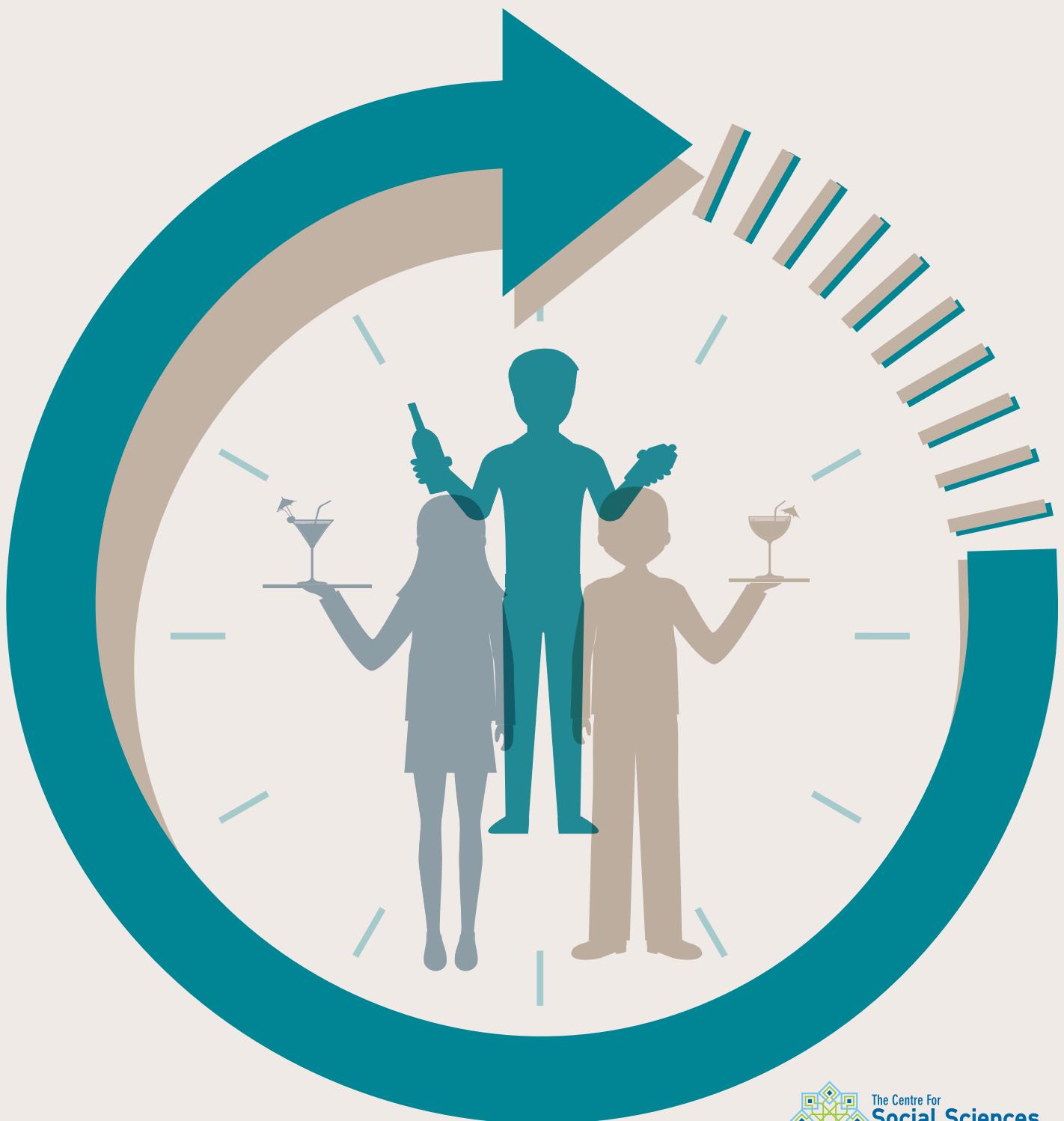


CASUALISATION, PRECARITY, AND PERMANENT INSTABILITY OF INFORMAL WORKERS.

A look at the working conditions of waiters
and bartenders in Lebanon.



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INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at “informal employment” through the lens of workers in the food and beverage service industry (mainly waiters and bartenders) in Lebanon in 2022/2023. It focuses on the labor conditions and multiple challenges faced by these workers, as well as the impact of “informal employment” on the professional and personal lives of these workers in times of economic crisis. The paper is based on in-depth longitudinal interviews with eight waiters and bartenders that, at the time of undertaking this research, work in a restaurant, bar, or cafe in Lebanon. All of the eight interviewees are informally employed, with no formal employment relationship between the person and the employer defining the rules and legislations of the employment as well as the duties, benefits, and entitlements of employer and employee.¹ The enterprises themselves are all within the formal sector, i.e. registered companies in Lebanon.

In Lebanon, “informal employment” as well as “employment in the informal sector” are widespread: many (mainly small) companies are not registered, mostly in sectors such as agriculture, construction², transport, and commerce. Likewise, the rate of informal employment is very high, and – according to latest statistics – has increased in recent years from 54,9 % in 2018-2019 to 62,4 % in January 2022 (Central Administration of Statistics and ILO 2022).

Reasons for these high informality rates are multiple: many enterprises prefer to escape the costly duties of formal registration and employment in the country, while the state itself is neither granting basic (social) protection and services nor able to enforce or control the implementation of the labor or social security laws (ILO 2021). Also, a high number of foreign workers and refugees are not able to access a formal work permit and are therefore obliged to engage in informal employment relations (Lebanon Support 2016). Since 2019, in light of the deepening socio-economic and political crisis in the country, informality rates have increased. Small enterprises struggle to sustain their operations and businesses, while existing social security schemes gradually lose in value, functionality, and meaning – diminishing any incentive to formalize labor relations. Therefore, informal labor, be it among Lebanese or foreign workers, has become a predominant labor relation notably in the service sector and more specifically the food and beverage industry (ILO 2021; ILO and UNICEF 2022). This industry was severely affected not only by the economic crisis in Lebanon but also by global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukraine

¹ In 1993, the 15th “International Conference of Labour Statisticians” (ICLS) defined the term “informal sector” for the first time. According to this definition, the term refers to the informal “characteristics of the production units” (ILO 2018, 6) themselves. At the 17th ICLS in 2003, however, the term “informal employment” was defined, highlighting a different angle of the term “informality” by looking at the characteristics of the job itself. A person can therefore be employed in the formal sector but still be informally employed, due to the fact that the employment relationship is “in law or in practice, not subject to national labor legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits.” (Hussmanns 2004).

² According to article 7 of the current labor law, agricultural workers as well as migrant domestic workers are also excluded from the law and therefore do not enjoy any legal rights or social protection.

war since February 2022 leading to temporary closures of businesses and rising costs of wheat, corn, energy, and gas.

In the existing literature, informal labor is often associated with the notion of precarity (Standing 2011; Chen and Vanek 2013; Breman and van der Linden 2014; Abdo 2018), highlighting the lack of social protection schemes and fundamental rights at work, the little opportunities for promotion or salary increase and the lack of a space for “social dialogue”³ (mainly between employers and employees) or collective bargaining. This paper focuses on the precarious situation of informally employed waiters and bartenders in Lebanon in 2023 and their worsening effects in a crisis-ridden context. Informal labor notably in the food and beverage industry appears to be an easy entry and rather flexible opportunity to generate income for many young people in the country who, in the context of an ongoing crisis, are neither able to continue their education, nor find “decent work”⁴. However, the lack of labor rights and protection, bargaining power, stability, and solidarity characterize this type of employment.

³ Defined by the ILO, “social dialogue” refers to “all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy.” These can be consultation among the government and employers and workers or only among workers and employers within a specific workplace. If successful, social dialogue “can also be a tool for maintaining or encouraging peaceful and constructive workplace relations.” (ILO 2023¹)

⁴ Defined by the ILO, “decent work” refers to work “that delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.” (ILO 2023²)

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on qualitative research, primarily based on semi-structured, in-depth, and longitudinal interviews that were undertaken with eight workers in the food and beverage industry in Lebanon (six men and two women). Five of the male workers are young men (between 20 and 35 years old), among them two Lebanese, one Sudanese migrant worker, and one Syrian-Palestinian refugee. The fifth male worker is a Lebanese bartender in his early 50s. The female workers are young women, both Lebanese. Topics addressed in the interviews tackled work conditions and employment relations, socio-economic status, education and career path, family status, living conditions, experiences of exploitation, abuse, and violence, support and solidarity at work as well as hopes and dreams for the future, especially in the career and professional life. Personal information remains confidential including names, the name of the workplace, and names of colleagues, supervisors, and business owners.

Increased casualisation of workers in the food and beverage sector in Lebanon

In the last decade, informal labor is increasingly becoming the dominant form of employment for the majority of workers in many parts of the world. Reasons for this development are multiple: labor has become progressively more defined by global capitalism and its diverse crises than by national legal and economic frameworks (Chen and Vanek 2013). Following neoliberal ideologies and economic policies emerging in the 1980s, the form of labor that has become prevailing is reduced to “a commodity, pure and simple, [...] unprotected and can be bought at the lowest possible price and only for as long or as short as the labor power is required” (Breman and van der Linden 2014, 926). The emergence of this kind of labor goes hand in hand with a gradual dismantling of the welfare state and a weakening of organized labor movements. Increasingly new inequalities emerge, on the one hand, the return “of extremes of wealth and poverty” (Breman and van der Linden 2014, 922) and on the other hand, the growth of a “missing middle” (Maktabi, Zoughaib, and Abi Ghanem 2022), the latter being informal workers who neither benefit from social security contributory schemes, nor from social assistance programs for the poor. This “missing middle” is always at risk of sinking into poverty, due to their exclusion from certain social protection schemes and the unstable, often unregulated nature of their employment. Besides the extreme poor and the “missing middle” which constitute the main share of the informal labor force, flexible working practices are generally sought by workers as they can meet needs specific to individual situations (Robinson 1999, CIPD 2013). For example, students may seek a part-time contract when studying, or a casual contract without commitments. Some casual jobs may need highly skilled workers from less accessible workers pools, providing some individuals with certain levels of influence. In other cases, workers with important socio-economic capitals do sometimes seek out informality to benefit from its flexible and unrestricted nature (Kucera and Roncolato 2008). For those without a choice, informal labor does not only mean the constant possibility of falling into poverty, but also chronic and constant insecurity and anxiety, or the “four A’s” of “precariat experiences” as Guy Standing identifies them: “anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation” (Standing 2011, 20).

The interviewed bartenders and waiters in this paper can all be categorized as informal workers: their current employment is not regulated; they never signed a contract nor are they eligible for any social security or protection. Moreover, there is no regulated opportunity or space for the worker to discuss or bargain their salary, working hours, and possible promotions, or to raise and address experiences of exploitation, abuse, or violence.

The majority of the interviewed workers still had or have some kind of “formality” in their employment relation, showing that some workers can oscillate between formality and informality or that, in other cases, formal aspects of employment intersect with informal ones. Still, all interviewed

workers described to us that – in light of the economic and financial crisis in Lebanon – the informal nature of their employment has increased and is becoming more and more the norm for waiters and bartenders in Lebanon. Although the interviewed workers differ in gender, age, socio-economic background, education status, nationality, and therefore “legal residence and work status”, they all have in common that the chosen career as bartender or waiter was not voluntary but is currently still perceived as the best possible option in light of several entangled crises they are living through: the financial and economic crisis in Lebanon, a lack of better employment opportunities or prospects of continuing their education, the obligation to sustain their own livelihood and to often support family and friends, and currently no perspective of leaving Lebanon – either to go back to their home country or to leave to a third country. All interlocutors described to us that they loved their profession and were keen on developing their competencies in the field they are working in, but still suffer from the working conditions and the lack of opportunities. The next sections will take an in-depth look at main characteristics of the working conditions and their impact on these workers’ lives from their perspective, including the lack of labor rights and social protection, the temporary character of their employment relation, the lack of bargaining power, and the lack of solidarity among colleagues.

Lack of labor rights and social protection

“At my last job, I had agreed with them from the beginning to work six days per week for nine hours a day. In reality, I mostly worked seven days per week for 12 hours per day. Because I had a lot of experience and I stayed with them for many years, the managers relied on me for every problem they had in the bar. But I never had a working contract, never health insurance, or a work or residence permit. When I was sick, they would not pay, only sometimes half the salary, out of courtesy or because they want to help me, or they ‘like me’. It was never about rights, only about what the managers decided to give. I left the company after working there for three years, and I did not get an indemnity or anything. It was as if I had never worked there.”⁵

Jad⁶ is a 30-year-old young man of Syrian origin. He came to Lebanon in 2018 because of the war in his home country and in order to evade military service there. Jad has been working in the food and beverage industry since 2016, and

⁵ Interview with Jad, 30 years old, from Syria, living in Beirut, working as a bartender, barista, and cook since 2016.

⁶ All names used in this paper have been changed to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents.

continued working in the same industry after his arrival in Lebanon. Since he started working in Lebanon, he changed jobs and employers four times, every time for a better offer, i.e., a better salary but never more rights:

“I started with a monthly salary of 400 USD in 2018 which was hardly covering my rent, later it became 800 USD. I left because I got offered a salary of 900 USD, then at the end of 2019 the crisis started, and the salary started to be paid in Lebanese Lira and it decreased more and more. Today, my salary is around 300 USD per month which is still more than most people in the sector get.”

For Jad, the salary is the only negotiable variable in his employment relation; in every job he has had, it is always made clear from the get-go that he cannot expect anything more, i.e. benefits as he is a “foreigner”.

If this scenario was deemed slightly different for Lebanese workers, however in reality, the situation tends to become increasingly similar after the start of the crisis. Yasmine, a 25-year-old Lebanese woman who has been working in the sector for seven years, told us about her experience, and how the crisis has been affecting her working conditions and crashing her hopes to better them. “When I started, I used to get paid per hour and then after one year I got promoted so I had a monthly salary. In 2018, they registered all employees at the NSSF but after the crisis everything changed. Now, we have to bargain about the salary mainly, nothing else matters anymore. Even for me, the salary is the most important aspect of the work. I need it because I am also supporting my family. I don’t even think about health insurance or these things anymore.”⁷

Charbel, a 33-year-old restaurant manager corroborates the centrality of the salary in comparison to social security and other – equally important – benefits. He explains: “as the crisis continued, I felt that what was being withdrawn from my salary for the NSSF, which hardly covers anything today, was useless. I asked the owner to remove me from social security as I need more cash during these times, with a salary that is barely enough for a month”.

Today, at the time of writing this paper, none of our interlocutors has a signed work contract, their employment being based on verbal agreements, noting here that the Lebanese labor law does recognise these as legally binding. Benefits or social security are no longer being discussed. The focus on the salary at the expense of any other benefit shows how the priorities of already precarious workers have completely shifted to mere survival and overreliance on cash and disposable income on the one hand, and on the other hand, it illustrates the limited space for bargaining and negotiation.

⁷ Interview with Yasmine, a 25-year-old Lebanese woman from Beirut, working as a barista since 2016.

The lack of bargaining power and solidarity

In the current crisis ridden context, all of the research participants voiced the impossibility of bringing up or discussing with their respective employers a formal written and signed contract, social security, fixed working hours, or leaves and days off. Even discussions about a higher salary appear to quickly reach dead ends. “The answer will usually be, you can leave anytime and find another job.”⁸ – as Noura, a Lebanese woman in her early 30s, who works as a bartender in Beirut, puts it. Negotiations with the employer appear to take the form of informal discussions that tend to be based on personal sentiments rather than professional arguments or criteria. “Because they like me, they grant me some extra benefits” – was a recurring statement of our respondents.

The personalisation of the professional relationships not only makes it difficult to negotiate work-related matters based on objective criteria, but also renders solidarity or collective action between workers extremely challenging. It creates a dependence dynamic between workers and their employers, hindering not only individual attempts of negotiation, but also any possibility of uniting or organizing for collective bargaining. “Flexibilization [of the labor market] results in growing stress and decreasing trust among fellow workers” – as described by Breman and van der Linden (Breman and van der Linden 2014, 933) and has led to globally weakened workers’ movements.

“We get along well and often go out together as colleagues, but when it comes to a problem at work, there is no solidarity. In the end, it is about your personal relationship with the manager, we do not have anything else, so we need to try to preserve this relationship because it keeps us our job. You cannot waste this relationship by standing in solidarity with your colleague.”⁹

Indeed, the bargaining power of workers has been through cyclical patterns historically: from agricultural work dependency, to industrialisation and the rise of bureaucracy, to more contemporary debates about union decline, globalisation, financialisation or the rise of the gig economy, or, in a context of Lebanon, a largely informal one. Globally, and in Lebanon specifically, a widespread decline in union membership and collective bargaining has been notable, and is due to many factors. These range from anti-union laws (Bou Khater 2019), union cooptation (Mouawad 2021), a rise in service sector jobs with flexibilisation and job market fragmentation, to the rise of the neoliberal doxa that eschews the idea of collectivism.

⁸ Interview with Noura, 32 years old, Lebanon woman from Beirut, working as a bartender since 2010.

⁹ Interview with Fadi, Lebanese 25 years old, waiter in a restaurant in Antelias.

In addition to this, many respondents also refer to issues like stress (such as Gilbert who juggles between two jobs and night shifts, while hardly being able to make ends meet), or experiences of harassment or dealing with aggressive or rude customers – which seems to be mostly encountered by women workers – with little to no support from their managers. Noura explains:

“I always solve these issues myself, there is no way I expect support from my managers. Maybe in all my time there was one manager that was able to handle these issues in a professional way but other than this they just ignore them, so when the emotional burden becomes too much, I just leave the job.”¹⁰

The two sentences “I just leave” or “they told me I could just leave” were recurring in our interviews. These illustrate the fear of losing one’s job or having reduced hours after voicing any grievances, concerns, or demands.

As the next section shows, leaving the job usually means ending up in another informal and temporary work setting.

Permanent instability

“I am 50 years old now and I have been working as a bartender since I was 16. You ask me how many employers I had. I have no idea; most of the places do not exist anymore. In the beginning, the first ten years, I was working in the same place; I had built it up with the owner. But since then, one year here, two years there, I got used to it. Nothing is permanent here in Lebanon [...]”¹¹

While Wissam is the oldest among interviewed workers with the longest work experience in the sector, even the young people we interviewed had similar experiences of constantly changing employment relations – either due to offers of higher salary or due to the closing of the place, the dismissal of staff or their own wish to leave a job. Instability seems to characterize all aspects of our interviewees lives, beyond employment. The story of Yasmine is telling. She had interrupted school at the age of 16 and started working in the food and beverage industry because it was her only option and she had the responsibility of supporting her family. Jad studied Arabic literature in Syria but had to interrupt his studies due to the war and seek refuge in

¹⁰ Interview with Noura, 32 years old, Lebanon woman from Beirut, working as a bartender since 2010.

¹¹ Interview with Wissam, 50 years old, Lebanese from Beirut, working as a bartender for 34 years.

Lebanon. He currently oscillates between wanting to go back to Syria and take care of his parents, trying to find a way to Europe, or staying in Lebanon and “maybe at some point open[ing] my own business here.”¹² Noura had to move houses twice in the last year, and changed her job three times. At the beginning of 2022, she had enrolled at university but dropped out three months later, as she did not have time to follow classes. She describes it as follows: “I am constantly on the move, the only stable thing in my life are my friends but I hardly have time to see them. Sometimes I feel like a lone wolf.”¹³

Based on research data and these testimonies, permanent instability seems to be the main characteristic of the lives of our respondents, including but not limited to the professional one.

¹² Interview with Jad, 30 years old, from Syria, living in Beirut, working as a bartender, barista and cook since 2016.

¹³ Interview with Noura, a 32-years-old Lebanese woman, working as a bartender in Beirut since 2010.

CONCLUSION

This paper sheds light on the current situation of informal workers in the food and beverage sector in Lebanon, amidst the ongoing and exacerbating economic crisis. It highlights the increase of informality and work casualization in this industry after 2019, as well as its impact on workers. The impact can be notably seen with the shifting priorities of these informal workers themselves from securing stable employment with benefits to over relying on disposable income and cash so as to get by in their everyday lives. The casualization of work has also led to extremely individualized work relationships that contribute, on the one hand, to limiting any bargaining power, and on the other hand, to undermine attempts to collectively organize, all the while increasing dependency towards the employer. Temporary and unstable employment circumstances appear hence to constitute a vicious continuum in the lives of these informal workers.

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