress draped in a worn-out bed sheet and lightweight blanket. The text on the video reads, “Us we just place ourselves, we do not sleep” followed by a cry laughing and broken heart emojis. Her sleeping condition a violation of article six of ILO’s Domestic Workers Convention C-189 which stipulates that MDWs are to be provided with decent living conditions that ensures their privacy is respected (Amnesty, 2025).



Figure 10 Binya's sleeping area

The text on the video reading, "We just place ourselves, we do not sleep".

A substantial number of MDWs' humorous videos across nationalities source their material from their own lived experiences of labour exploitation, maltreatment and abuse through humour. While humour can be used to evoke laughter, it is also a form of a coping response to difficult situations. In such cases as Binya's tour of her sleeping area- relief humour provides, "... a safety valve, a mode of minimizing pain and defeats, as well as a medium capable of expressing grievance and grief in the most artful and incisive ways" (Early, Carpio and Sollors, 2010, p.37). The laughing track complemented by her laughing while demonstrating how she sleeps signals the audience to laugh with her. Other MDWs join in the laughter under her comments while they share peculiar resting nooks- some in the kitchen and store room. They joined Binya in coping with humour in their living condition. Yet, for me the affective elicited as an outsider looking-in is not humour but rather despondence. Through other videos posted by Binya, one can tell she works in a palatial house yet as the individual in charge of keeping it clean Binya is not provided a private room to rest. Rather she is shockingly banished to one of the corridors of the house and provided a slim mattress to sleep on. However, for insiders, this being MDWs as demonstrated by comments left under Binya's post indicate that such content simultaneously offers relief as well as a coping tactic for MDWs working and living in in vulnerable and precarious working and living conditions.

4.5 Visible Counter-Conduct Mediated Through Humour

Binya in a livestream she hosted on 4th May 2025, with five other co-hosts (other MDWs) poked fun at Madams who perceive themselves to be all-knowing and act as experts in work they are unfamiliar with yet they have the audacity to bark orders on cleaning routines. Binya says, "the trick is to wake up before them and *ku-passport* (surface clean) quickly. By the time Madam is awake you have completed your work and she misses the opportunity to poke her nose in your work". In this example, Binya uses humour to communicate her subversive practice of *ku-passport* (surface cleaning). While a repetitive practice, it is done only when the authoritative figure is not around. In the livestream Binya ridicules Madams for thinking their omniscient yet MDWs have found ways to circumvent their authority without their knowledge. Binya emerges as superior in moments she

outwits her Madam. Through humour, Binya shares how she deploys her everyday resistance by circumventing the long working hours and arduous tasks. While Binya does not directly call for collective action, she has the ability to influence her followers to partake in everyday resistance. As Wilke (2017) notes, humour has the ability to lead to action and therefore activities inspired by anti-hegemonic humour posted online could influence MDWs offline activities which can be labelled as “visible counter-conduct” (Fox, 2018, p.90). Binya’s trick of carrying out chores before the Madam is awake is a tutorial on how to undermine an employer’s role of exercising their power. Thus, the employer is denied the default role of commanding orders and being fastidious of the chores done by the MDW.

A popular skit performed by MDWs across nationalities is depicting how when they were *jedids* (novice workers) they were diligent in their work. They would dust, mop and Hoover crevices of the house. The opening scene is followed by a cut alluding to a temporal transition where a few months have passed and now the routine consists of cleaning apparatuses barely touching the surfaces in need of cleaning. Some sheepishly put the mop on their shoulder and close the skit by performatively acting as if they are on the lookout to ensure they are not caught slacking off work. This challenge demonstrates the limits of authoritative control. In the absence of the Madam (power holder of authority) the MDW uses her temporary freedom to do housework however she wants. This skit gives insight into how MDWs reject comportment instilled in them through mandatory pre-departure trainings. As *jedids* they are applying what they learned in these courses. They need to be ‘good domestic workers’ who earnestly and diligently do their work. Part of their good behaviour and obedience is how they do their work. When they become seasoned MDWs they reject taught comportment and expected behaviour of passivity. Albeit hidden in their rejection as they search to ensure they are not caught; they find humour in their subversive practice of rejecting comportment and using their agentive abilities to preserve their physical energy by performatively tidying and successful getting away with it.

4.6 Conclusion

Emerging from this study is how humour is creatively approached by MDWs in the counter-publics. Despite drawing from their abuses and exploitations, the content MDWs post does not ask the audience to take pity on them. Instead MDWs creatively utilize digital platforms as repositories and cites to bear witness to their everyday experiences. This includes how they resist, cope and circumvent maltreatment and labour exploitation as well as spaces, “...where marginalized groups can speak outside of oppressive discourse” (Billingsley, 2013, p.20). This study demonstrated how MDWs use humour as a form of destabilizing existing hierarchies. By deploying anti-hegemonic humour, MDWs materially disrupt the social hierarchy. They approach humour through Bhungalia’s (2020) description of, “laugh(ing) in the face of power (by not saying): ‘I oppose you’ but instead, “your power has no authority over me” (p.389). I also illustrated what Benton (1988, p.54) and Sorensen (2008, p.169) highlight how transient this form of resistance is. Albeit humour functioning as a stress reliever, it simultaneously lends itself as “resistance to oppression” (Sorensen, 2008, p.169) but also what Benton (1988) describes as “fleeting as the laughter it produces” (p.54). I therefore make the conclusion that despite their humorous practices being manifestation of their agentive abilities to partake in resisting in their oppression as well as critiquing, it is indeed ephemeral forms of resistance that do not gradually lead to overhauling existing hegemonic power structures facilitated by the Kafala system.

5. INFLUENCER ECONOMY AS ALTERNATIVE LIVELIHOODS

The table below captures how all the seven closely monitored guest homecare workers supplement their monthly salary with their presence online.

Table 2: Digital Livelihood of MDWs

Pseudonymized usernames	Source of digital livelihood (Below information is based on data collected 27 March 2025)
Bivra	Advertises for small boutiques based in Kenya which sell self-care products. She is also a broker for both a recruiting agency and a small company that sells land. She has a total of 6 videos in her brand partnership playlist, however she has more sponsorship videos in her profile not listed in this playlist. She also posts frequently on YouTube with the hopes of her channel being monetized. She has amassed 6,300 subscribers on the platform. She also advertises for a pre-departure training institutions right before their intake.
Bosodo	She is also a land and recruitment broker. She is monetized on Facebook and shared a screenshot of where she has earned \$ 1,824.3. See figure 11. She posts the same videos she uploads on her TikTok to her Facebook account.
Buti	She is finalizing a self-published self-help book geared to MDWs. Distribution will be done via WhatsApp. She is also a recruitment broker
Binya	Thus far, she has not made any paid sponsorship nor commission-based posts but regularly does livestreams where she is 'gifted' virtual items which have monetary value once she redeems it.
Bosire	She is a broker for a recruiting agency. Sells a fitness programme worth KES 100 per package, equivalent of \$ 0.76.
Boina	Broker for recruiting agency and land selling company (16 videos in her brand partnership playlist). Runs a private paid subscription on WhatsApp where members share enterprising ideas and investment opportunities. Fee to join the group is KES 150, equivalent to \$ 1.2. She goes live with the land selling company she brokers for at least once a week where she and the company representative respond to enquiries.
Benta (has now returned)	She is a brand ambassador for a home caring and pre-departure training institute. She has done sponsorship posts for electronic and hairdressing shops. Runs a YouTube channel with over 37,000 subscribers- making her eligible to monetize her channel. She is currently working on opening a childcare business aimed for MDWs in Kenya who need their children to be minded while they are deployed

kujeni hapa niwapee goodnews

Performance-based payout

\$1,824.3

30 Apr 2025

Figure 11 Bosodo's Facebook earning

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I investigate how MDWs who are social media influencers (SMIs) navigate their presence online. How they negotiate their identity as MDWs and exploit it effectively to be successful in their alternative digital livelihoods as SMIs. I make the assertion that for SMIs who are also MDWs to have a robust and effective digitalized hustle they exploit the parasocial relationship formed with their followers who are also MDWs. While the previous two chapters focused on the top-down hierarchical relationship between Madams and MDWs. This chapter focuses on the skewed power relationships amongst guest domestic labourers.

5.2 Literature Review

5.2.1 Exploiting Parasocial Relationship Using Digital Infrastructure

Parasocial relationship is a concept in communication studies coined by Horton and Wohl (1956). It was initially used within the context of legacy media to explain the lopsided relations between media consumer and media personae. The media viewer invests not only time but also effort and emotional energy yet the media character is unaware of their existence. Consequently, the media consumer forms a one-sided interpersonal relationship with the media personae. Similarly, parasocial relationships are formed through consumption of digital media. Tukachinsky, Walter and Saucier (2020) argue that online creators encourage parasocial relationships as it benefits them. This sentiment is echoed by Chung & Cho, (2017) who make the case that brand campaigns and sponsorship posts do well when consumers believe they trust and have an interpersonal relationship with the content creator.

Social media networks have increased accessibility of media characters when compared to traditional media. Yet accessibility remains unilateral to an extent. Some scholars have argued that features such as comment sections (and direct messaging) might ignite an interaction from the content creator (Wulf et al, 2021). Other scholars push back and make the point that these accessibilities do not guarantee interactions and a significant number of the audience remains unnoticed by the influencer as it is nearly impossible for one person to interact with swathes of people. Even in the chance they are noticed, Bond (2016) argues it is not repetitive enough to balance the lopsided relationship.

Nevertheless, for relatively smaller content creators they are able to interact sufficiently with their followers. While in some scenarios, even larger online accounts hire agencies or social media managers to interact with their audience in order to keep up the perceived interpersonal relationship. My example is reaffirmed by Chung & Cho (2017) argument that, "parasocial relationship through internet mediated research with celebrities are in fact more, "intimate, reciprocal and interpersonal" (p.490). With this new age of social media, traditional celebrities have shifted, "from being an elite and magical condition to being an almost reasonable expectation from everyday life" (Turner 2013, p.94). Hence why online media influencers have been dubbed 'micro-celebrities'. Therefore, what sets SMIs apart from traditional celebrities is that that SMIs are regular people (who happen to stumble upon fame through the content they create and post on digital platforms (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

5.2.2 Emergent Digitalized Livelihood as a Hustle

I will not approach 'hustling' in the normative as explained by Anwar, Ong'iro Odeo and Otieno (2023) where it is often tied to micro-economic activities of youth excluded from structural work. Such a definition infers hustling to being survivalist in nature and as Ferguson (2006) views it as a response to labour insecurity. However, in this context, I will frame hustling using Muthoni Mwaura's (2017) work on digital livelihoods as an emergent side-hustle. Mwaura (2017) unlike scholars who

study hustling as a survivalist concept approaches emergent digital livelihoods as less of a survival strategy and more of a side-hustling to either supplement the main source of income or as a strategy of amassing capital as groundwork to pivot to another livelihood.

Abidin (2018) defines social media influencers as, “vocational, sustained and highly branded stars” p.71. In the age of digital of capitalism, online culture is driven to optimize human capital through creation of (personalized) content that garners not only (positive evaluative) engagement but also making it monetizable (Tornberg & Ultermark, 2022). Monetizing life stories is not limited to digital capitalism. Fernandes (2017) postulates that commodification of narratives is not a new phenomenon and what makes it appear new is its constant modifications. Therefore, in the case of MDWs the multifarious story telling’s melded with sales of land, advertising for job openings as MDWs, training institutions, skincare and other goods and services is but a continuance of commercialized narratives using digital infrastructure.

Global capitalism married with perverse networked communication infrastructures alongside the transition to neoliberal governance has introduced new types of ‘immaterial labour’ (Lazzarato, 2004). In the past, creative labour was associated with limbered and autonomous employment but in the 21st century capitalism, this labour now embodies self-exploitation (Gill & Prater, 2008 and du Peuter, 2014). Influencers are emblematic of enterprising ‘self-exploiting’ individual. They create content to be consumed by their audience. Second, they exploit their own experiences to sell products and services. Third, they offer their online platforms to companies where their amassed audience become the ready market to buy products and services being advertised.

5.3 Recruitment as Hustle: MDWs and Official Channels

Despite online and offline efforts by the Ministry of Labour, returning and prospective homecare labourers seek out MDW SMIs for job openings, seek advice on the recruitment process, attend training schools advertised and endorsed by MDW online content creators. They have been incidents of previous MDWs now turned recruiting brokers swindling their followers (NTV Kenya, 2025). It could be surmised that a more assured pathway is to apply through formal government channels. Yet, this is not the case. It is fairly common to find comments under an MDW’s post enquiring about recruitment opportunities, pre-departure processes and advice on renewing contracts or returning contracts. Why is that? In his research on YouTube content creators, Ramussen (2018) comes to the conclusion that despite their micro celebrity status, SMIs are discerned as ordinary and relatable. Similarly, Schouten et al. 2020 also note that in their findings, online audiences found SMIs to be relatable when compared to traditionally famous people. The brand ambassador for government led recruitment drives is the CS of Labour, a career politician who is neither relatable nor accessible to the ordinary Kenyan. This is even more prominent when compared to the SMI who is an MDW, working in the pursued profession. Which makes her not only credible and relatable due to her profession but also accessible as a result of the features available on TikTok that promotes engagement between them and their followers. In the scenario these interactions are not repeated enough (Bond, 2016), MDWs have resolved inundated enquiries on TikTok by having a separate WhatsApp contact solely for their placement brokering role as seen in figure 14. By doing this, they make themselves more accessible. Their reasoning for the WhatsApp option being, only serious candidates will utilize their contacts on TikTok and make the effort to reach out to them.

Furthermore, the postings on NEA-IMS and Kazi Majuu are on faceless spaces and lack human interaction. Kim & Kim (2022) highlight digital dyadic communication with their followers as what gives SMIs the edge and makes SMIs more robust and effective in their advertisements. MDWs can be contacted under the comments sections of their posts or direct messages. They can also be

reached via WhatsApp. Furthermore, the regular content they post as MDWs, whether it is 'a day in the life of a kadama', sharing their experiences of navigating this type of work and even presenting themselves as skilled enough to offer guidance to other MDWs make them the ideal recruiters. These MDWs are able to use their influence as micro celebrities with a substantial following as well as their lived experience as transnational labourers. Sedda and Husson (2023) note, "SMIs ability to be perceived as insiders by the community adds value" (p.291), to their affiliated marketing. That in their recursive and ordinary presentation of themselves grounded in what Georgakopoulou (2022) refers as to mediated authenticity. Thus, they are able to market themselves as recruitment brokers due to their online presence as well as their occupation as MDWs.

This is shown in figure 12 where Bivra's presentability influenced an audience member to pursue overseas domestic work. Bivra's focus on positivity is also a marketing tactic as 4 out of the 7 closely monitored MDWs, have disclosed in their 'rant' videos they have occasionally self-censored the challenges they face in order not to discourage others from migrating. While this could be true to an extent, it is possible if they candidly shared their abuse and exploitation, their advertisements will fail to attract potential MDWs. Bivra is not only a broker for a recruiting agent but also collaborates with a training institute that offers pre-departure trainings. Benta also is a brand ambassador to one of the training institutions that offer pre-departure homecare courses. More often MDWs would share testimonials of success stories of their recruitment process, which buttress them as trustworthy individuals. As seen in figure 13, Buti is showcasing to her 59,500 followers that she has successfully brokered recruitment for two of her audience members.



Figure 12 Screenshot from a comment left under one of Bivra's recruitment post.

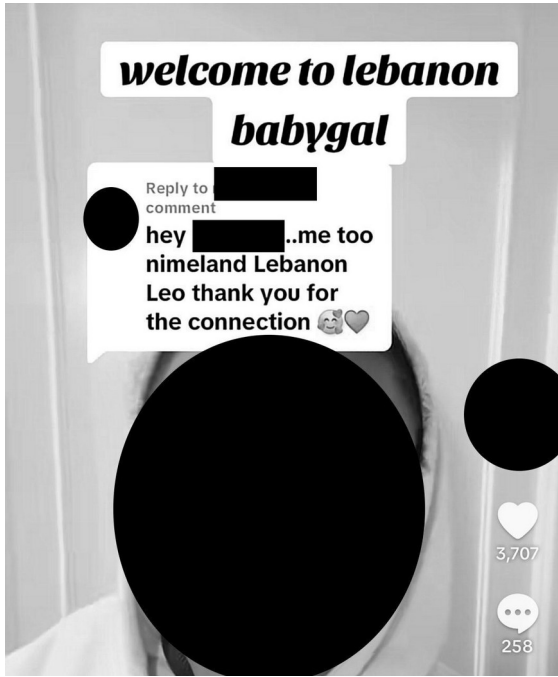


Figure 13 Testimonial illustrating Buti success as a recruiting broker

This is a video posted by Buti in response to a commenter. Buti demonstrates her success as a recruiting broker as she has successfully facilitated for two people to work in Lebanon.



Figure 14 Boina posting on behalf of a recruiting agency.

She asks those interested to message her using the phone number I have censored.

5.4 Exploiting parasocial relationships

In offline settings, Katz, Lazarsfeld and Roper (2006) note part of influencing involves being opinion leaders. The same applies to digital media influencers. They take the role of instructors of the community of practice (CoP). In CoPs, bonds are formed around shared interest and partake in

learning as a collective with the purpose of sharpening skills and knowledge (Wenger, 1998). In my observation, the seven identified MDWs were approached as sages virtually visited to resolve conflict, impart their wisdom through advice they share and offer ethical guidance. Here, Amin Maalouf's (2001) horizontal identities in his plurality of belongings cogently applies in this case. That these transnational labourers navigating similar lived experiences establish a shared identity, the 'horizontal identity' as described by Maalouf (2001).

MDWs as a collective bond based on their shared spatial and temporal liminalities as well as their dehumanization, exploitation and complex family relationships. It is in these experiences they foment a horizontal identity strengthened by digital infrastructure. This horizontal identity heightens feelings of parasocial relationships. Furthermore, since MDWs are often confined, isolated and detracted of dignity, this makes them the ideal media consumers to form interpersonal bonds with SMIs who are MDWs. Paravati et al. (2020) points out that parasocial relationships are a sub-classification of social surrogates. SMIs assist the consumers to feel as if they belong addressing the consumer's social gaps such as loneliness, isolation and rejection (Paravati et al. 2020). They mimic actual relationships such as friendship and even romance (Tukachinsky and Stever, 2019), in this case they encourage filial relationship, labelling their guidance as 'sisterly advice' or endearing terms as seen in figure 13. Benta has embraced and successfully branded herself as a 'big sister' to other MDWs. She is called upon by other MDWs to resolve misunderstandings within the digital community, table solutions for those finding difficult to adapt to this new environment and overall, a source of encouragement. It is within this trust and interpersonal bond, Benta is planning to open a residential children care entity where she will look after the children of MDWs. A role that is currently reserved for close kin.

Their advice videos cement them as opinion leaders and are often trusted to provide sound guidance. While some of the advice videos are not monetized, it is in such recursive videos that establish them as sages with their professional experience and following legitimizing their authority to provide guidance. Therefore, their monetized content⁶ is readily accepted as authentic advice with the intention of improving MDWs since they share a 'perceived' interpersonal relationship with each other. MDWs do not view such content as beguiled posts exploiting shared horizontal identity and perceived interpersonal relationships. For some posts, affiliate marketing is surreptitious at a surface level deciphered as earnest advice. As for other posts, advertisements are displayed on the screen or in the caption of the video but are not addressed by the SMI. Instead, in such a video they provide advice on how to cope and resist exploitative labour practices, the importance of living a healthy style and even how to navigate tumultuous filial relationships. An example of such is seen in figure 15. The SMI only shared advice as a 'big sister' to novice workers and did not address the land advertisement image on her post that appeared throughout her video. This can be interpreted as the SMI wanting to be viewed as close kin who genuinely cares for the well-being of her followers as she addresses their working conditions and how to navigate mistreatment. Even if she does not address the investment opportunities, she is signaling that she is recommending economic advice that would be beneficial to them similar to the guidance she has just shared. Furthermore, the hashtags she also uses are to reiterate that she is giving advice based on hard truths and this includes the land investment as it appears throughout the post.

⁶ Refer to table 2

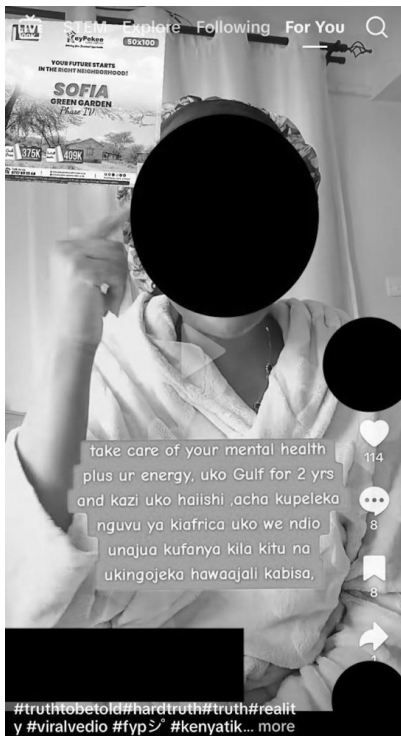


Figure 15 Sponsored post selling land while providing advice to other MDWs not to over exert themselves

5.5 Conclusion

Albeit digitalized livelihoods being relatively nascent, Sedda and Husson (2023) correctly recognize such income pathways are in their burgeoning years of being professionalized. I demonstrate how SMI MDWs' alternative income earned from their digital side-hustle supplements their monthly wages. MDWs exploit parasocial relationships to bolster their alternative income pathways. They take advantage of the horizontal identities coupled with perceived interpersonal relationships to make themselves robust online marketers. Furthermore, SMI MDWs relatability due to their lived experiences and current profession as transnational domestic workers married with accessibility afforded by digital infrastructures make them preferred recruitment digital recruiters. Moreover, as leaders of the CoP these MDWs gain an elevated status in comparison to MDWs who simply consume their content. They set the tone for what is acceptable forms of resistance, when best to capitulate to compartment through their advice videos.

6. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing literature of online platforms as counter-spaces for migrant workers. It does so by approaching content posted by transnational labourers as not prattle pastime but rather a window into mosaic forms of power dynamics within a rigid structure such as the Kafala system. This dissertation prioritised the narratives of MDWs in order to produce situated knowledge, away from discursive framework of human rights advocacy. Therefore, this is not an advocacy study hence the focus is not what could or should be done in this labour structure. Instead, it approaches virtual spaces as counter-spaces to study MDWs everyday experiences as agentic actors who challenge their oppression and exploitation. However, the study also is cautious of overstating the resistance practices of overseas workers. It recognizes that most of their counter-conduct is temporary, subtle and away from holders of authority, in this case their Madams. It explores the fluid micro-dynamics of the Madam and MDWs. Nevertheless, such approaches are necessary as they dilute the potency of the victimhood imagery imposed on migrant workers. Additionally, it also explores power relations amongst MDWs. By demonstrating how digital influencer culture is efficiently and robustly deployed by MDWs who are also social media influencers.

By studying their day-to-day activities, I was able to audit formalized responses deployed by Kenya as a labour supplying country in collaboration with their migration governance partners such as the ILO and International Organization for Migration. This approach is pertinent for the aforementioned policy makers in evaluating their responsive and mitigative actions. Such evaluations are also useful for other labour exporting countries to take stock of what responses by other countries are working as well as identifying areas of improvement. In my research I investigated how instilling compartment and regulating the recruitment process has failed to an extent to halt abuse and fatality of MDWs. In addition, by exploring parasocial relationships formed by followers of MDWs indicated that formalized recruitment process by the state has not stopped unregulated recruitment of potential guest workers. This is despite the Kenyan government being recruiters themselves alongside launching platforms for agents to post overseas job opportunities. My study shows that the unregulated recruitment market continues to boom online with SMI MDWs being the go-to recruitment brokers.

Internet mediated research does indeed democratize knowledge produced as argued by Sanya and Lutomia, (2015) and demonstrated by Bryan (2021) and Chee (2023). This is pertinent particularly where certain voices of subjects of studies have been elided in the past. It does indeed provide the opportunity to hear from and observe the marginalized, criminalized and overall, the subaltern beyond sensationalized or parochial framing. This is useful as such groups of peoples' experiences would no longer be studied flatly but rather textured with nuance. In my research I was able to capture variegated navigations and negotiations of transnational labourers in their oppression, exploitation and imposed behaviour. That in their everyday experiences I was able to observe MDWs beyond the imagery of perpetual servile beings.

This dissertation is limited by its focus on TikTok as a counter-space with Kenyan foreign domestic helpers at the foreground. It invites further research on other platforms. A comparative study of the implications of semi-private digital spaces such as invite only WhatsApp and Facebook groups would provide deeper insight on their everyday experiences. This thesis has not discussed how digital spaces have become sites of rescue for 'stuck' and runaway MDWs as well as medium for mobilization and digital activism. Research can be conducted on how different nationalities have utilized online spaces to conduct rescue missions when labour exporting countries have failed to facilitate returning trapped and runaway MDWs.

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