

**The Realities, Needs and Challenges
Facing the Feminist and Queer
Movements in Lebanon
in Light of a Multi-Layered Crisis**

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG – BEIRUT OFFICE

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report provides a situation analysis of women in Lebanon. Overall, it examines gender, feminism, sexuality, queer, and human rights conditions and challenges. The reading takes place in the context of Lebanon's severe economic collapse, especially after the Beirut Port Blast and the lockdowns imposed during the pandemic over the past two years. This report was prepared based on two research phases: the first phase includes a desk review that looks at the situation of Lebanese refugees, displaced women, and queer individuals in the context of economic, political, and social conditions related to this collapse; it aims to understand how gender and social identity impact and determine current conditions. This phase contributes to building the research background on the topic, as well as constructing an interview guide in a way that covers various contemporary topics. The second phase involves interviewing thirty feminist and queer activists in an attempt to map and read different opinions and evidence on how women, feminist, and queer movements are affected by the intersections of the pandemic, the blast, and the economic deterioration in the country. It also reveals how women in Lebanon are impacted by regional and global events. Nowadays, the feminist scene that has experienced many discriminatory aspects legally, economically, and socially over past decades is facing increasing challenges that require comprehensive and courageous interventions. This comes as a response to the multi-layered crisis that takes more virulent dimensions as the collapse deepens daily. The report also identifies the impact of the current situation on the needs and networking efforts of feminist organizations, activists, youth, and "alternative movements". It also deals with existing feminist structures and its relationship with the state's systems and agencies, and how feminists deal with these shortcomings. The report begins with mapping the political and economic situation in Lebanon and its impact on women's rights in general, and on the increasing issues facing women as a group who has always been the least protected in society. It then addresses serious aspects of the crisis, affecting women and various marginalized groups in unprecedented ways, touching every detail of their lives. The review goes on to illustrate how feminist and queer activists and associations have responded under crisis. Moreover, the review goes back to the roots of the problems facing women by dissecting the ongoing legal discrimination and comprehending the extent to which it has reached today. It also follows the situation of refugees and displaced women from Syria and Palestine and the challenges met by the LGBTQI community. The report will also cover the growing health-related issues, recent and emerging crises (such as period poverty), work conditions, the media, environment, gender-based violence, advocacy, networking, and other overlapping topics that shape women's current reality. Finally, the mapping seeks to show the development and response of women's organizations and movements over recent years, before enquiring about women's position in public policies and on political agendas in a country heading into a future with significant difficulty.

The Positionality and Objectives of this Research in Light of the Current Situation

Heinrich Böll Stiftung conducts this analysis to understand the current gender position in Lebanon for several reasons. The foundation needs to better understand the situation, to draw an internal institutional plan towards approaching some issues, and to develop a funding vision that meets the urgent needs of individuals and organizations. This comes through continuous implementation of the gender vision adopted by the Foundation¹ throughout its international and regional offices in Beirut and the Arab world. Secondly, the Foundation relies on this mapping for a set of thirty interviews with feminist activists to establish direct and effective communication with stakeholders and practitioners who are active on different feminist causes. It is essential to draw parallels on the most accurate needs and aims dominant on the feminist and queer scenes in Lebanon, and to understand on-the-ground challenges away from stereotypes and prevailing narratives. What we mean by the feminist and queer scene is within the scope that we were able to cover through review and interview processes. We do not claim in any way that the mapping covers everything, as it is possible that there are feminist perceptions in regions and frameworks that we could not reach or consider. Therefore, we are aware that there are other spaces that may exist outside what we mention. However, despite this, we try to cover the conditions of women, queer society, refugee women, migrant workers, and women in marginalized societies to the best of our knowledge. The mapping dissects the circumstantial intersection of the aforementioned groups through a gender and queer lens and by contextualizing their respective situations.

Since 2019, Lebanon has been through critical, unprecedented obstacles in its history, with seemingly no end in sight. To deal with such a reality, a new level of responsibility and a great deal of seriousness and understanding in both the development and gender fields are needed; what the Foundation is trying to maintain in its current projects and what drives this review. While working on this research, we found many gender mappings that took place before and after the Beirut Port Blast. However, our observations attempt to engage various emerging voices, visions, and ideas; issues remain important in linking the concepts we have reached with each other. Our efforts will be equally important in establishing an interaction with the concerned organizations and activists and in initiating deeper communication between these voices and visions at a later stage. This mapping also seeks to accurately understand the roots of many of the problems floating on the surface today.

1-The Heinrich Böll Foundation vision on gender and feminism: <https://www.boell.de/en/feminism-gender>

According to the global gender gap index, Lebanon ranks 119th, as indicated by the World Economic Forum's latest report (2022)², amid a rapidly deteriorating situation in the country. This classification calls for an understanding of the factors and circumstances that place women and their issues at such a low rank, pushing them away from any form of equality at various levels. Addressing this low rank is not limited to one aspect of discrimination or violence against women, it is in fact a reflection of their position as citizens and individuals, or whether they are even citizens of this country at all. In this introductory part, we provide an overview of the situation of women in Lebanon in relation to current political and economic events in light of the ongoing effects of the pandemic. In fact, understanding the economic, social, and cultural structure of Lebanon today is essential to appreciating women's situation and the positionality of the feminist and queer movements.

2- The report was made available on July 12, 2022: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf

The Political and Economic Situation in Lebanon

Since mid-2019, Lebanon has been going through an economic collapse, the first of its kind in the country's history, according to the World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor (2021). This failure is not only limited to direct classic symptoms, such as a decline in purchasing power and commercial revenues or through shrinking tourism, as these were the assumed signals of a failing economy in the past. However, today's indicators seem more serious. The critical financial crisis is mainly related to the deterioration of the value of Lebanese pound—compared to the US dollar and other foreign currency exchange rates— and is taking over economic and financial prospects. This is accompanied by the dominance of restrictive measures taken by Lebanese banks towards depositors, which prevents them from withdrawing their money and deposits, except in Lebanese pounds, within very few and unfair limits and rates. This reality comes within a system that depends entirely on imports from abroad to meet the basic needs in the country, what is known as the “dollarization” of the economy. This pushes hundreds of thousands of citizens and residents in the country into extreme levels of poverty . This picture prompted the World Bank to describe the crisis in Lebanon as “one of the three largest global financial crises since the mid-nineteenth century.”

As the country plunges into the deepest banking and financial crisis in its history, and perhaps the modern world, according to the statistics, it is expected that Lebanon will suffer painful losses that will not fall equally on everyone, according to World Bank estimates. In parallel to this economic collapse, the country is going through a deep political conflict and regional dilemmas that impede any attempt to address the economic issue or contain it with a serious and unified action plan. The political deadlock in Lebanon is always in the background of any economic or social situation. The internal political agreement after the end of civil war and the signing of the Taif Agreement never happened, and soon the country's parties were divided against each other in every aspect. This situation has persisted over past decades, in parallel with continuous external interventions that made the internal dispute sharp and intractable. Today's political scene is divided into political alliances, based on regional powers that have nothing in common except to hold onto power and suppress any serious attempt for change, affecting the foundations of the Lebanese system. In 2019, before the pandemic became global reality, international estimates predicted that 50% of people

3- World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor, Spring 2021: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/lebanon-economic-monitor-spring-2021-lebanon-sinking-to-the-top-3>

4- From the report “The great denial” that was released by the World Bank Economic Monitor of Lebanon (2021). <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/36862/LEM%20Economic%20Monitor%20Fall%202021.pdf>

5- World Bank, “Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction,” press release, June 1, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>

residing in Lebanon will live below the poverty line by 2020. However, some Lebanese economists estimated that the number will be much higher and will increase over time. The reality was not limited to the economic crisis: both the pandemic and the Beirut Port Blast in 2020 resulted in crushing losses on the fragile and eroding Lebanese social strata, which confirmed that poverty rates exceeded what was expected.

To understand the roots and depth of the crisis, it is worth knowing the Lebanese economy has always relied on an influx of US dollars. It must be noted that the foundations of financial continuity in Lebanon depended mainly on the flow of remittances and foreign investments, especially those coming from the Arab Gulf states according to the Lebanese researcher Hicham Safieddine in his book “The Banking State: Lebanon’s Financial History”. In 1997, The Banque du Liban, the country’s central bank, artificially pegged the exchange rate of the Lebanese pound (LBP) to the US dollar (USD) at 1,507, in a country that does not produce, does not export, and does not manage, extract, or invest in natural resources. This was preceded by years of fluctuations in exchange rates, from 1987 to 1997, that led the country to a series of social unrest and public turmoil. In fact, back in 2009, a financial boom took place in Lebanon, due to the global financial crisis, transferring capital and deposits from countries experiencing significant financial challenges into Lebanon, which, at the time, was seen as “financially secure” according to the World Bank Monitor (2020). However, in 2011, the financial slowdown began, remittances from the Lebanese diaspora decreased, and the economic circulation of dollars decreased as well, until the beginning of its widespread scarcity in 2016. Back then, the Governor of the Banque du Liban started a financial engineering plan that encouraged banks, despite the risks and negative indicators, to place more financial bonds at the service of Banque du Liban, and thus to the service of the public exchange debt. In fact, foreign investments, especially the ones coming from the Arab Gulf, declined dramatically between 2016 and 2019 due to regional conflict, in which Lebanon was embroiled. Growth indicators also showed that these investments and funds flowing from abroad witnessed a sharp decline in 2017. In 2019, the USD had reached a massive decline in reserves due to transfers abroad and to large withdrawals; not to mention the amounts that were wasted due pegging the exchange rate at 1,507 LBP and the central bank’s borrowings from banks, speculation, and interest rates. Because of the

6- The article “Lebanon’s Crisis: Great Denial in the Deliberate Depression” retrieved from the World Bank: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/01/24/lebanon-s-crisis-great-denial-in-the-deliberate-depression>

7- *Banking on the State: The Financial Foundations of Lebanon* is a book by the Lebanese researcher Hicham Safieddine on “the standardization of economic practices and financial regimes” and the emergence of central banking and its impact on political economies. The book focused on Lebanon as a case study. It is described and available through Stanford University Press, via this link: <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=28419>

8- *The Journey of the Lebanese pound throughout 100 years*. Available through Blog Baladi <https://blogbaladi.com/the-lebanese-lira-100-years-journey/>

decline in the reserves, the confidence in the stability of the Lebanese pound decreased and concerns about the stability of the banking sector was exacerbated, which led the depositors withdrawing more of their dollar accounts, which in turn contributed to a vast contraction in dollar reserves, causing deterioration in the unofficial exchange rate from 1,507 to, at the time of writing, a record-high rate of 39,900 LL in October 2022 .

With the depreciation of the Lebanese pound, the price of basic commodities, most of which are imported, increased—limiting the ability of people to bear the costs of food, shelter, housing, transportation, electricity, medicines, and healthcare in particular—after subsidies were lifted gradually on most goods and services the Lebanese state had previously subsidized, with the help of the Central Bank. The monetary and financial deterioration was accompanied by deterioration at all levels and sectors, in particular the healthcare sector, which was previously considered one of the best sectors in the Arab region and the Middle East. We should also mention the enormous damage affecting the education and higher-education systems, both suffering from massive student and professor dropouts. The organic relationship between the state and the banks and the tireless attempt to prevent the fall of the banks came at the expense of the impoverished classes. The Banque du Liban also pledged to issue bonds on behalf of the state in order to borrow money in foreign currency (hence the stability of the Lebanese pound against the dollar) in order to perpetuate the common interest between banks and depositors. The Lebanese government did not create a social security system that could accommodate the most marginalized and vulnerable groups. Instead, as a response, the government through its political and economic systems started formal negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to request loans from the World Bank amid an official (late) declaration of state bankruptcy. The Lebanese side aimed to discuss a plan to rescue the faltering economy, with ten billion dollars in aid for the country as part of an austerity policy plan, but when the politicians failed to agree on an estimate of the size of the country's financial losses, the negotiations stopped. Till now, negotiations are pending, despite the appointment of a representative by the IMF in Lebanon and the recent dialogues; this step remains linked to a serious reform package that does not seem to be on the Lebanese authorities' agenda.

9- The information are available through “The Economic crisis in Lebanon...the roots, horizons and Impact” article on Al Istiklal electronic newspaper (2021).

10- According to an article by Hicham Safieddine in the Legal Agenda. Available through the link: <https://legal-agenda.com/تالوث-الحكم-المصرفي-تاريخ-من-انعدام-ال>

In light of this scene, we start to link the severe deterioration of the country to the decline in general human rights and women's conditions, in particular. It is also expected to have a decline in the current position of women's issues amongst the priorities on the national political agenda. Women's issues, often excluded from the Lebanese political agenda, are now more distant from any official prospect of reforms, and legal and social protection. Women in Lebanon were always in a situation that does not rise to equality or attainment of rights, even before the economic and social collapse. Therefore, they are more vulnerable to the devastating effects of the current economic crisis, already affecting the most vulnerable groups. In addition, even before these turbulent economic and political conditions, women in Lebanon were completely excluded from any serious economic and political decision-making, which is still the case today, estranging them from any corrective and rescue attempts for the country's future.

The economic crisis has a multi-faceted impact on women, from undermining their physical and mental health, job loss and unemployment, dropping out of school or university, to more exposure to violence and discrimination. Women also endure problems that would not have been detected in this way or amplitude, such as "period poverty" (to be addressed later in detail). The banking crisis led to a massive wave of unemployment among working women who partially lost their jobs or left the labor market completely. Not to mention the impact of the pandemic, which exacerbated the situation and forced women to leave their jobs under pressure from domestic and family responsibilities. Women are expected to provide unpaid care work in response to social pressures, based on the assumption that care work is exclusively their responsibility. Here, we should mention that migrant workers and refugee women have been given more domestic responsibilities in increasingly harsher conditions, when compared to Lebanese women; the following sections will discuss this issue in detail.

COVID19-: An Unwanted Guest at the Wrong Time

The scale of the crisis in Lebanon was amplified with the arrival of the global pandemic (COVID-19) to the country in February 2020. While most countries took the decision to quarantine and lockdown to limit the spread of the virus, Lebanon had to bear the consequences of a long, severe closure that affected its dilapidated economy, where families were and still are facing worsening problems. The pandemic inflated the picture and data of poverty and economic difficulties facing Lebanon's citizens and residents. The closures had a significant impact on marginalized groups, including low-income families, women, people with disabilities, displaced persons, refugees, migrant domestic workers, and LGBTQI people, along with the absence of any formal social rescue plan based on thoughtful coordination and understanding.

At the level of healthcare, things got out of hand given the healthcare system was already in decline. Struggling Lebanese hospitals were trying to provide patients with urgent and necessary medical care to confront the pandemic, coming under severe financial pressure affecting already scarce resources and medicines. The situation reached a climax with the interruption of fuel and energy supplies from hospitals during the summer of 2021. This came with the reluctance of the health insurance groups to pay the bills (even though COVID-19 patients were covered by the Ministry of Public Health and many external grants). This was also related to the government's failure to provide private and public hospitals with fuel or to settle the money it owes. In 2021, Médecins Sans Frontières indicated that there is an unprecedented demand for free reproductive and psychological healthcare services, in addition to medical care for people with chronic diseases, especially in Bekaa. This prompted the organization to express its serious concern about the availability of medical services and accessibility to it.

The pandemic deepened all aspects of the economic and social failures. Education, for example, was a victim of not just the pandemic but also of poor crisis management and lack of educational vision and infrastructure in the country. Teaching shifted from the classroom to remote sessions via the Internet. This created a new prospect of inequality and increased the risk of school dropouts for children who were not able to attend online classes, especially those more vulnerable and less able to follow up with distance learning. This imposed a threat that they might not be able to return when their peers physically returned to school. Several studies conducted by Social Media Exchange (SMEX), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) showed concern about the gap created by the online schooling, not only in terms of quality, but also through its accessibility in homes that do not have electricity, internet networks, computers, electronic boards, and smart phones. A governmental distance learning strategy has not been consistently

developed or implemented, leaving the majority of students out of the actual education framework. In many cases, families prioritized male children over female children for using or accessing limited educational online materials. It is necessary to note that that period was accompanied by mandatory quarantine without intervention from the authorities to ensure access to internet services everywhere, while some banks were preventing financial operations via the internet, which hindered many businesses.

While trying to understand the impact of the pandemic, work presented a major part of how the crisis affects women. According to a UN Women report (2020),¹¹ the pandemic contributed to job losses in Lebanon, especially among working women. Women were either the first to be laid off or chose to resign in order to carry out essentially “assigned” family responsibilities in a social structure that did not account for unpaid domestic work in the country’s national economy or GDP. Women were exploited in the process of capital accumulation. The pandemic reinforced existing social norms that define the roles of women as housewives and men as the financial heads or family breadwinners. Under this umbrella, men jobs remained in ownership and were prioritized since they were considered “heads of families” by the prevailing social division. Women who already carry the heavy burden of unpaid care work found themselves taking on more responsibilities with out-of-school children, homeschooling care work tasks, and providing the extra care needed for all family members, in addition to house-bound migrant domestic workers enduring more consequences than others.

According to a rapid assessment of the pandemic situation in Lebanon (2020),¹² the United Nations Development Program in Lebanon (UNDP) stated women who used to do three times more care work than men (pre-COVID-19) provided more care at home during the pandemic. In addition to more homeschooling with schools closed in all Lebanese regions. In fact, these data were similar to data received from different countries on a global level, indicating that, on average, women’s contribution to unpaid care work is already three times that of men. The UNDP reported that during lockdown this disproportionate rate deepened, especially with the responsibility of educating children, which was attributed more to mothers than fathers. According to this UNDP

11- The report is available through <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2020/04/Gender%20and%20COVID-19%20in%20Lebanon/Updated/Gender%20Alert%20on%20COVIDLebanon%20Arabic.pdf>

12- *Facing Multiple Crises: Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers and small-scale enterprises in Lebanon (2020)*. This rapid assessment can be found on this link <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/rapid-assessment-impact-covid-19-vulnerable-workers-and-small-scale-enterprises-lebanon>

assessment, women in Lebanon reported their fear of doing more unpaid care work at the expense of their paid jobs, which still requires them to be on the ground or to complete it remotely. Many of them risked their paid jobs to do unpaid household tasks; tasks that are subject to an already unfair social distribution.

A survey conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2020)¹³ in Lebanon on the situation of Lebanese and Syrians during the pandemic indicated that 70 percent of participants believe the burden of housework and care work had increased during the pandemic. Eighty-one percent of women think that their family duties had increased, while 64 percent of men think the same. According to Nagham Sharaf (2021),¹⁴ the main problem in Lebanon is the severe impact of the pandemic on the sectors in which women primarily work; this eventually led many of these women to leave their jobs and return home to provide more caring and homeschooling duties. Another study by Care International (2020)¹⁵ on the situation amongst Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians in Tripoli indicated that although men spent more time indoors during the pandemic, it was still less likely that they would ever contribute to domestic responsibilities.

Feminist anxiety transcends the figures facing the conditions that Female Migrant Domestic Workers (FMDW) were experiencing. With the deteriorating economic conditions in the country since the end of 2019 and the collapse of the Lebanese pound, many FMDW who kept their jobs were forced to stay at home during their off days, due to enforced closures, exposing them to more work. The extra care responsibilities were thrown at them without any additional compensation and, sometimes, for even lower salaries. Some workers were also forced to perform some care activities in outside, such as buying necessities/groceries and accompanying pets for walks, which put them at risk of contracting the virus.

13- This report "Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan and Lebanon" is available at the link https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749356.pdf

14- From an article by the journalist and activist Nagham Sharaf on Khateera Website. Available via the link: <https://khateera.com/article/97-تخلت-عن-وظيفتها-مرغمة-خسارة-النساء-مضاعفة-في-الأزمات>

15- A rapid assessment by Care International (2020). Available via: https://www.care-international.org/files/files/Rapid_Multi-Sectoral_Needs_Assessment_Lebanon2021.pdf

The Beirut Port Blast: Is the Collapse Complete Yet?

On August 4, 2020, an explosion in the port of Beirut devastated the city in an unprecedented way. The explosion affected the neighboring areas, violently destroying them, affecting the entire city and country. The blast, killing more than 200 people, injured thousands and destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes, facilities, and businesses. It also created urgent humanitarian needs as it affected many people living in destroyed areas and beyond. According to Human Rights Watch's study (2021),¹⁶ Lebanon's food supply has been dramatically affected, as Lebanon imports 85 percent of its food, and uses the port to handle about 70 percent of the country's imports. The explosion also affected 163 public and private schools and rendered half of Beirut's healthcare centers inoperable, according to the report.

Lebanese officials said the explosion was caused by approximately 3,000 tons of highly explosive Ammonium Nitrate, which had been stored at the port since 2013 without proper safety measures. International reports, media, and observers claim that high-ranking officials of the Lebanese state were aware of its presence but failed to act. Officials promised a transparent investigation into the causes of the explosion, while human rights groups expressed serious concerns about the transparency and independence of the investigation, calling for an international investigation to look into the causes of the explosion. Today, with the emergence of many scenarios, the circumstances that led to the incident are still subject to legal investigation accompanied by sharp political disputes and clashes between the various Lebanese parties.

According to UN Women (2020),¹⁷ women bore the brunt of the explosion with "51% of the affected population [...] defined as female-headed households, and 8% of those affected are elderly women living alone." However, to this day, any gender sensitive and sustainable response is still missing. The UN Women rapid assessment (2020) spotted gender issues that resurfaced as a result of the explosion and identified refugee women, women with disabilities, LGBTQI people, and FMDW among the most affected groups. Feminist and women's organizations insisted that women should remain at the forefront of the humanitarian response to the explosion; a reaction to their exclusion from official decision-making mechanisms, despite their presence and committed activism on the ground since. The decision-making process that we refer to here is somehow complicated, and it does not necessarily reflect the deep and true picture of policymaking, but the closest possible point to influence these policies, especially policies that have a direct impact on the reality of women, are the economic decisions and personal status laws.

16- The study by Human Rights Watch called "The killed us from the inside" (2021). Available through: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/08/03/they-killed-us-inside/investigation-august-4-beirut-blast>

17- A rapid Gender Analysis by UN Women. Available via: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/10/rapid-gender-analysis-of-the-beirut-port-explosion>

Among the problems exacerbated by the Beirut Port Blast was the increased vulnerability of women and girls to gender-based violence; they felt unsafe after having to leave their homes, lived temporarily or permanently in remote shelters, or endured partial or complete power outages. This increased the rate of violence and sexual harassment on the roads, resulting in many not going out and restricting their right to move freely. The problem of violence was growing silently, with no adequate plan to address it, and, it was noted, violence was higher among affected families as well as generally in Lebanon, according to UNDP agencies rapid assessment during the weeks following the explosion. This was accompanied with another major problem, “period poverty” or the lack of access to menstrual and related products to reproductive health and personal hygiene. Women were receiving in-kind aid that contained only food, deliberately ignoring their basic needs. Most of the families suffered heavy material losses in their homes and properties; women and girls did not have access to their own items or to the safe menstrual products and hygiene supplies they needed. They had to look for alternatives, such as tissues and pieces of clothes, indicating exacerbated level of period poverty. Although many girls and women needed these items, relief operations were mainly focused on distributing food without paying special attention to other needs, which reflects a poor understanding of the concept of need among women after the explosion. In fact, women were absent on two levels: on the ground, they were not asked about their needs, and, officially, where they were not present in formal decision-making processes in identifying and distributing aid or developing an appropriate and responsive action plan. Many of these aids were conditional, according to nationality, so many refugee women and migrant workers were excluded from their benefits. This is not just a misdistribution of aid, but a conscious decision to exclude and discriminate.

Women faced another major challenge post port blast: an increasing need for accessible and affordable mental health services. The truth is the entire Lebanese population faces a mental health challenge after the economic collapse, the lockdowns, and the Beirut port explosion. However, it is particularly important to encourage women and girls to seek the help they need in order to maintain their mental health because, due to overcrowding of needs and responsibilities, they often do not prioritize this type of health service. They are also not given priority in this field compared to what they are going through, according to a study prepared by Al-Hajj (2021)¹⁸ on the consequences of the Beirut port blast. In general, the health and psychological effects of the explosion were enormous and could not be confronted without a comprehensive recovery plan, for the affected women and men. According to another study conducted in 2021,¹⁹ women and girls are in need of long-term mental health assistance after the Beirut Port

18- A study by Al Hajj, Mokdad and Kazzi “Beirut explosion aftermath: lessons and guidelines” (2021). Available via: <https://emj.bmj.com/content/38/12/938>

19- A study by Natali Farran “Mental health in Lebanon: Tomorrow’s silent epidemic” (2021). Available via: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8503814/>

Blast and are less willing to seek such help if unassisted. Talking about the mental health of the Lebanese community and its residents requires extensive research. However, it must be noted, this area is not given the best approach despite attempts from the Ministry of Health and civil organizations and coordination between the two. People in general, and women in particular, are encouraged to seek psychological care, but do not receive adequate attention; their request for this service often falters, and it is certain that the reality is worse in the current crisis.

Feminist and women's rights organizations were heavily involved in the humanitarian response in the aftermath of the explosion, creating a form of solidarity and a growing sense of collective action and assistance among hard-hit communities. Many women also participated in creating a volunteer response body, through cleaning, handling aid, preparing meals for people who have lost their shelters, and across many other activities. In fact, women led most of the initiatives: heavily participating in the response and playing active roles from planning to engaging to implementation. However, women's and feminist organizations remained outside any formal decision-making or action-planning related to the response, which impeded attempts to contain emerging or significant issues relating to them. This is one reason why the response following the explosion was not largely geared towards women's needs, based on quick gender analysis conducted by UN Women in October 2020.²⁰ In light of this ever-growing reality, which began three years ago, we aim to build and present this mapping based on the opinions and visions of a large group of activists and feminist activists who were in contact with all of these issues and more. What follows is a broader explanation of the research process.

20- The source is previously mentioned in two of the footnotes.

Research Methodology and Investigative Approaches

To create a comprehensive understanding of the reality of the feminist movement and organizational work around successive manifestations of collapse, we conducted thirty interviews with activists, experts, and researchers who are familiar with gender fabric in Lebanon. We approached activists—whether in resident communities or displaced societies—LGBTQI movements, and regional feminists. These interviews were conducted to supplement this mapping and report with information that we did not find during the desk review and to obtain critical and analytical angles through their on-the-ground lenses. All interviews took place between February 21-April 15, 2022. The aim of the interviews was to reach a wide range of gender topics that address a broad range of points, which we then looked at and analyzed.

Before conducting the interviews, an interview guide was developed. The themes of the guide were varied and comprehensive, covering all current discussions in society, media, academia, activism, and organizational work across various fields. The themes were related to the economic and political crises (the economic conditions afflicting Lebanon since 2019 and its impact on women). The interviews also dealt with the impact of the pandemic and the Beirut Port Blast on the situation of women, the legal failure to protect women, the increasing legislative demands of civil society, political participation, and elections. The themes also included approaches about refugee women in Lebanon between Palestinian camps and displaced Syrians (I met and interviewed Palestinian and Syrian activists); laws and narratives; means of protection and integration; the LGBTQI community on rights, violations, and challenges; and the path and history of the feminist movement in Lebanon. The interviews also dealt with the role of international associations and organizations, with key advocacy funders, and activists. They also addressed women in education, work, social culture, and the family; pointed out gaps and priorities; and inquired about a way forward. Most of the results are contained in this report, while a portion of the results will be included in an action-plan to be shared within the organization on the project's progress and charting next steps. We note that after the completion of the report, the content was reviewed by Ghiwa Sayegh, researcher and editor at Kohl Journal.

Eighty names were first charted (to be preserved in the institution's archive), including organization, role, theme, and method of communication. Eventually, it was reduced to thirty names. Diversification of visions and roles was the priority during the selection process. We then contacted the selected names and asked them for interviews, which took place electronically (Zoom or WhatsApp), or through personal interviews at the activists' workplaces (details of the interviews are included in the second annex). Of course, everyone was asked to fill out a consent form to conduct the interview and to record it.

We conducted extensive interviews, covering all the themes set in the interview guide (not necessarily all questions were asked) with activists who had been working on feminist causes for years or decades to find out how they read the current context and how they relate different contexts to each other. We interviewed feminist activist and lawyer Manar Zaiter, researcher and trainer at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA); feminist researcher and activist Lina Abou Habib, director of the Asfari Institute at the American University of Beirut (AUB); human rights researcher, activist, and trainer Jumana Merhy, Arab Institute for Human Rights; researcher and activist Myriam Sfeir, director of the Institute for Arab Women's Studies at the Lebanese American University (LAU); researcher and activist Caroline Sukkar Slaibi, director of the Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering; feminist activist and researcher Alia Awada, founder and partner of Noqta, a feminist intersectional platform; activist and journalist Hayat Mirshad, co-founder of Fe-male; journalist and activist Maya Ammar, currently at Crisis Action and the media platform Daraj; Lara Saadeh, program coordinator and researcher at UN Women Lebanon; and researcher, activist, and journalist Saada Allaw, from the Legal Agenda.

Each interview attempted to cover all topics, based on the person's depth of involvement in the feminist movement and gender work, ranging from 10-30+ years. Each interview also provided different perspectives to read the current situation and to approach the identification of challenges, needs, and solutions. I believe the intersection of views generated an opportunity to create a comprehensive picture that discusses the root causes and structural elements that contribute to women's current situation in all areas in this multi-layered crisis.

Jumana approached the economic, social, and legal situation of women in Lebanon from a human rights perspective and women's limited access to rights and protection. Both Manar and Lina read the scene with reference to the political system to explain the complexity of measuring the gender gap, in light of the economic collapse, and through the structural changes in the current prospect of interventions. Maya Ammar presented a feminist reading that reflects a cross-generational view of the ways of activism and dialogue between feminist generations across emerging feminist groups and the impact of this dialogue on major issues. Caroline, Myriam, and Lara highlighted the interventions that are proposed by feminists and how to face growing challenges. Saada also provided an overview of a contextualized patriarchal bargain, the position of women in the family, and the similarities or differences in gender struggles and challenges between different regions. Alia and Hayat discussed approaches on how women's platforms work and respond to current dilemmas, funding, and activism.

The other side of the interviews was more specialized. We decided to meet with specialists for each of the topics that we wanted to address. First, we met with Nisreen Salti, a researcher and professor at the department of economics at AUB, to talk about women, the economy, and work, especially in times of crisis. Nisreen provided a reading on the situation in Lebanon, how it has systematically led to the current collapse, and how the Lebanese political economy has affected women. With regard to period poverty, a meeting was held with activist and researcher Vanessa Zammar from Jeyetna to learn about awareness, relief, and community initiatives.

With regard to the LGBTQI community and the queer movement, we interviewed the activist and artist Dayna Ash (Haven for Artists), activist and researcher Tarek Zeidan (Helem), activist and researcher Sarah Abou Zaki (Marsa), the organization working on sexual health and that works privately and extensively with the LGBTQI community. We also had the opportunity to meet with Hashem Hashem, a transgender man and founder of Qurras for transgender rights, research, and artistic activism. We also met with Renee Adanouv, a transgender woman refugee activist who founded Qadira for transwomen's rights using art and dance, a method for defending the rights of transwomen in Lebanon. These interviews contributed to form a picture of the needs of the LGBTQI community and its struggles in society, and showed the difficulties facing organizations and how the crisis intensified the challenges of marginalized communities in Lebanon. We were also able to meet with Amal Al-Sharif, who addressed disability and women, and spoke about the day-to-day conditions of women with disabilities in Lebanon.

We also interviewed researcher and human rights activist Karima Chebbo, who is the campaign director and leader of “My Nationality is my Right & My Family’s Right”. Karima helped us understand the effect of the current crisis on women unable to transmit nationality to their families and the impacts of the law during the pandemic. She provided recent and real-life examples of how COVID-19 changed families’ lives and created new layers of needs and difficulties. As did the activist and researcher Farah Al-Baba of Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) by recounting what happened with FMDW during lockdown, how feminist civil society responded to the crisis, and how the system itself is complicit in the bloated situation that surfaced. Human Rights Watch legal researcher Aya Majzoub also provided a comprehensive reading of the legal situation in Lebanon regarding gender and discrimination against women, highlighting feminist movement efforts and reform possibilities in light of the crisis.

Researcher and activist Nay El Rahi, co-founder of HarassTracker, currently a researcher at LAU, explained the rationale and motives behind the launch of HarassTracker, the current landscape for reporting harassment in Lebanon, as well as a critique of the law that was adopted in 2020. In parallel, we interviewed Professor Tamar Kabakian, Faculty of Health Sciences at the AUB (reproductive and maternal health specialist), to ask her about the needs of pre- and post-natal maternal care and about women’s needs in the reproductive cycle. Tamar revealed challenges that were not found online through a desk review. As for refugee camps and displaced women’s frameworks, we interviewed researcher and Public Health Professor Sawsan AbdulRahim, Faculty of Health Sciences at AUB and founder of the Amenah Project (combating child marriage in refugee settings), to talk about girls in the Syrian refugee community in the Bekaa area. We also interviewed political and social activist Leila El-Ali (director of Annajdeh Association) to ask her about aspects of the crisis among Palestinian refugee women, especially in the camps, and how the multiple layers of oppression left a severe impact on refugee women within intersectional structures. To talk more about the different aspects of Syrian refugee women’s lives, we interviewed researcher and activist Reham Kanout (Arab Reform Initiative), researcher and activist Anas Tello (Women Now for Development), and activist and educator Ola Al-Jundi (Gharsah). They explained the life, legal, and transgenerational aspects of Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon and shed light on the struggles, Syrian women wage for survival.

We also had a meeting with researcher and activist Dima Kaedbey (Knowledge Workshop) who answered questions related to the current positionality of the feminist movement, the necessity and impact of feminist research, and the existential needs of organizations in this situation. During a meeting with Professor and Associate Provost Fida Afioni of AUB, we talked about the conditions of Lebanese women in the labor market; the issues faced in institutions, especially education; how they deal with problems, such as harassment, in the workplace or career promotion; and work-life balance in times of crises.

On completion, the recorded interviews were placed in the Heinrich Böll archives. The most prominent points mentioned in these interviews were written-up. Later, a table was created to include all the names, dividing them into multiple interview themes, in order to reach a comprehensive and coherent analysis. The interviews were important in complementing the various comprehensive mapping visions of the Lebanese gender landscape. We began to analyze and extract subjects by listening and dissecting the interviews. As a result, the interviewees responded to the various topics raised through the interview guide and attempts were made to fill in the gaps from the initial desk review. Below, we will mention the most significant findings by highlighting where the information was received: desk review or interview.

Throughout the report, I will talk about feminist and queer movements. From the outset, it is important to clarify that I do not claim that I have covered all aspects of these two movements. The scope through which this research was conducted, despite efforts, remains limited and did not go into all parties and regions. Certainly, there are spectra of feminist work, even if undeclared or unaware of its feminism. The “seen” feminist work is concentrated in the capital, in organizational activities, media discourse, and alternative media. At the same time, it is present in other unreachable places. A deep mapping of reality needs to go beyond, to the various voices that are often faint or silent, despite our best efforts to hear them.

Women in the Lebanese Economy

We chose to start the analysis from an economic angle: its relation to women and their role in it. We also wanted to understand the worth of their presence in the work cycle in relation to monetary exchange and the cost of work performed, taking into account productivity, work value, and unpaid care work. Nisreen Salti considers that the main problem facing women in Lebanon is the majority work unofficially/informally. Women have always been a pillar of the informal economy in Lebanon, and this sector is the first to weaken during crises; it was extremely obvious during this current crisis. Both Manar Zaiter and Jumana Merhy agree with Nisreen and point out how this economic positioning of women is reflected in social protection schemes. In general, the economic impact of the current multi-layered crises is weighing heavily on women, impacting their opportunities to find work, keep their jobs, and maintain their salaries and rights to social protection. Additionally, the issue of unpaid work remains subject to more investigation in the absence of any formal figures and the absence of serious intentions from official authorities that neglect to understand the reality of poverty and destitution when it comes to women in particular²¹.

As in many countries, women's usual place in the labor market is less secure and is often associated with less access to rights, social safety nets, and largely lacks any regulation, as emphasized by Caroline Sukkar and Myriam Sfeir. The salaries are usually lower and working hours may be less, resulting in less money, and mostly do not guarantee more compensation in return. On the other hand, there is a traditional workplace culture that assumes men should work and earn an income as "heads of the household". Therefore, if a man and a woman are having to compete and choose, the man will win over the woman. The presumed logic behind this is that "work of men" should not be risked because "women are not usually the ones who take care of the family financially," as Jumana Merhi, Saada Allaw, and Nisreen Salti point out. There are so-called household negotiations that usually result in women sacrificing their professions and jobs if such differential decisions take place. Saada Allaw, a journalist and researcher at Legal Agenda, says that even if a woman's salary is higher, when someone in the family must give up their job, it will be the woman not the man. This is due to cultural and social structures that control decision-making patterns, which entail a social dimension, not just an economic one. The man, in the prevailing family structure, is supposed to be the head of the family; within this picture, women's chances of negotiating their roles are diminished.

Today in Lebanon, families have to assume responsibilities that were previously attributed to the state, private institutions, or to strangers. There are also some services that are attributed to the market, such as teaching/education, caregiving for the elderly, children, and transportation. Before this crisis and the inflation of the national currency, there was a possibility of obtaining these services from companies, institutions, and

21- Most of the information that will be available here are the ones that were available in the interviews of many feminist activists and academics, mostly in the interview of Nisreen Salti in addition to the report she wrote with Nadine Mezher for UN Women, under the name "Women on the edge of Economic Collapse" (2020). <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2020/10/Lebanons%20Economic%20Report%20Updated%201110%20FH.pdf>

external members, but now (and more so during periods of closure) these services are required from family members, specifically women. This left a harsh impact on the choices made by women in the labor market and decisions that are usually made on their behalf in the labor market. Women usually pay for these conditions. However, there is an opposite wave to these circumstances, as most families are in dire need of income, some of them started to ask/encourage women (mothers, sisters, and daughters) to work and to be part of the workforce during this crisis (even if part time); this was never the case before.

Saada Allaw proposes the situation today is very similar to the situation in Europe during the Second World War, when men went out to fight and women went out to work, and when men returned, it was no longer possible for women to reduce or reshape their roles. Family structures, in addition to social and legal builds, had to change. Instead, this role may crystallize in a different way, especially since the context is different, and the risks and opportunities may not be similar here. In times of crisis, women are always pushed into all kinds of jobs that might often be harmful and unsafe for them. However, this trend in Lebanon may be limited because the crisis is deep and devastating. Working women might now accept inconvenient or abusive working conditions, offered and imposed with a small margin of negotiation and greater exploitation. Thus, women are paying the price of this collapse, once again. The system already puts them in a vulnerable position, making it almost impossible to survive these crises.

There are primary infrastructures of the political economic system have led to women's profound financial and economic vulnerability. This state is not only patriarchal but also neoliberal and has never allowed growth to empower women or men as much as it is concerned with building capital and developing fortunes for the privileged and exclusive classes. The initial decision to fix the Lebanese pound to a specific exchange rate for several decades led to an increase in imports and a decrease in local production, which led to the production cycle becoming expensive and later less favorable, weakening it further. This did not allow for a natural and steady growth in opportunities for all people in general. The deeper impact was on women because what was available went into the hands of men. Nisreen mentions we do not have many resources as a country, but we have skills and knowledge. If there was a process that plans to balance the brain drain, it would have been possible to give more space for women to prove themselves economically.

Exports in Lebanon dwindled over time, reducing opportunities for women and families in general, as the sectors that could have contributed to women's integration into work diminished. In Egypt, for example, studies like the one produced by the ILO in 2014²² show local factories that send their exports abroad are usually places that

22- A report "Labour market transitions of young women and men in Egypt" (2014) by the ILO. Available via: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_247596.pdf

create permanent employment opportunities for women and guarantee their right to transportation, social safety nets, and others, especially for elderly women. We could have followed this example but took the decision to rely on imports, killing those productive opportunities that could have embraced working women because of the rentier political economy. Some may see that exporting operations created an economic cycle that helped women to work and contribute to the labor force, but the Lebanese markets are highly monopolized, exclusive, and limited, according to many studies. This itself limits the players and opportunities for women (and more so for migrant women) because the competition is restricted, and the market is small. As power is limited, the production and value chain become less efficient and therefore fewer people will work, resulting in much less participation from women. And if competition and equality in the market had not been limited, it would have been possible to take advantage of the political-economic structure that we have had over the past thirty years to advance women's rights.

Over the past fifty years, women in Lebanon have become more educated, trained, and professional but this has not been reflected by their presence in the labor market. A huge gap has been created between women's human capital and its use, all of which has led to more migration and more social and economic contradictions. As for social security, safety nets and other social security schemes for women, their absence affected their economic status in society and the family, putting them in a weaker bargaining position, thereby creating a viscous social security cycle. Also, there is a clear disparity between women and men in the administrative part of political decision-making (they are not equally represented): the chances of men in continuing work is preferred over women, if this decision must be taken. This also relates to women's participation in the informal sector. Even if we start to reform the laws, the lack of enforcement in the informal sector keeps women out of this protection circle and reduces their power in the workforce.

Before talking about the presence of women in the economy, we need to understand the relationship is valued when visible, however it is often an invisible one, not only to people but also to political systems, statistics, and policies. When we talk about invisible work, we mostly refer to unpaid work and care work. Figures indicate the presence of women in the economy (outside the scope of care and domestic work) in Lebanon and the Arab region, despite its limitations, is limited to a certain age. Moreover, participation decreases between 25 and 35 years, which coincides with childbearing and motherhood, and is a matter for concern. Many countries are making efforts to tackle this issue globally, to create a protective framework for women to save and preserve their rights before, during, and after taking maternal decisions. However, Lebanon did absolutely nothing in this regard. Even when childcare ends and women have more opportunities to contribute to work, nothing is done to protect women; this is reflected in the maternity and paternity leave policies. In Jordan, there are more advanced laws

that command the availability of childcare facilities whenever there is a certain number of female employees entering motherhood. In Lebanon, this was not on the political agenda and was not among the main demands in feminist civil society.

While addressing the issue of unpaid care work in Lebanon, the pandemic has created another layer of pressure on women who have found themselves leaving their jobs to take on their culturally and socially ascribed care work responsibilities. Unfortunately, the size of this issue has not yet been measured at the national level, and we do not have strong representative numbers at this time to use as an argument in the face of those who prevent and perhaps conceal these policies. But even before the crises, women in Lebanon used to provide three times more than men in these services. This, of course, is similar to the numbers in the Arab region, but still is heavy in Lebanon, despite the high levels of economic participation. This was the case when it was last mapped in 2016. Now, it has definitely gotten worse and more extensive on many levels. Today, the baseline for these services is considered much harder, in addition to sought primary care. Educational services are now required from women, not only from the school, but in addition to caring for the elderly and their daily chores.

The deportation of FMDW from the Lebanese houses due to the depreciation of the national currency also had a disproportionate impact on women and their families, and always far from any impact on men. This has affected women twice. FMDW have lost their jobs, safety, and money, with an increase in the layers of oppression against them. On the other hand, some women who depended on the recruitment of foreign workers lost their alternative support system, which is fundamentally brutal and incompatible with rights and permanence, represents an enormous force of discrimination against migrant domestic workers. Eventually, women resorted to this system, to replace their “assumed role” in domestic work, in addition to great abuses in the social system on migrant domestic workers. Putting women in between these two unfair and discriminatory sides avoids the creation of any official policies that do justice to women in care work, whether they are citizens, refugees, or migrant workers. In these cases, the burden on women inside the home increased.

Furthermore, the pandemic affected the educational sector, where most of the employees are women. The teachers took their duties home where they faced additional responsibilities from their families as well. The education sector faced time poverty due to the fact that most of its employees are women who face unimaginable burdens. The other affected sector is health, also dominated by women and greatly affected due to their family and health responsibilities. These two sectors suffer from tightness and poverty of time, affecting women more than men in the family.

With regard to period poverty (discussed in detail later), it is mainly caused by the inability of women to access the necessities of the menstrual cycle, politically and economically. It is entirely linked to the political motives behind the very concept of support and subsidization, according to Nisreen. Since the start of the economic meltdown, all the subsidization policies were ineffective, unplanned, uncalculated, useless, and uncontrolled, resulting in central bank losses and an absence of any benefit for needy groups. The subsidy benefited the big merchants and monopolists as it was for the commodities not for the middle and poor classes. As usual, as a tool in the Lebanese economy's neoliberal conception, subsidization excluded women and neglected their basic rights. This comes hand-in-hand with the absence of women in decision-making cycles on how to proceed with the disposition of limited economic resources. The market is already outside the control of the state; this is why subsidies have been pointless. Neither women's health tools nor contraceptives are supported—essential to a woman's ability to be independent and maintain self-agency over herself and her body—in a context that deprives her of decision-making, freedom, and power. There has been official neglect at the level of women's reproductive health, and this will affect women for a long time, over many generations.

The Lebanese political economy's lack of interest in reproductive health is similar to the concept of unpaid care work. According to Lina Abou Habib, the care work burden on women is socially compulsory. It takes from the opportunities that were reserved for women, to develop them, and guarantee their rights. In a crisis, these opportunities become much less. Therefore, the measurement of economic progress among women and men becomes unequal because it is based on an unequal starting point. Here, opportunities are essentially lopsided. Women have greater responsibilities and less access to resources. All these factors led to only 26 percent of women of expected working age to be employed. Nisreen Salti points out that this is a problem with the indicators used by the economy as a science. It measures phenomena through transactions and not through the occurrence of service. If there are no transactions, the economic service is not counted. Services must be measured and evaluated even when no transactions occur. One of the few benefits of the pandemic is the awareness it created about this kind of work being put outside of attention and intervention. We count work when there is a babysitter, but we don't count it when a mother takes care of her baby. "Do we care about buying/selling services or the service itself happening?" Nisreen Salti asks. These are the details that have been lost due to the mismeasurement of consumption and thus got lost in the economic awareness of official authorities. We need to care about the division of family time as much as we need to care about

those needs, which are not accounted for by male economic decision-making, and by extension of official authorities. There is also no talk about social security, whenever solutions are mentioned. There is no official intention to deal with the distribution of losses fairly and seriously. There are four exchange rates in the market, and this reduces the chances of any serious and obvious intervention in the coming period as we cannot even calculate the increasing losses every day. The gap is not fixed, and so is the loss distribution. Therefore, keeping four exchange rates is the regime's tool to hide the reality of this loss, certainly affecting the sustainability of social security, which still functions within the clientelist political frameworks of official security institutions that the political economy does not dare mention.

Manar Zaiter states that the approach adopted by women's organization in terms of economic empowerment is inadequate, mostly focusing on professions classified as stereotypical, such as beauty care, cooking, sewing, embroidery, and others. There is no serious educational approach to the impact of the economic system on women. Projects and initiatives come to address the slight exclusion of women through activities that are neither permanent nor radical. There is no correction to the intertwining of power with banking and banking interests—limitations in the approaches may lie in the unwillingness to clash with the rentier economy—which in turn affects the rights of many groups, including women. On the other hand, Sawsan AbdulRahim and Anas Tello talk about the issue of empowerment within the framework of Syrian refugee communities, approaching the issue in a different way, which does not contradict this radical approach, but rather runs in parallel with it. In their opinion, if certain professions are available and can provide women with their needs within the circumstances in which they are present, and if women feel safe in work, then it may be useful at this stage for associations to adopt projects of this kind to benefit women and secure their needs, while continuing other paths that lead to discussions, attempts, and practices that are more just and economically sustainable. In order to develop a more comprehensive vision of the conditions all women go through, we must talk about the conditions of women in social frameworks that do not presuppose their presence in the economy, in addition to the conditions of refugee women at work and the conditions of migrant workers (to be discussed later). The basis here remains to point out this gap—whether in the presence of the economy, or in the presence of the economy versus the presence of men in economy, or in getting the right to work, fair wages, and social protection—is the product of conscious and creative marginalization policies, which did not happen by chance.

Women in the Agricultural and Environmental Sectors in Lebanon

In the process of understanding the position of women in the economy, it is useful to acknowledge their situation in the environmental and agricultural sectors. There are stories and situations that deserve appreciation, which do not recur in feminist discourse, knowing that environmental justice is a feminist issue because it is affected by concepts of justice (or absence thereof), and agriculture is linked to ideas of social and economic security for women, who occupy a large part of the agricultural picture, especially in the central and northern Bekaa, Akkar, and Tripoli. Even though women are an essential part of the food and agricultural production chain, official figures and statistics do not reflect their presence on the ground and therefore do not influence policymakers. The 2010 census of the Ministry of Agriculture²³ indicates that only 9 percent of women own agricultural holdings, and that they represent 5.7 percent of working people, which is far from a true representation or gender composition in the agricultural sector; this makes them a hidden force. In a 2010 study, the Collective for Research and Training on Development-Action (CRTDA)²⁴ mentioned that women represent seven percent of all landowners and own only 3.5 percent of arable land. This comes with the absence of social safety nets and laws protecting their presence and roles as landowners, agricultural workers, or farmers. In the absence of protection, the structural dependence on men to manage and consequently control resources is reinforced. Later, when crops are poor or the agricultural season's problems are exacerbated and the official support is absent, women pay the price, as there are no policies to protect them. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)²⁵ recognizes women are the last to benefit, despite the fact that they are a mainstay of the agricultural sectors and are the ones that ultimately carry all the burden.

On the other hand, women in Lebanon, as in other countries, pay a higher price for climate change and environmental disasters than men, especially as women are responsible for managing family members' household resources. According to a study in 2018,²⁶ Lebanon is considered one of the most polluted countries in the world, especially in water quality and solid waste treatment. Perhaps the most prominent challenges facing women's ability to participate in effective environmental protection is the absence of women in the overall decision-making process and consequently their absence in decisions affecting the climate, environment, and energy. The lack of women's economic resources weakens their effectiveness and presence in public spaces to establish an environmental movement. This limited intervention is also related to the care burdens they carry, which takes up the efforts they would have made in order to access environmental information, field participation, and community environmental activities.

23- This information was taken from a report by the CRTDA (2010) "Women and Economic Power in Lebanon: The legal framework and challenges to women's economic empowerment" by Delphine Torres Tailfer. Available via: <https://crtda.org.lb/sites/default/files/Women%20in%20the%20Lebanese%20Economy.pdf>

24- The same resource from the CRTDA's study.

25- A FAO publication "Country gender assessment of the agriculture and rural sector – Lebanon" (2021). It can be found on this link <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb3025en/>

26 "The Role of Women in Preserving the Environment in Tripoli" (2018) by IE Med. The Study can be found on this link: <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-role-of-women-in-preserving-the-environment-in-tripoli/>

**Emerging Issues:
Women
Unsupported
as Period
Poverty Rises**

While exploring women's status in the economy, we find their conditions are heavily impacted by the economic and political decisions, including support and subsidization strategies. The committee formed by the Lebanese Parliament to select the products that should be included in the "basket of subsidized goods" were made up of male members exclusively. The committee excluded menstrual tools amid popular anger and feminists call to reconsider the items in the basket. Menstrual or period poverty is "the inability to access health products, a safe and healthy place to use them, and the right to manage the menstrual cycle without shame or stigma."²⁷ This is a condition that accompanies many women and girls in Lebanon due to the alarming rise in the prices of goods related to the menstrual cycle and the accompanying pain and symptoms. Menstrual poverty is considered one of the most important economic aspects that women and girls suffer from in Lebanon today. It is increasingly due to the deteriorating economic conditions, the collapse of citizen purchasing power, the high supplies, and commodity prices. Previously, when the value of the Lebanese pound was pegged to the US dollar, menstrual products were mainly imported, subsidized or relatively affordable, and available to the majority of women in Lebanon. Today, with the Lebanese pound losing its value, these goods are no longer within reach, and sanitary pads that used to cost between 3,000 and 4,000 Lebanese pounds are nowadays no less than 40,000 and 50,000 pounds. At today's prices, women can no longer afford menstrual products because the country's poor economic conditions have pushed half the population below the poverty line. In a recent survey by Fe-male, 76 percent of women reported they faced challenges in accessing their monthly needs and special hygiene items due to the economic crisis. With no other options in sight, many are forced to find unhealthy alternatives, such as newspapers, old clothes, and tissues. These are all very harmful alternatives, causing health problems that cannot be remedied later. The country's political authorities completely ignore this matter.

Jumana Merhy talks about this issue, noting that what appears to be aggravated with the current crisis, in reality happened years ago: during the July 2006 war, as relief aids were distributed, they included razors for men, underwear for men and children, but did not include sanitary napkins or intimate products for women's bodies. This only indicates the topic has been present and ignored for a long time, despite attempts and calls by the feminist movements; the officials in charge did not change their approach or in restructuring priorities and subsidies.

In the beginning of the crisis, women and girls were faced with a limited monthly income, but now women from different social and economic backgrounds can no longer buy menstrual products, as the margin of weakness in purchasing power increases for everyone. Amongst women's basic needs, the first products to be affected are menstrual products, amid other women's essentials. Even for women who earn an income, work and household heads today admit their salaries do not allow them to purchase menstrual

27- This is taken from "Period poverty: why it should be everybody's business" (2022). Taken from <https://www.joghr.org/article/32436-period-poverty-why-it-should-be-everybody-s-business>

supplies. Because of the financial crisis, women are forced to re-evaluate and rearrange the list of things to buy, which means forgoing this expense in the daily struggle for putting food on the table, purchasing electricity and water, and transportation costs²⁸. Women are also looking for alternative cheaper brands or to dispense with other items they consider less important, as in the case of many Lebanese homes that have begun to change their purchasing habits and priorities since the economic downturn.

There was no official response to this issue, instead, many initiatives were formed to find a solution that met the needs of women who can no longer afford these goods. One of the most prominent of these initiatives is Jeyetna, which colloquially means: “we have our periods.” It is a feminist initiative that seeks to raise awareness to combat menstrual/period poverty in Lebanon, either by providing supplies or by spreading health and physical awareness. One of Fe-male’s initiatives “Nashftoolna Damna/You have dried our blood” also worked to confront the issue and to highlight it in the media. This initiative distributed sanitary pads and products with in-kind aid that gives women one whole year’s supply. In the same context, there is also Dawrati, which means “my period”.

Together, they aim to respond to the issue by securing menstrual tools throughout Lebanon. Many associations concerned with sexual health are now distributing reusable and washable sanitary pads, such as Marsa Association and Annajdeh Social Association, made in Palestinian camps. It is also worth noting that organizations like Roots and Roof began producing low-cost sanitary pads and menstrual products at reasonable prices in new production units established in Jabal Mohsen, Tripoli, in coordination with UN Women, ACTED, and Japanese government support, in response to period poverty and the economic marginalization of women; this led to the creation of a sanitary pad product named “Rose” that will be available on the Lebanese market²⁹.

We interviewed activist Vanessa Zammar, co-founder of Jeyetna—a feminist intersectional organization for equitable menstrual and period rights in Lebanon, linking period poverty with misogyny and patriarchy in Lebanon’s political economy. Vanessa confirms the team that founded the initiative was keen to use the plural/collective expression in the word Jeyetna (“our” period) because it is a social and political problem concerning all women and girls, who are collectively harmed by these unsubsidized Lebanese government policies. “The plural form is very important for us,” says Vanessa.

28- An article that is available on L’Orient le Jour: “The financial crisis changes the purchasing habits”. <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1269265/on-the-plates-of-lebanons-middle-class-the-financial-crisis-has-dramatically-altered-grocery-shopping-habits.html>

29- “A Tripoli-based social enterprise begins the production of high quality, low-cost feminine hygiene products, meeting humanitarian needs and addressing period poverty, with support from the government of Japan” Available through the link <https://lebanon.unwomen.org/en/stories/press-release/2022/03/a-tripoli-based-social-enterprise-begins-the-production>

Since 2021, this initiative has been based on social activities that aims to raise awareness about menstruation and period poverty, the right to access these necessary supplies, and to distribute them to girls and women through national tours across various regions in the country. Vanessa points out that period poverty includes the lack of access and absence of basic necessities related to the menstrual cycle, the want of appropriate alternatives, the inability to reach clean and decent toilets, not having someone to talk to about periods, and the poor or no access to information on this matter. It was around these points that Jeyetna³⁰ was launched, especially after the Beirut Port Blast. Vanessa established the initiative with her friend, who produced a documentary about ten women in Lebanon of different ages, social, and economic backgrounds to talk about period and period poverty. It was shown at a film festival, which turned cross-regional, traveling to raise financial support, and to spread awareness on the issue. The team planned the festival in a way for it to be inclusive and open, guaranteeing women the freedom to choose the appropriate products to deal with menstruation and not to impose a specific vision on what can be defined as the best product. This is why some products were disposable and some products were reusable. The team traveled to several Lebanese regions from February 2021 till August 2021 (halting during the fuel crisis). They visited Tripoli, Akkar, Halba, Wadi Khaled, three spots in the Bekaa, and two areas in Saida. The tour included more than 900 women and girls.

The activities started by introducing the team and the work they do, and then asking women to choose the characters, on which the film was based, to relate with them or to challenge preconceptions about them. This was driven by an attempt to understand that many different women suffer from the painful consequences of menstruation, and how to respond, whether they are about to start having the period or not anymore. It is also about whether or not they communicate and talk about their periods, and whether or not there is a way to access the necessary products. The team presented products, such as pads, tampons, cups, and others, in front of everyone and talked about these products and their relationship to the menstrual cycle, virginity, and the hymen. The conversations included Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian women and girls, in addition to migrant workers. The discussions included the benefits of reusable pads, and the washing and re-using processes. These pads are manufactured by Wing Women Lebanon³¹, a social initiative by refugee women who make reusable sanitary pads in Palestinian camps. One of the objectives was to challenge the narrative around menstrual blood, especially that it is a recurring stigma in society that it is “unclean”. Jeyetna is also working with Marsa to obtain reusable period products. However, they work with “Jeyetik? Jeyin³²” (translation: Do you have your period? We are coming!) for disposable menstrual products.

30- Their page on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/jeyetna/?hl=en>

31- Their page on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/wingwomanlebanon/?hl=en>

32- Jeyetik? Jeyin page on Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/jeyetik/?hl=en>

Jeyetna addressed most of the needs and tackled knowledge and awareness on sexual and intimate diseases. It also aims to be present across various and distant Lebanese regions. On International Women's Day 2022, the initiative networked with many groups on period poverty and menstrual rights, sexual rights, and personal hygiene rights. Jeyetna tries to leave an impact, allowing women more independence and less in need of help and distributing products, such as cups (up-to 15 years) and reusable pads (up-to two or three years). It also aims to spread the narrative and widen the culture where menstruation should be viewed as a social issue, impacting women as groups and not as individuals. Unfortunately, period-related issues, including period poverty, remains a concern that women and girls carry when dealing with this taboo subject.

This initiative is an example of a new wave of feminist work represented through the work of young and modern initiatives that do not operate within large organizations. This was not easy. This initiative and others worked with local communities and specific focal points in each community to reach the largest number of people and to draw attention to the issue through well-known people in the area. The initiative has not yet worked towards amending the related policies; it raises awareness through social activities to allocate the issue in its political framework, not just from a humanitarian perspective. So far, there are no solid numbers about period poverty, but it is estimated that the needs in this range includes approximately 80 percent of women in different Lebanese regions, either through not reaching their needs (using cheaper and lower quality products) or using their pads for longer. Exchanges of experiences and cross-generational support are very important here because young initiatives need a lot of support. The most prominent challenge though is financial, while the second challenge is raising the level of awareness on menstruation issues, placing it in line with the human need for food, medicine, and water, because directly relates to the body's safety and human being dignity. Unfortunately, there is a general belief that this issue is secondary and does not deserve attention, support, or publicity. However, these initiatives are trying to counter these attitudes. Perhaps what is good in this context is that men do not know much (or most probably anything) about women's cycles, which reduces the chances of interference in talking about the matter when they talk about gender-based violence.

One of the most prominent needs in the context of period poverty at the national level is to produce more reusable products as they save a lot of money and resources on women, the economy, and the importance of popularizing their use in culture. Another challenge facing this initiative, and many other young feminist intersectional initiatives, is to preserve the language of "Women in Lebanon" and not just "Lebanese women" because it is a cross-national problem that includes everyone, especially refugees and immigrants who suffer from a lot of marginalization and poor resources. In parallel, official bodies concerned with women's rights have yet to deal with this problem in any serious way and have failed to support emerging initiatives trying to solve the problem today.

**Access to
Healthcare:
Women Bear
the Burden of a
Fragile Health
Structure**

While discussing women's rights or the body's health and safety, it is necessary to address the health structure, as the Lebanese health system today is at the core of the political debate and at the heart of social justice and protection discussions. Paying attention to women's health in fractured conditions becomes necessary in light of collapsed and eroding systems. The economic crisis came hand-in-hand with the pandemic; the hospitals were in a dilapidated and difficult situation, which affected the response in all health-related aspects, even in the reception of wounded people after the Beirut Port Blast. We interviewed Professor of Community, Reproductive and Maternal Health Tamar Kabakian Hasholian at the Faculty of Health Sciences, AUB. We asked her about the current reality of sexual and reproductive health in Lebanon and the repercussions of crises on women's health.

Tamar mentions that the health system in Lebanon is fragmented and divided, even before the recent crises. The economic collapse is usually linked to social, organizational, and institutional collapse. The health system in Lebanon is linked, centered, and almost entirely dependent on the services of the private sector, with very little dependence on the public sector (there is cooperation between the two, but COVID-19 showed that this cooperation is slight and weak). As soon as the pandemic hit, it became clear that private hospitals did not want to open departments for patients who had COVID-19, and the Lebanese state was not able to oblige them to do so, especially since the public money allocated for health coverage had run out and had not been fully paid to these hospitals in the past. It took weeks for some private hospitals to decide to open some departments for COVID-19 patients, which was sufficient and obvious. It showed the absence of a basic vision or intention to strengthen the public health sector to respond strongly to the pandemic and its repercussions. More obviously, the support received by the private sector—at the expense of public sector—left a profound impact, in terms of the lack of access to available services and the absence of equality and justice.

The same mentality that led to the decline in the public health sector did not invest in the health system and did not give priority to reproductive health and women's health during the various stages the country had gone through. There are programs that take care of this, but they are funded by international organizations or informal channels, which means that any interruption or decline in funding would have an inevitable effect on the availability and quality of service. Therefore, the absence of a national plan was problematic. The irony is the hospitals themselves were stronger than the public health system.

Over time, it became clear there was not enough investment in public health to sustainably support women. In a situation like this, to prevent any exacerbation, women were more affected by the decline in necessary health services, they were not prioritized in either sector, and the authorities never placed public health over private interests.

The priorities then went to respond to people who were wounded during the explosion and its long-term effects, as well as to infants and newborns, in addition to COVID-19 patients. Of course, all these categories deserve to be served on the spot, but the restructuring of urgencies due to resource scarcity was not in women's interest. Perhaps one of the few things that remained a concern are aspects of pregnancy and care directly related to childbirth and not maintaining an adequate health status for mothers. Attention and resources have been poured into antenatal and intrapartum care and removed/reduced from postnatal care (exclusively relating to the mother's safety when related to that of the baby). The focus was always on children and not on mothers and their health, knowing that healthy children are directly linked to the mothers' health status throughout, from the height of pregnancy to childbearing and their youth.

Lebanon was one of the countries that gave great importance to prenatal care, to the extent that 80-90 percent of pregnant women visit a doctor at least once; this is a good achievement compared to global rates over the past couple of decades. But today, through monitoring from the Ministry of Health and the Lebanese Red Cross (there are no exact figures), it has been concluded that this is no longer the reality. Here, it is also necessary to revisit aspects included in prenatal care, as it was customary for visits to follow the weight of pregnant women, instead of monitoring their blood pressure, for example, which was the important procedure. The concern today is who goes to prenatal care in the first place. It is worth noting that most pregnant women used to request these services from the private health sector, as it was extensively available, where there was not much confidence in the public sector.

Today, the Ministry of Health has begun to encourage the use of the primary health sector, especially in clinics, but the majority of women do not know about it. On the other hand, there was a problem with the use of postnatal care. While the rate of antenatal care was around 90 percent, the postpartum care was no more than 60 percent. This is now exacerbated and there is no doubt that the number of visits are far fewer; the World Health Organization³³ requires eight visits as an acceptable limit according to Tamar Kabakian.

The most serious problem in the current scene, which began to increase over the last two years, is a rise in maternal mortality. Before the crisis, there were higher numbers of maternal deaths among Syrian refugees compared to Lebanese women, according to a study conducted at AUB,³⁴ although the rate in both groups decreased sharply over the last ten years. It is worth noting that, over the course of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, UNHCR has supported reproductive care services, but it remains necessary

33- This is indicated by Tamar Kabakian in the interview we had with her.

34- This study "A person who does not have money does not enter": a qualitative study on refugee women's experiences of respectful maternity care" is recently released by Kabakian-Khasholian, Makhoul and Ghusayni in 2022. It is available via: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36199044/>

to understand that there are factors that are unchanged and contribute to the high number of maternal death³⁵. During the crisis, maternal deaths increased sharply among Lebanese women, most of the time, due to the pandemic, which was monitored before and after the vaccine. There are also other high numbers unrelated to COVID-19. Tamar states that a forthcoming study based on women's narratives will attempt to understand the causes that led to these deaths; they are likely to be related to all layers of the crisis, not only the pandemic. These factors are directly related to the decision to go to hospital: whether the hospital will receive a pregnant woman, and the quality of healthcare the woman receives during and after childbirth. All factors will inevitably contribute to dismantling the facts behind these deaths, knowing that deaths represent the tip of the iceberg, forming a basis for what was previously mentioned.

Despite this, we point out that maternal health programs receive more attention than other programs in Lebanon and other countries because the focus is on the health of the newborn, not the women themselves. Reproductive health outside the scope of the child and the childbearing process does not receive the same attention; also represented through neglecting matters of menstruation, birth control, and family planning. Awareness is also at stake, even when the resources are available. It is not enough to say that contraceptives are present in a center and women should go there to get them, as women may not be able to reach these centers to a large extent, especially if they are accustomed to obtaining them from nearby pharmacies, which is not possible anymore due to exorbitant pharmaceutical prices. However, if the women were accustomed to other forms of contraception that were previously provided by the private sector and physicians, they are forced today to re-acquaint themselves with primary healthcare centers and what they offer. According to Tamar, this is not an easy thing for them or for the entire health system and flow of health services. For example, a medical visit at the American University of Beirut Medical Center (AUBMC) costs 800,000 Lebanese pounds (today), which is a very pricey service for most women who cannot visit these clinics for breast health checks, Pap smears, and a suitable contraceptive/consultation. These women (and they are the majority) will inevitably postpone the visits, or cancel them. These are the basic preventive measures that were previously taken by 40 percent of women, and this percentage is surely reduced today. It remains essential to monitor how women will respond to these variables and the extent to which they will adapt to the new healthcare system based on public health and primary healthcare, instead of a system of private medical visits frequented by the majority of past users.

As for pregnancy and childbearing, there still exists effective medical units for women's health supported by international bodies and non-governmental organizations, however they have become grown in complexity. For example, UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), who used to follow-up with Palestinian women in Lebanon, obliges women to go to three hospitals, exclusively. Palestinian women, in a recent study, stated that if

35- According to the World Health Organization, Maternal Mortality rate is the annual number of female deaths from any cause related to or aggravated by pregnancy or its management (excluding accidental or incidental causes) during pregnancy and childbirth or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and site of the pregnancy.

it were up to them and if they could cover their expenses themselves, they would not have chosen these centers or hospitals. The same applies to the commissions entrusted with health affairs for Iraqi and Syrian refugee women. It is worth noting that the services exclusively cover childbirth and not other forms of health monitoring, such as the uterus and breasts. There are not enough medical personnel assigned to refugee women to take care of these matters. By contrast, the narrative for refugee women receiving free health services are intensifying, which reinforces resentment and racism against refugee communities. However, the reality is completely different because in truth not all services are available and not all that is available is good. Sometimes women are forced to go, fearful because of what they heard from their acquaintances, which often leads to not going back at all. Over time, women stopped seeking medical services, contributing to more maternal deaths and to the accumulation of bad experiences.

With regards to awareness campaigns about breastfeeding and early breast examinations, the efforts made were essentially insufficient in Lebanon as a whole; rather they were limited and dependent on specific programs. Today, in light of all the forms of collapse and the accompanying social concerns, awareness campaigns linked to messages about the seriousness of a disease and the necessity of check-ups are rejected, or at least undesired, by women. For example, a message of the type “If you don’t check your cervix, it will be dangerous for you” will not be received properly. Women’s reception in a tired economic society where they do not suffer from any apparent symptoms (at present) will reduce and eventually ignore these messages, as a reaction to their negativity. The current situation does not encourage this kind of campaign. Today, it is more useful to put effort and resources into strategic health community activities. Women’s participation in raising awareness and health activities of this kind will be more effective and feasible than campaigns that carry messages without any engagement. Shifting prevailing health strategies towards patterns that involve women in communities will be more effective, sustainable, and save on resources. The question remains legitimate about the scarcity of women’s associations interests in women’s health and welfare rights, compared to other issues, such as violence and rights, despite the fact that the healthcare women receive in Lebanon carries many forms of gender-based violence. It is worth noting that the general exhaustion accompanying the pandemic contributed to obscuring the health conditions of women, even more so in light of a dilapidated economic reality.

While looking at alternatives to the prevailing health and medical patterns, some of the proposed replacements seem ineffective. For example, if we assume that women today have to go more to midwives for deliveries, we must first ask if midwives are sufficiently and effectively present in the Lebanese health system. We must also ask about their position in the current reproductive system, as they are unappreciated and invisible to most women who seek the services of physicians. Basically, we don’t have enough

midwives in Lebanon. Recently, some primary care centers began to employ midwives, but this requires a change in the culture of women receiving this service. It will also ask hospitals to change their systemic beliefs in the roles of midwives, which requires a lot of educational and training work. At the same time, it is not possible to look at the disparity between midwives and physicians without considering the patriarchal and male structure of healthcare in Lebanon; as midwives are mostly women, while 80 percent of gynecologists are men. The balance of power between them varies in terms of equipment, unions, and propaganda. It is worth noting that the Ministry of Health has never put legal midwifery on its agenda except once through a program adopted by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). The absence of the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) in this regard weakened midwifery in reproductive care structure. The real problem in Lebanon is the resources have always been placed in a way that does not guarantee the continuity of care, its comprehensiveness, and its fairness.

It is also essential to consider the health follow-up of elderly or adolescent women and women with disabilities that do not hold any importance in the Lebanese health system or in the monitoring conducted by official authorities. This locates the sexual health of large groups of women in a state of neglect and danger. There are no units in the MoPH that take care of these marginalized groups, and therefore the programs that address them are absent. These are women who need to be catered for, which often does not happen, thus increasing their neglect in urgent health matters.

It is worth noting that the pandemic contributed to creating unfavorable conditions for nurses in Lebanon, especially with the decline in the value of their salaries. The burden that was imposed on them during the COVID-19 response and the violence that many of them also faced in the midst of the epidemic prompted many to resign or emigrate: Lebanon today suffers from a great shortage of nursing staff. In parallel to addressing women's health, we mention the "A Project", a women's initiative launched in Lebanon in 2014 concerned with addressing issues related to sexuality, sexual health, and gender. The project has opened the door to health discussions and awareness for women, especially about protection, disease prevention, and health as a right.³⁶

36- <https://theaproject.org>

**Palestinian
and Syrian
Refugee Women:
Challenging
the Layers of
Oppression
and Confronting
Racist Narratives**

The intersectional approach to women's situation is generally important when dealing with their positions and access to all their rights, but it becomes extremely important when dealing with the status of refugee women in Lebanon: being a woman imposes legal, social, and economic discrimination, but being a refugee woman imposes greater discrimination. A particularly heavy layer of women's rights violations exist in Lebanon among refugee women who bear multiple burdens of being both women and refugees. This situation has significantly worsened over the past two years. To better understand the situation of refugee women, we interviewed Leila El-Ali of Annajdeh Association; Sawsan AbdulRahim, professor and founder of Amnah at AUB; Reham Kanout from Arab Reform Initiative; Anas Tello from Women Now for Development; and Ola Al-Jundi of Gharsah.

The situation of refugee women in the current crisis can be described as complex, and this is not limited to the crisis-imposed economic burden, but also relates to their own current ways in seeking protection and obtaining rights. In Lebanon, Syrian and Palestinian refugee women and girls are still far from any form of gender equality, even with their Lebanese (non-refugee) counterparts, especially in light of current circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on refugee communities, particularly women and girls, and amplified by the basic obstacles they face: movement, protection, access to health services, and employment. Even beyond the pandemic, estimates of aid studies indicate that COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on refugee women in Lebanon for a long time to come, especially on those who have been subjected to violence. According to a report issued in 2021 by the ESCWA,³⁷ the negative repercussions on refugee and displaced women go beyond the increased risk of contracting the virus to a dramatic increase in violence, exploitation, and sexual abuse. This is exacerbated by poor living conditions that persist today, including camp overcrowding, poor infrastructure, lack of water, sanitation, and sexual and reproductive healthcare services.

There are approximately one and a half million Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR in Lebanon, while it is estimated that there are a much larger numbers of unregistered persons who have also entered Lebanese territories and are living in refugee camps, within different regions and communities. Despite the length of the crisis, the residency policy in Lebanon for refugees has made it difficult for them to gain legal status access, which increases the risks of exploitation and abuse, restricting access to work, education, and healthcare. During the pandemic and lockdowns, some Lebanese municipalities were imposing discriminatory restrictions on Syrian refugees that did not apply to Lebanese people using a racist framework that municipalities defined as "part of local efforts to combat COVID-19,"³⁸ citing arguments related to security and stability. This reality requires a careful reading of the refugee situation, particularly

37- The report addresses and can be found on this link: <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/women-syrian-refugees-lebanon>

38- A discriminatory narrative frequently used to attack Syrian refugees throughout the lockdown measures. Based on a Human Rights Watch review in 2020. Available via this link <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2020/04/02/340118>

among women, during this past period, in order to understand women's reality who had suffered so much in a society affected by the collapse. In parallel, according to the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, there are approximately 174,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon, where they still face significant restrictions, including their right to work and own property, and where the majority reside in the camps, spread over specified areas, with legal and social consequences imposed. In addition, approximately 30,000 Palestinians from Syria sought refuge in Lebanon, according to United Nations estimates, and reside in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, suffering the effects of asylum twice.

A recent report by Annajdeh stated that although refugee women already suffer from a lack of basic rights and patriarchal relations within the family as well as within the camps, the lockdowns worsened matters. Refugee women live in small, tight apartments, in crowded camps, with no outdoor spaces, and often with large multigenerational families. Instead, homes that should be safe places for women and girls have become violent and intimidating environments. In a study conducted across seven Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Annajdeh³⁹ found there was a significant increase in physical, verbal, sexual, emotional, and financial violence due to the pandemic and the lockdowns. It also revealed that young girls are being forced into early marriage more than ever before. Of the Palestinian refugee women surveyed, 89 percent indicated that they had experienced domestic violence from a male family member, 58 percent had experienced verbal violence, and 40 percent had experienced physical violence. Finally, 15 percent experienced financial violence and 5 percent were victims of sexual violence.

Lebanese laws prevent Palestinian refugees from acquiring citizenship and restrict their access to work. The Lebanese government also imposes fees on Palestinian workers and institutions that employ them. This pushed many Palestinian women into the informal economic sector where they do not enjoy any form of protection. Additionally, Palestinian women are not allowed to own or transfer property. The Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) recommended that Lebanon improve the situation of Palestinian and Syrian refugees.⁴⁰ This includes adopting measures to protect refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls from economic and sexual exploitation, sexual violence, forced marriage, and discrimination. Years later, Lebanon has still not complied with these recommendations, lacking any legal protections. The pandemic had repercussions on the informal work of refugee women; as refugees, they lost opportunities in many jobs that did not provide healthcare or social protection and have been a vital source of income for their families. Legally, there are obstacles for the lack of documentation, low trust in authorities, extreme poverty, and a culture of reliance on informal channels to resolve disputes impedes access to and use of the formal justice system. Refugee women face special obstacles in obtaining protection under the Domestic Violence Law.

39- A study by Annajdeh Association in light of the COVID-19. Available on this link: https://association-najdeh.org/files/___١/

40According to the interview we had with Leila Al Ali.

Leila El-Ali talks about the impact of the crisis on women in the Palestinian camps and does not hesitate to describe it as a compound and intertwined crisis. Annajdeh offices and units witness increasing demands for urgent and unconditional financial aid, not only among Palestinians but also among Lebanese; this was Annajdeh's assessment after the Beirut port blast in particular. With the collapse of the Lebanese currency, the burden became heavy on women who manage and head their homes and family matters, especially with the increase in prices. This led to a decline in family purchasing power. Leila points out that food security indicators among Palestinian refugee women, especially among pregnant women, reflect a real danger and a crucial need to follow-up, in conjunction with the deteriorating medical situation and sporadic health visits. Post-explosion, the most prominent problems facing refugee women were insecurity, growing frustration, and depression (which had existed before but increased exponentially). In light of these conditions, Annajdeh was able to find a balance between development and advocacy on the one hand, and relief and assistance on the other. This is based on the history of the organization's work in earlier times. They always aimed to find safe shelters for women who were under pressure and needed counseling; they especially provided psychological and social support. For Leila, Annajdeh's relief efforts in the Palestinian and Lebanese communities contributed to the systematic stripping of many racist and prejudiced tropes towards Palestinian refugees.

Refugees face limitations in movement and an inability to gain employment and obtain rights, all of which are related to asylum, displacement, and migration in Lebanon. However, legally and logistically, as the narratives and racist practices towards all three had grown, there is a difference in the legal description related to Palestinian refugees and displaced Syrians. The conditions that apply on both do not apply to migrant workers, in relation to work in particular. According to Laila, there is no clear legal definition of a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, despite the attempts of the Palestinian-Lebanese Dialogue Committee. The results of that dialogue remain without approval and are still subject to discretion, which impacts dealings with labor laws and decisions. This contributed to defining professions limited to foreign workers, restricting a lot of job opportunities. Today, with the deterioration of the economic situation, this reality is declining further, and opportunities are becoming more limited and thus more burdensome on families in need of support. Sawsan Abdulrahim considers the waves of lockdown led to the loss of daily informal and agricultural jobs refugee women usually resort to, which doubled their and their families' economic predicament. A study she was following through Amenah on Syrian refugee women⁴¹ was accompanied by frustrations and difficult mental health challenges.

41- Based on the interview with Sawsan AbdulRahim.

For civil and feminist activism in the Syrian refugee space, we turn to Women Now for Development, one of the most prominent organizations working on Syrian women's affairs in Lebanon. Anas Tallo, an activist and coordinator, points out that since its establishment in 2014, the organization focuses on Syrian women and their children, and the concerns of the Syrian refugee family. This happens through programs concerned with professional and educational development; protection for individual and group psychological support/ health session; leadership programs that support women in public and political spheres; decisions related to women's rights and citizenship; and a combination of advocacy, research, and work with campaigns led by women. These struggles included child marriage and family campaigns for freedom (in pursuance of the issue of those kidnapped). According to Anas, the pandemic had a severe impact on women, as well as on the work of the organization and organizations that target refugee conditions in general. Women Now for Development tried to respond remotely but this was challenging as the pandemic was accompanied by the economic crisis. The responsive efforts were focused on strengthening feminist solidarity between Syrian and Lebanese women by emphasizing that discrimination and violence are one. Anas points out the organization has taken a similar path to many organizations that play a relief role, despite their primary developmental role. There was a fundamental need to shift a large part of the funding to urgent, unconditional financial assistance.

Anas talks about the concept of intersectionality as an essential element in understanding the impact of current crises on Syrian refugee women. Although violence against women is apparent in Lebanon, its impact varies from a Lebanese woman to a refugee woman: from a refugee woman living in a tent, a refugee woman living in a closed community, a refugee woman living at home, a woman living with her entire family, to a woman whose husband had been kidnapped or killed. All of them are criteria that leave their impact on the ways of violence and exploitation within an intersectional perspective that is not necessarily subject to academic measurements but is present in society's subconsciousness, according to Anas. There is a deep fear of reporting violence among refugee women, which was indicated by Leila El-Ali and Sawsan Abdulrahim, in terms of women and girls' reluctance to use existing laws that are insufficient in providing protection. According to Anas, refugee women, even those not officially registered, can use the law to report without being arrested, however the majority are not aware of this. At the forefront of the scene today is the problem of shelter if violence is reported, especially since the Bekaa region does not contain centers to receive abused women, which forces them not to even think about filing a complaint. The effects of the complaint will not be applied to ensure protection from the abuser. Leila El-Ali mentions the number of women who declared their exposure to cases of violence doubled (200-300 percent) and the closed cycle of violence took on greater dimensions due to the economic collapse, for all women, Lebanese and refugee. This is due to the official slowdown through the ineffectiveness of many official bodies and the associated costs

with trials and lawsuit expenses as women could not afford the costs. Leila points to the inability of the official security protection units to enter Palestinian camps, which made it impossible to deal with very serious violence cases, weakening the reporting and increasing the risk of women's exposure.

Another problem that has been escalating for some time but has now taken on more serious dimensions within the camps, is child marriage, especially in Syrian refugee communities. Women Now launched the "Ma tkabrouna Ba'dna Zghar" (translation: Don't treat us as adults, we're still young) campaign in order to fight and reduce child marriage, and there has been diligent work to raise awareness and urge girls to take the route of education or professional development (led by refugees from target communities) instead of a marriage that would end a girl's future.

The organization obtained a guarantee from more than 1,600 families not to marry girls under the age of 18. It also succeeded in making 176 families retract their position in favor of child marriage, and stopped 13 engagement ceremonies for underage girls. In light of her work on the Amenah project, which seeks to combat child marriage in Bekaa's Syrian camps, Sawsan Abdulrahim adds this mission is problematic and closely linked to the availability of education and the inclusion of girls in schools. Sawsan also talks about the methods adopted to confront this phenomenon, especially since the approaches adopted by the project she is working on are very traditional, and must evolve to be more protective. Awareness classes given to girls do not protect them from early marriage because the problem is related to the intersection of systems with school dropouts, and there lies the actual problem. For Sawsan, any talk about the marriage of girls and their families without addressing the root of this systematic structure is not substantial and does not lead to concrete results. The guaranteed solution that leads to a decrease in the rates of early marriages is the compulsory education of refugees up to twelfth grade for both girls and boys, and the provision of a subsidy for the social structure so as not to interrupt the education journey. For Reham Kanoot, the matter is not limited to economic needs. There are families who believe that marriage is what should happen to their daughters. They believe that they should marry early to establish a family. Therefore, the need here goes beyond circumstances and regulations for cultural and ideological simulation that can change this view to protect girls.

Ola Al-Jundi discussed the state of education in refugee spaces and stated that most of the parents suffer from illiteracy because they originally came from places that suffer from severe poverty in development and education, such as the countryside of Raqqa, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor. Therefore, one of Gharsah's activities was to open classes for children and mothers (as most of the fathers did not comply). The educational initiative tried to embrace women and girls and to create a safe space that would secure sustainable educational and social results, within the possibilities available as it is not yet registered in Lebanon.

Ola says that during the crisis, for the first time since the establishment of Ghrasah, the initiative receives job requests from Lebanese women, which illustrates the depth of the crisis and generates opportunities for teamwork and a shared sense of the problem and responsibility. Ola believes that the populist racist discourse is limited, but it is sharper and clearer in the media and politics. As for the racist narratives fueled by the current crisis, there are reasons related to the rumors that spread from time to time promoting Syrians receive huge sums of money from the United Nations in fresh US dollars at a time when Lebanon is suffering from a severe shortage. Many political voices are emerging to confirm this narrative in what looks like populist mobilization against the Syrian refugee crisis. Anas points out the mechanisms for receiving financial aid, which are often carried out through women, have exacerbated racist narratives and practices against Syrian women in particular. According to Anas, these mechanisms need to be reviewed and restructured in order to break this narrative, in conjunction with human rights discourse that shows the impact of the crisis on everyone.

Reham Kanout stated that most of the Syrian women who suffered in Lebanon came from rural areas in Syria and from very modest economic and educational backgrounds. There was real pressure on them, as most of them resided in refugee camps. "In the end, a refugee is considered a refugee when he/she is poor," as Reham says. With the exacerbation of the crisis in Lebanon, the situation has deteriorated further, and, despite the cessation of war in some Syrian areas, violence and threats still exist. Therefore, narratives leading to the necessity of returning refugees are not only racist, but endanger them as well. Racist narratives are exacerbated when resources become scarce. It is not up to refugee women to refute these allegations, and it is more useful that this task is not required of them; in conjunction, legal protections for them and for Lebanese women should be worked on. Reham expresses young feminist experiences in the context of Syrian refuge in Lebanon and ways to contextualize a feminist identity far from her mother country under the shadow of verbal or actual racism. Reham misses the atmosphere of sisterhood in Syrian feminist approaches in countries of asylum, as she and the daughters of her generation try to engage in academic work instead of community work. Reham admits that she has found a nurturing and more supportive feminist environment in many cross-generational activists in Lebanon and is supported and directed by female feminist activists who have long and deep experiences in human rights work.

LGBTQI

Community:

Social and Legal

Burdens and

Daily Battles

for Survival in

Lebanon

This mapping counters a campaign launched against the LGBTQI community. A group that calls itself the “Army of God” or “Junud Arab” removed the rainbow flag (symbolizing the LGBTQI movement) from the Ashrafiyah area. This happened at a time when a statement was issued by the Lebanese Minister of Interior, Bassam Mawlawi, warning LGBTQI people and supporters of queer issues from gathering and demonstrating, despite separate official and religious calls in support of his statement.

Notwithstanding, queer issues face many obstacles in Lebanese society—it affects one of the aspects not subject to discussion among large groups of society, sexual, and gender identity. The feminist movement in Lebanon was able to break the silence on queer rights, especially after the 1995 Beijing conference. In a previous Knowledge Workshop⁴² article I’d written on feminism in the nineties in Lebanon, many feminist activists spoke about the impact of the Beijing conference in diverting attention away from some previously marginalized issues, including LGBTQI, which were then included as part of the feminist and human rights agenda. There was a feminist and queer movement turning point in global feminist funding, thus creating a chance to raise awareness and shed light on the challenges, stigma, and threats that accompany queer presence and activism in Lebanon. Although still stigmatized, awareness and advocacy efforts have changed key concepts in favor of queer rights, creating a relatively safe space for LGBTQI people in some Lebanese regions or among certain cultures and societies⁴³. Although we cannot consider the country to be a safe place, especially since the past three years the unfolding crises had left undeniable marks.

Regardless of social and civil efforts, the legal aspects continue to oppose the rights and freedoms of the queer community in Lebanon: Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code punishes “any sexual intercourse contrary to nature”⁴⁴ with imprisonment of up to a year. Although this law is hostile to gender rights and freedoms, it can be interpreted in a way that contradicts its goal, which is what happened later, especially since the law is broad and open to multiple interpretations. But the very existence of the law, combined with religious punishment and social mentality, has often translated into a violent attitude toward queer individuals and demands on the queer movement. For example, transwomen in Lebanon face systemic violence and discrimination in accessing basic services, including employment, healthcare, and housing, in addition to the general negative attitudes that had receded over time. Not to mention the difficulties that come with LGBTQI members who belong to or live within refugee communities, where their issues cannot be brought up until they leave. It is worth noting that many organizations or initiatives working with refugee communities avoid discussing the issue within refugee communities. Mainly, they want to ensure the continuity of their work in environments that categorically refuse to talk about it. There are attempts, if queer

42- This article is found through the Knowledge workshop website via the link <https://www.alwarsha.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Fatima-al-Moussawi-Narrating-1990s-.pdf>

43- From the report “As long as they are far from us” released by the Arab Foundation for freedom and Equality (2015)

44- The text of the law is present in this legal reading by the Human Rights Watch (2018). Link available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/19/lebanon-same-sex-relations-not-illegal>

refugees are in real and imminent danger, to intervene and send them to safe places until they leave Lebanon. It is worth noting, Lebanese queer men, who belong to middle or upper-middle classes, were less affected by the application of this law than queer refugee or less privileged or impoverished men; intersectionality emerges as a factor that influences this legal approach.

In October 2019, the queer movement and human rights defenders in Lebanon aimed to take their struggle to the streets through protests, chants, graffiti, and public debates. For queer people, this was an opportunity to transfer demands from the margins into mainstream discourse. However, not long after, the queer community were most affected by the economic collapse, the Beirut explosion, and the pandemic. According to activists, the economic crisis, which was exacerbated by severe lockdown measures, has affected the LGBTQI community in an unprecedented way. The Beirut explosion, which devastated Mar Mikhael and Gemmayze, had an unprecedented impact on society where most would gather in these areas. According to queer activists, most of their art gatherings, NGOs, bars, cafes, and homes in those areas had been greatly affected by the explosion, causing a loss of safety and a sense of belonging. Queer people have stated they cannot feel safe anywhere else in the country. This adds to the past losses of people still seeking justice and belonging that undermines their basic rights and identity. We conducted interviews with relevant and well-known organizations, such as Helem (Tareq Zeidan), Haven for Artists (Dayna Ash), Qadira (Rene Adanouv), Qurras (Hashem Hashem), and Marsa (Sarah Abou Zaki); there are other organizations working on this scale but we couldn't meet them. We approached the challenges facing the queer movement because the crises had the most profound impact on their lives in Lebanon.

The Legal and Social Structures of Queer Issues in Lebanon

As mentioned earlier, the law itself is not consistently applied and is often subject to interpretation by judges in charge of pursuing case files. In fact, the law itself is vague and left to the judges' interpretation. Some judges have decided that sexual intercourse between two people of the same sex is not contrary to nature and therefore there is no need to prosecute the detainees, while others have decided otherwise, especially in courts located in conservative cities. Almost all police arrests were men, rarely women. This, according to Hashem and Renee, is related to patriarchal norms that stigmatize against males if they submit to non-conforming sexual norms. Society has much harsher, negative attitudes towards transwomen than transmen—women that transition to the “more socially powerful” gender. The security authorities also have discriminatory measures against queer men, more than women, because patriarchal society perceives this as a violation of manhood and therefore an attack on patriarchal structures

and their gender manifestations (According to the dominant narrative). Among the most prominent turning points affecting the path of the LGBTQI community was the participation of Lebanese feminists at the Beijing conference in 1995; the founding of Helem, the first association concerned with queer rights; the case of Hamed Sinno, the singer and musician who faced many issues and threats, eventually leaving Lebanon; the suicide of the Egyptian queer activist Sarah Hegazy in Canada; the practices of the Internal Security Forces against arrested queer individuals; the positionality of queer causes in Lebanese media coverage; the growth of queer art; and the threats and prevention of marches.

The October 17, 2019 Revolution: Thawra

The revolution that began with clear economic demands and widespread popular anger towards a decline in living standards, turned to broader demands, such as social and legal reforms and the overthrow of a corrupt system. Among the demands that have found their way to the forefront are queer issues⁴⁵. Some of the protesters carried rainbow flags and queer rights slogans, and graffiti was painted on walls of downtown Beirut near Parliament. In addition, one of the revolution tents in Riad El Solh square belonged to Helem, which aimed to spread awareness and knowledge about queer issues and rights. These slogans were previously used in the yearly Women's Day marches and in protests of the queer movement; advocacy into the broader national scene for these rights took an unprecedented turn. This was accompanied by a wave of artistic expression and campaigns on city walls in what could be described as a form of rebellious expression and revolution. We were used to seeing queer art, graffiti, and slogans on the streets of Gemmayzeh, Karantina, and Mar Mikhael but this time they were on the walls of main buildings in downtown Beirut, alongside other slogans against the practices of sectarianism and the banking systems. This reflects how fundamental and existential the October Revolution was for the queer cause, a momentous moment in the history of social and human rights movements. One of the slogans raised by the queer movement was "homophobia is the only disease"⁴⁶ in response to the narrative that homosexuality is a pathological condition. Additionally, activists graffitied on bank walls "LGBT rights" and "Trans Women for the revolution". Activists also wrote on barriers surrounding Parliament, "for women's rights, for workers, for female workers, for refugees, for queers, for transwomen, for the Lebanese, for refugees".

45- The article "Lebanon's LGBT People Reclaim Their Power" found on the link: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/07/lebanons-lgbt-people-reclaim-their-power>

46- From Human Rights Watch article "If not now, when?". Link available via <https://www.hrw.org/vid-eo-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>

The Economic Collapse, the Pandemic, the Lockdowns, and the Beirut Port Blast

With the economic situation deteriorating at the end of 2019, queer conditions worsened on a large scale. LGBTQI individuals faced difficulties obtaining food, commodities, basic needs, and housing. Financial concerns prevailed and more restrictions were imposed in accessing work compared to previously. With the closing of restaurants, bars, and nightclubs (where most worked), queer individuals found themselves unemployed and in need of money. At the time, for example, Marsa offices usually provided health services. They began receiving calls for financial support, which indicated how bad the situation was, and continues to deteriorate. In response, Marsa started seeking and gathering support to ensure food and health supplies for the most affected groups. With the pandemic and later with the explosion, many queers were unable to pay their rent and were forced to return to their families' homes where they had previously been subjected to violence, hatred, abuse, and threats. Some LGBTQI people decided to stay at their homes for fear of returning to their families, despite their inability to pay rent. Relief initiatives helped them cover unpaid living costs that had accrued for several months from the beginning of lockdown until after the explosion⁴⁷.

During the explosion, many LGBTQI people lost their homes and shelters, as most of these homes are located next to Karantina, Jeitaoui, Mar Mikhael, Gemmayzeh, and Ashrafieh; areas that were severely damaged during the explosion (even today, many of them cannot return and are forced to live in areas that do not accept them or, worse, expose them to discrimination and threats). They needed housing, furniture, and immediate cash assistance, especially since most of them were already unemployed due to the pandemic and consequential closures of cafes, restaurants, bars, and art galleries. However, after the explosion, these centers or "hubs" were destroyed, making it difficult for them to access income. In addition, the economic situation in the country itself was constantly deteriorating, which led to more difficulties, even in other jobs and other living/working areas. The paralysis that afflicted the country affected these most vulnerable and marginalized individuals. Many also suffered physical and psychological injuries. Between October and November of 2020, a comprehensive survey was conducted to assess the impact of the explosion on access to services among LGBTQI people. The study revealed that most of them still suffer from deteriorating mental health, disturbed feelings, inability to sleep or concentrate, and intensifying panic attacks. However, the explosion brought serious barriers to accessing services, due to their cost, and a fear of COVID-19 infection, which peaked sharply after the explosion.

47- From the article "In Lebanon's Covid-19, Aid the Vulnerable, Including LGBT People", can be found on this link: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/lebanons-covid-19-aid-vulnerable-including-lgbt-people>

Since then, the Yalla Care alliance⁴⁸, which started during the lockdown period, initiated a response to the needs of the LGBTQI community, including organizations such as Marsa, LebMash, Mosaïque, Skoun, SIDC, and Haven for Artists, providing humanitarian support for affected queer people. After developing a list of the most vulnerable beneficiaries and identifying assistance plans, sexual health was somewhat marginalized in favor of humanitarian aid and still is, to a large extent, but the coalition strived to meet all needs. We state that the phenomenon of homelessness and loss of permanent/decent housing has increased significantly, especially for transwomen and refugee transwomen, prompting many queer networks to obtain funding for assistance.

The explosion led to a decline in mental health and a loss in safety; LGBTQI people used to meet in areas where they also used to live and work. The feeling of losing their space was heavy and devastating, according to Hashem, Rene, and Dayna. However, the Yalla Care alliance and other activists were quick to act. Two of the people who led and coordinated relief efforts provided housing and furniture after the Beirut explosion: Sandra Melhem, a queer activist from Lebanon, and Dayna Ash, the director of Haven for Artists. According to Hashem, the two parties were present and essential partners for the LGBTQI community during the rescue.

The Health Burden and the Logistical and Material Lack of Resources

There is a debate about access to healthcare among LGBTQI people. The healthcare system in Lebanon is already collapsing, as mentioned earlier, which leads to the expulsion of many medical professionals from the country due to continuous migration. Many doctors, endocrinologists, and hormonal specialists, who used to oversee the health of people undergoing sexual transition, have left. Therefore, currently, the medical needs of many LGBTQI people are not being met. There is a need to rebuild a LGBTQI-friendly healthcare network again in a way that ensures that medical staff with knowledge, awareness, and acceptance are available to follow up with trans and queer people in the most appropriate manner. One of the main concerns for the queer movement in Lebanon today is access to health services and the hormonal supplements needed for trans individuals to complete their physiological transition. Marsa obtained funding to work with a sexual health professional who would follow-up with transgender people, and by the time the grant was received that physician had left Lebanon in an unprecedented wave of medical staff migration. The association sought to find another specialist, but this is difficult and challenging.

⁴⁸ The alliance conducted a big study to assess the reality and the needs amongst the crisis: The report of the study can be found on this link: <https://cdn-5e344ff7f911c80ca0df760f.close.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/87/2022/02/YALLA-CARE-Report-2021-Edited.pdf>

Another impact of these crises on queer health has been the decline in attempts to access sexual health services as they are no longer seen as priorities, due to high prices for some services, limited mobility, and the stressful atmosphere in clinics, due to the burden of coronavirus and fear of infection. However, the demand for mental health support and psychosocial counseling had increased, and, fortunately, these are services that were widely provided during the period of closure and the explosion and available over the phone thus able to reach most people.

Initially, there was limited information and varying beliefs regarding the spread of COVID-19 but, gradually, as the data developed and the World Health Organization (WHO) released factual information, fears of coronavirus were allayed, including that of HIV patients who were anxious of complications and possible infection. However, another problem facing people living with HIV now is the unavailability or limited quantity of HIV medicines that were previously provided by the Ministry of Health. The interruption of HIV treatment has serious health implications that must be avoided and poses serious threats to patients' lives. This treatment is expensive and unavailable on the Lebanese market. In addition, the demand for free condoms is increasing, which is leading many organizations to raise funds with the purpose of purchasing more condoms for free distribution, especially among transgender individuals.

Queer Art and Shared Space Creation: Permanence Spaces for Expression and Activism

Among all the interviews that we conducted to supplement this part of the research, we spotted the presence of art in queer consciousness in Lebanon as one of the fundamentals of rebellion, a desire for change and revolution. Art has emerged as a queer tool for survival. For example, Hashem Hashem prepares his plays and writes his poetry, Renee expresses herself through dance and choreographed art, while Haven for Artists gather various artists to express themselves and their fears, hopes about the lives they seek, and through cultural and artistic discussion (never devoid of human rights issues). Queer art in Lebanon is vast and growing, consisting of plays, stand-up comedies, choreography, painting, and drag art—a growing and active artform in Lebanon: Sandra Melhem is a leading artist in this field, as well as an activist who has played a major role in the post Beirut Port Blast relief efforts.

Perhaps a concern that has accompanied the LGBTQI community recently is the need for immediate financial assistance, for shelter or the renovation/reconstruction of damaged shelters, assistance with rents, house relocation to safer places, food security, and medical and health safety. Queer initiatives and people are in need of funding in more than one direction, especially where there is a decline in the ability to find work, the need to leave the country, especially for those who belong to refugee communities and need to leave to safer and more nurturing contexts. In addition, there must be some work to reform the legal, social, and media narratives. Renee and Dayna point out that it is essential to reconsider the support structure for the security forces in parallel with support for the LGBTQI community, especially that security forces are engaged in various forms of violence against queer people. At a time when immigration becomes the most prominent destination for queer individuals, Dyna says that the most important question queer people should ask is how much racism can they take versus how much sexism can they tolerate. These options are not easy at the moment. Both Tarek and Hashem mention that queer people who were able to leave Lebanon have left.

**Legal
Shortcomings
and Limited
Implementation:
Politics and
Sectarianism as
Obstacles**

Persistent Legal and Political Discrimination

What makes the current situation even more difficult for women and the queer community is the lack of a supportive legal infrastructure that can protect them socially and economically. Legislation has a profound impact on the lives of women and marginalized groups in Lebanon. Some of this legislation has been reformed due to persistent feminist activism or through political will and opportunities seized. Others, however, remain unchanged due to political sensitivities and contradictions. The personal status law is heavily protected by religious figures, and dominates family courts and administers in all aspects of women's lives in the country. According to all the feminist figures we'd interviewed personal status laws are the main umbrella for all abusive measures against women and against justice being served. To the personal status laws, we add the laws that have been at the center of feminist battles over the years, namely the nationality law, gender-based violence law, harassment law, child marriage law, custody law, and kafala system, which stems from the absence of fair laws protecting migrant workers. In fact, no legal discrimination can be read, aside from women's weak parliamentary participation and the absence of a solid feminist agenda on the political table in Lebanon. We also mention the electoral and voting systems are setup in such a way that do not allow women to obtain equal results at the district level, which is reinforced by the absence of a female quota; although quotas themselves are subject to discussion in feminist circles. Despite constant attempts and calls for a more powerful quantitative and qualitative political presence, a corrupt and legislative void still impacts the presence of women in power. Often, the processes of change that occur are often due to specific favorable circumstances and not because of a clear methodology that empowers or influences women.

Over a parliamentary session in October 2020, MP Enaya Ezzedine⁴⁹ presented a proposal for a female quota law, which led to the amendment of the electoral law issued in 2017, guaranteeing 26 parliamentary seats in the upcoming elections for women, with the possibility of electing more women from outside quota seats. In her proposal, this call was only a reflection of what parliamentary blocs have always said about women's empowerment and the importance of political participation. The irony is that the deputies refused to discuss the proposal and did not take it seriously (even from within the parliamentary bloc to which Ezzedine belongs), which prompted Ezzedine to leave the parliamentary session. Voices within the feminist movement demand a quota, while other voices from within the movement reject this principle, given that it frames and defines women's political participation. Supporters of the argument assert that committing parliament and society to a culture of broad women's participation can only be done with a specific number of seats occupied solely by women.

49- <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/%22الكويتا-النسائية22-%22مناقشة-ترفض-لبنان-في-النيابية>

It is remarkable that ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections, more than fifty institutions, associations, and personalities that make up the “Platform for Feminist Civil Society in Lebanon” gathered to launch a list of demands to achieve gender equality and address them to male and female candidates at the parliamentary elections, which took place on May 15, 2022⁵⁰. Among the most prominent of these demands from the candidates was: “A commitment not to include in their speeches, media appearances, and electoral campaigns any discrimination against women, stereotyping, masculine, patriarchal or misogynistic signals; demand to include gender perspective in all future plans, legislation and budget; enact temporary measures, such as quotas to expedite securing equal representation of women in elected and appointed bodies in all areas of public life; adopt a law protecting women from political violence, including any measure designed to prevent women from participating in political party or organizational activities; demand reforms for a gender-sensitive economy; adoption of a law to combat child marriage and setting 18 as the minimum age for marriage; amendment of articles 503 and 504 of the Penal Code to criminalize marital rape; repeal of articles 534 and 521 of the Penal Code that are used to criminalize same-sex relationships; adoption of a unified civil code for personal status that applies to all women and men in Lebanon; amending the nationality law to ensure that Lebanese women are granted the same right as men to pass on their nationality to their children and husbands; amending Article 24 of Law 46/2017 to increase paid maternity leave to a minimum of 14 weeks and establishing paternity leave; repealing article 26 of the Labor Code that prohibits women from working in certain occupations considered arduous or dangerous; amending Article 14 of the Social Security Law, which gives the husband the right to benefit from family benefits on behalf of his non-working wife but it does not allow the wife to benefit from it unless her husband has reached 60 years or more or if he suffers from a physical or mental handicap; enact a law to regulate the work of domestic workers, abolish the sponsorship/Kafala system, and expand the scope of their protection; amend Law 164 on combating human trafficking to be aligned with the United Nations Protocol to Combat Trafficking in Persons to achieve maximum protection for survivors,” as stated in the statement read by ABAAD’s Director Ghida Anani.⁵¹

50- <https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/متفرقات/منصة-المجتمع-المدني-النسوي-عرضت-10-مطالب-تشكل-خريطة>

51- <https://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/متفرقات/منصة-المجتمع-المدني-النسوي-عرضت-10-مطالب-تشكل-خريطة>

Women in the Lebanese Political Context

Last century, during the fifties, Lebanese women gained the right to vote, which was considered an advanced step in Arab and Middle Eastern society at the time, according to research conducted by Al Ma'aitah in 2013.⁵² Currently, the number of Lebanese women who vote in elections or run for office and reach positions in parliaments, governments, and other major political councils reflects a huge gap when compared to men. In the newly elected Lebanese Parliament, there are eight female representatives compared to 120 male representatives, and in the 2018 Parliament only six females were elected. This is the highest percentage of women registered in the Lebanese Parliament to date, which indicates slight progress compared to previous years, despite this complex reading of “progress”, especially since half the elected women belong to traditional political parties with a clear patriarchal approach. Also, this is considered a shallow representation compared to other countries that adopt similar political democratic values, according to a report issued by Lebanon Support in 2019.⁵³ When the Lebanese government was formed early in September 2021, a woman occupied only one ministerial seat out of 24 seats. This is not only related to the small number of women present in the Council of Ministers or in Parliament, it also the lack of qualitative participation, which leads to the absence of effective and serious promotion of laws that support women’s rights to safeguard their public rights. We note the attacks on women MPs on gender have always been repeated. Women MPs in the 2018 session were subject to crude male parliamentary and media comments, and this behavior persists today.

There has never been a fierce feminist moment towards the regime in Lebanese history. Perhaps that may have happened on March 8, 2014, because the Beirut protests on International Women’s Day was massive due to overwhelming popular anger when large numbers of murdered women occurred during that period. However, Parliament absorbed this anger during the following month when it passed Law 293 (albeit imperfectly) after KAFA and their supporting coalition embraced a civil proposal that had been sought for many years. According to Maya Ammar, the regime tried once again to break popular anger, as it did to the unions to shrink their role. Dima Kaedbey talks about the momentum in the feminist movement, which usually maintains its strength for about five years, calms a bit for two years, then resumes activity right after. It is natural in light of these collapses that everything will recede, but when feminists do not take lead of their own issues something is missing. Today, specifically after the October Revolution, there are feminist spaces that are inspired by the thoughts and practices of the feminist movement in Beirut and abroad, even though to a large extent it is still not visible enough. The emerging feminist discourse outside the capital is a huge gain for

52- According to a study by Al Ma'aitah and others (2013) on Arab women and political development. Available via: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315858661-2/arab-women-political-development-rowaida-al-maaitah-arwa-oweis-muntaha-gharaibeh-hmoud-olimat-hadeel-al-maaitah>
 53- A study on women's political participation in Lebanon prepared and published by “Lebanon Support” (2019). Link available via: https://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/lb-womensassessment-report_en-online_1.pdf

women, for feminists, and for queer movements. It is worth noting there are multiple feminist paths in different regions, which undoubtedly have always taken on languages, concepts, and forms of their own that may be related to land, agricultural activity or property, education, and work (demonstrations by female students in many cities far from Beirut took place during the revolution mimicked local concerns). In recent years, the feminist movement and research have expanded to address larger issues from women's immediate concerns to economic and political matters that either oppress or empower women. Every step is cumulative within the movement itself, and we have a long road ahead, according to Dima. Disorganization becomes important sometimes, especially during crises, in terms of confronting bureaucracy that challenges civil work, even if feminist, and the current focus on relief would weaken community organization; relief orientation is subject to reality and funding requirements.

On October 17, 2019, new horizons for women's participation in the political scene began to take shape. The Lebanese revolution was characterized by the existence of a feminist agenda⁵⁴. Since the first protests, women themselves asserted that they are an essential part of the revolution. At the forefront of marches, discussion groups, sit-ins, and roadblocks, women were a major driving force behind the movement. The protests were feminist and intersecting in nature. Women were defending their rights in politics and other matters. Demonstrators called for the safeguarding of queer, sexual, and reproductive rights. The protests in Beirut and elsewhere turned into discussion forums where activists exchanged ideas. Activists from organizations, communities, and women's rights organizations participated in the discussions and expressed their views on women's achievements, obstacles, and opportunities to access, exercise, and protect their rights. Women carried banners supporting their causes and led groups to object to a system they unquestionably considered unfair. When reading the role of women in the 2019 uprising, it was stated that the importance of women's participation is to maintain peaceful aspects of the uprising and to sustain diverse and unified protests, which were organized and led exclusively by women in Ain al-Remmaneh and Khandaq al-Ghamiq. The political meaning of the presence of women at demonstrations requires a deeper study, and it might not be positive or fair to link their presence only to nonviolence, especially since peaceful protests were largely dismantled during the 2019 revolution. In any case, women's presence cannot be limited to peaceful aspects or to mitigate the rush of men during the uprising. It was frustrating for many women when protesting men sometimes asked women, who were used as human shields, to defend the front line as police or armed groups attacked.

The main focus of the October Revolution was to increase women's inclusion in political spheres without being limited to official frameworks. Political spheres can be at the core of a party, trade union, and institutional, professional or educational organization.

54- An article by UN Women (2019), Available on this link: https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2020/03/Gender%20and%20The%20Protests%20Paper_Arabic%20Version.pdf

Active participation of women ranged from protesting against police violence to writing statements highlighting the discriminatory nature of political systems against women. The method of organization and the demands of the protests were feminist in nature, and thus the uprising revealed one of its main goals: placing women at the heart of this transitional phase before building the next, especially in exposing the impact financial, banking, and economic systems have on women.

International Law and Legal Context

Despite being one of the first countries in the Arab region to grant women equal rights to fully participate in politics in 1953, and despite ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, Lebanon has made only limited progress in promoting gender equality, empowering women, and allowing women to participate in achieving sustainable justice. Women are still disproportionately affected due to the systematic discrimination against them legally and politically. There is a gap between the provisions of the Lebanese Constitution and CEDAW and Lebanese laws. In some cases, there is a gap between the law and the application of justice as many women's organizations in Lebanon have focused on advocacy and social awareness campaigns to ensure that Lebanon complies with its obligations under CEDAW and other ratified international treaties. However, while providing assistance services to women and advocating for law reform are necessary and important, they cannot guarantee a sustainable shift without policy change and incubating political will.

Gender Legislation Challenges: Major Battles and a System that Resists Change

Legal researcher Aya Majzoub from Human Rights Watch (Beirut office) recounts the most prominent legal gaps regarding the rights of women and LGBTQI people in Lebanese legislation. She points to the five most important points that take priority on the reform ladder, namely the nationality law, especially that many neighboring countries have preceded Lebanon in this regard; creating a unified civil personal status law; reforming the domestic violence law; dropping the sponsorship/kafala law; and criminalizing underaged marriage of girls. Aya says that in the summer of 2019, women's organizations and institutions following up on the human rights situation, including Human Rights Watch, contacted Minister Violette Safadi and worked with her team towards legal reforms that should have been discussed in a parliamentary session in March 2020. However, the protests and later the entire state of the revolution and the resignation of Saad Hariri's government prevented the session from convening. After that, the general atmosphere in the country moved away from discussing legal reforms regarding laws pertaining to women.

Over the last three years, there has been very little progress in this area: limited to passing a law criminalizing sexual harassment and amending the domestic violence law (still below the ambition and demands of the feminist movements). At the same time, women's situation in Lebanon had worsened dramatically because of the economic collapse, the pandemic, and the increase in cases of domestic violence, in addition to the cases of child marriages and other difficulties that had been exacerbated. There was no official reaction to this deterioration, which made the situation worse in terms of the law and its application. Although Lebanon is the first Arab country to criminalize sexual harassment, which is an important matter, the law itself is inadequate and contains many flaws. It does not respond to the cumulative and large feminist work in developing proposals and drafts that actually mimic the realities of harassment, the extent of its impact, and how to address it. Also, the proposal did not undergo the necessary and sufficient consultations and was quickly approved without seeking to study it, improve it, or strengthen the protection clauses therein.

Aya points out that there is a lack of coordination and trust between feminist organizations, which is something that some feminist activists agree with. They confess to the lack of cooperation between the movement's components. We add to this the difference in approach to working with authorities and its institutions, especially that some push for partial reforms, while others only want broad, radical reforms. This difference only deepens the decline. The lack of coordination is not only limited to the feminist movement but extends to Lebanon's entire civil society, evidenced when working on gender issues in particular due to intertwining funding trends and constant competition. Another obstacle to legal reforms is the lack of transparency and clarity, which hinders many corrective and demanding steps, making the legislative scope a difficult place for activist work to take its course.

The criterion for measuring change is the patriarchal, "religious", and authoritarian character of legislation in Lebanon. Every proposal that attacks the authority of men in general, politicians, and clerics in particular⁵⁵, is abolished or gets diluted. For example, Both the child marriage law and a clause on marital rape were rejected in the amendment round of Parliament due to opposition from the religious authority lobby within the legislative committees, while political intransigence stands in the way of passage of the nationality law. On the other hand, the implementation is often poor compared to the purpose of the laws, as is the case with the rest of the laws called for by civil society in Lebanon, such as the laws on the prevention of torture and access to information. Initially, the implementation of these two laws was difficult despite the laws themselves being very well drafted and were passed, according to activists. The basis for this is the existence of permanent loopholes that empty the laws of their content and purpose. This became evident with the domestic violence law that was

55- From article "Gender politics in Lebanon and the limits of legal reformism" by Riwa Salameh, via the link: <https://civilsociety-centre.org/ar/paper/gender-politics-lebanon-and-limits-legal-reformism-en-ar>

unable to constitute a deterrent to violence. In addition to the textual gaps: complaints about violence are still referred to women's or relief organizations for reception then referring them on to the prosecution, instead of submitting to official processes directly. No matter how necessary the role of organizations, these services need broader and more solid strategies at the official level. The same applies to applications within the corridors of the courts, which may take a long time. Most importantly, in the security forces' departments, complaints about the severe lack of gender sensitivity are raised by the security forces that deal with women's conditions and are often subject to the standards of patriarchal society, far from legal and security approaches.

With regard to the independence of the judiciary and its ability to protect women's rights, most activists point out the judiciary is generally directed to protect higher political interests. However, some judges take the initiative to read laws in a way that takes into account women's interests to some extent and make considerable attempts in women's favor. Legal reform remains difficult as long as judicial reform is difficult and unaffordable. Another challenge is whether the political authority is using the collapse as an excuse to put gender legal reforms on its agenda. Aya Majzoub says that if the political will is found, as has happened with the sexual harassment bill, the matter may succeed, but the issue is also subject to all the challenges mentioned above. On the same point, Maya Ammar says the concept of setting priorities and understanding the timing to introduce laws into Parliament and having them approved is not subject to a specific logic that we can understand, rather it is a sudden process that may occur without necessarily understanding its reasons. The awareness-raising process remains the healthiest and most appropriate facility for legal reform processes as it contributes to breaking social concepts that nourish or are nourished by patriarchal laws.

Nationality Law

The current nationality law, adopted during the French Mandate, discriminates against women married to non-Lebanese men, their children, and their husbands by depriving them of Lebanese citizenship (Human Rights Watch (2018))⁵⁶. This law affects nearly every aspect of the children and spouses' lives, including legal residency status, access to work, education, social services, and healthcare. It leaves some children at risk of statelessness, which also contravenes the universal conventions on childhood. Among the repercussions of this law is the need to re-apply for legal residence in Lebanon every three years, and the need to obtain a work permit in Lebanon, which is not always granted. Children and spouses are usually not allowed to work or prohibited from many professions. They often report bias in the labor market due to common discriminatory employment regulations. They are denied access to national health insurance and

56- "Lebanon: Broken Promises On Women's Rights" (2020), via: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/04/lebanon-broken-promises-womens-rights>

government-subsidized medical care, even though they must pay taxes for system levies if they work. They also face bureaucratic obstacles when enrolling in public schools and universities. Twenty years ago, activists in the feminist movement began a campaign to amend the citizenship law. The most prominent of these campaigns was launched and supervised by the Research and Training for Development Action Group (CRTDA), which launched the “My nationality is a right for me and for my family” campaign and transferred its experience to other Arab countries, which witnessed major legal changes, while the situation in Lebanon remained unchanged politically and legally.

In this regard, we went back to the coordinator of the campaign, researcher and human rights activist Karima Chebbo, to inquire about the development of the case. The sons and daughters of Lebanese women who were abroad had to stay abroad during the time period in which the Lebanese state did not allow non-Lebanese to enter the country. Often, the families were not able to send money to these sons and daughters because of the bank seizures of the depositors’ money. As a result, many people went to study abroad due to their inability to learn some professions in Lebanon, the lack of career prospects, legal abuse, and work regulations, but found themselves forced to remain without resources and without the ability to return to Lebanon during the travel ban, and the evacuation procedures that began in European countries and Lebanon.

Many families booked tickets for their children and when it was time to travel, the Lebanese authorities denied them entry. In addition to the material losses incurred, in terms of airline bookings and medical examinations, the emotional violence accompanying the selective evictions was particularly heavy on these families. The same applies to registration processes at the Lebanese University, as non-Lebanese students of Lebanese mothers had to pay fees in US dollars, which were refused. The campaign followed-up on this issue. Karima talks about the extra effort that the campaign had to make during the pandemic due to the exacerbation of the problems facing women and their families, especially in light of the authorities’ reversal of some decisions, readopted without warning.

When families resumed returning from abroad (as soon as it was allowed), Karima sent a letter to the Council of Ministers, where each party began transferred responsibility to other parties, such as the Relief and Emergency Committee. These returns were meant to take place during closure and lockdowns when authorities allowed for Lebanese to return to Lebanon. Only when the campaign changed course, sons and daughters who were detained abroad were able to return. Karima and the campaign had to communicate with embassies and consulates to make sure that it was possible for them to return. At first, they were not allowed to board the plane, despite checks and return ticket purchases. These cases were documented and recorded, and here the campaign’s demands intensified to change the decisions and ensure their enforcement. Karima

asks, “Why do families have to live this kind of pressure on top of the pressures they are already experiencing?” The campaign observes that conflicting decisions regarding the pandemic, education, and registration have always harmed sons and daughters. Karima states, in many cases, she had to write the decisions herself and keep up with the declarations as institutional failure was permanent.

Karima accompanied mothers and families as their suffering intensified with COVID-19, and says the absence of legislation during crises has a bad effect because violations increase during a crisis. Regarding work, Karima indicated a large number of spouses, due to their inability to attain permanent work, were on daily wages. The lockdown and the suspension of daily work had a catastrophic impact on families’ daily income, especially since many decisions and methods of in-kind and financial assistance were not covered. Letters for children’s families arrived informing them that the children will not receive aid, estimated at 400,000 Lebanese pounds (at the time, it had a higher value than today) because they are from non-Lebanese fathers. Many of the complaints that reached the campaign include threats of housing eviction, due to the inability to pay rent. At this stage, the fear was it would become a charitable campaign, even though this is a human rights demand.

This issue is subject to deep political wrangling and remains hostage to racist discourse that uses arguments of demographic imbalance and settlement in order to prevent women from obtaining their rights to citizenship for their families. Years ago, Judge John Al-Azzi used some loopholes in the law to grant the children of a Lebanese woman (widow to a non-Lebanese man) the right to Lebanese citizenship. The judge was punished and removed from his position. Later in the text, we will mention the proposal submitted by the President of the National Commission for Lebanese Women Claudine Aoun; the text constitutes a violation and is discriminatory rather than a contribution to the establishment of justice. It is worth noting that the My Nationality campaign released several videos⁵⁷ depicting the reality and suffering of women during this period, looking at all the obstacles they’d faced, and presenting it to the court of public opinion. One of the most important things Karima believes is necessary is for short-term decisions or exceptions to become permanent, especially that the current situation imposes severe discrimination.

We address the nationality issue from an activist perspective. However, we are aware that it goes further, to the roots of the legislative and social framework. This is also reflected in the conditions of female migrant workers, refugee women, impoverished women, and those on the margins or outside formal economies. The Lebanese model is based on political sectarianism, which inevitably affects women. In a political sectarian

57- The videos are available on the campaign’s channel on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuKTGypINrw>

model, the rule of sects prioritizes the interests of men, the clergy, and sectarian parties, reducing women's interests. Therefore, women's relationship to citizenship, state, and land is derived from their relation to men whether father, husband, or sectarian leader.

The issue of nationality cannot be separated from the Lebanese economic and political structure, which places women on the margins of protection and gain. The reality of women in social security, career advancement, and unpaid work becomes inconvenient, and this subsequently enhances the concept and practices of the kafala system and protects it against migrant workers. This approach also underpins the situation of refugee women who suffer double marginalization because they are non-Lebanese, impoverished, and women. These are formative pillars of the Lebanese system; thus, we can understand that women's conditions did not happen by chance but rather through a premeditated and conscious scheme. All this is to protect the patriarchal sectarian gains in a sectarian-divided country at the expense of marginalized groups, where women always fall into the category of weakness for those making policies and politics.

Law 293: Violence Against Women

Gender-based violence and domestic violence have been and continue to be the main prevalent abuses facing women in Lebanon. The feminist civil movement in Lebanon, through a coalition led by "Enough Violence and Exploitation", was able to pass a law criminalizing gender-based violence in 2014, after more than twenty years of hard work, raising awareness, continuous advocacy, and struggle with some political and religious institutions resisting civil intervention in laws that manage family affairs. However, the law remains largely incapable of providing full protection because it does not recognize all types of violence; does not give weight to moral, emotional, and verbal abuse; and does not guarantee women's economic and financial independence from their abusers. Moreover, the law does not criminalize marital rape, and puts the law itself at the mercy of the personal status law in case it conflicts with it; personal status laws can overwhelm and cancel Law 293.

In addition to the controversy over the effectiveness of Law 293, in terms of protection from violence, there are other laws, such as Law 220 aimed at protecting persons with disabilities, which seeks, in principle, to enshrine one of the constitutional principles based on equality in rights and duties among all citizens without discrimination or preference; after years struggling to support the rights of people with disabilities. The irony is this law is not effective and cannot be applied, and attempts to facilitate its implementation were closed, such as stopping support for Haltak, launched by Amal Al-Sharif and a group of individuals, to facilitate monitoring persons with disabilities' movements in Beirut and other areas. Amal Al-Sharif, an activist and a woman with

disabilities—she insists on this nomenclature because it is universal—discussed aspects of the political and social neglect on persons with disabilities and, specifically, their effect on women.

Amal addresses the health and occupational aspects that make women with disabilities more vulnerable to exploitation without this law or any of the related procedures trying to protect them. It talks about the low salaries they receive, in addition to a very weak ability to negotiate work conditions, if they are allowed to enter the labor market at all, after experiencing many obstacles in the absence of educational institutions equipped to accommodate their disabilities. It also talks about how a large part of the health sector neglects communicating with women with disabilities to inform them about their conditions, and even considers their guardians better suited. Although disability issues affect both men and women, Amal indicates the impact of disability on women has always been heavier as they are more shackled and vulnerable to exploitation. While writing this report, Lebanon was buzzing with news of a rape incident against a girl with disabilities in one of the camps, which left the door wide open to controversy about protection systems for people with disabilities on one hand, and the engendered physical weakness for creating greater persecution on the other. Here, the intersectional lens is able to read the stress an incident of rape or sexual violence imposes on a girl who bears the characteristics of asylum and physical weakness (physical disability, in this case).

Rape Law: Abolishing Law 522

In August 2017, the Lebanese Parliament repealed Article 522 of the penal code that allowed rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims. However, this measure was not sufficient as it left a clause in relation to sexual offenses with children aged 15-18 years old. Despite its importance, this legal step hollowed out one of the main provisions of protection. Its move was followed by debate within the feminist movement to address the issue of child marriage, which is still legally and socially accepted and protected by religious and political institutions. The law's amendment, despite its importance and limitations, was clear evidence of the mechanisms adopted by the legislative mindset in Lebanon, which make concessions and advance amendments only when they do not affect the interests of higher religious and political groups in the country.

Personal Status Law

The battle of personal status laws in Lebanon is the main battle between the Lebanese political authority and the sectarian system against the civil reformist and feminist movements. Women in Lebanon continue to suffer from discrimination due to 15 personal status laws that govern the personal issues of 18 sects (Human Rights Watch, 2015),⁵⁸ depending on religious affiliation. These laws, without exception, discriminate against women and discriminate between one woman and another, and since legal and religious institutions fall under patriarchal norms, women's interests are rarely taken into account. These laws reflect the main aspect of the public/private space dichotomy that overlaps with the concept of family as a major socio-political element, transcending the concepts of equality, justice, and rights Rizk (2019).⁵⁹ Religious authorities view the family unit as a permanent and essential link to social continuity within their own vision, and not as shifting power-relations where variables that can affect society can be produced. Therefore, there is difficulty in establishing a dynamic role between men and women that goes beyond what has been socially organized by these powers and the courts entrusted to them.

The personal status law places more barriers on women than on men who wish to end a marriage, initiate divorce proceedings, secure post-divorce rights in relation to their children, or secure financial rights from an ex-husband. Despite the various efforts made in Lebanon to achieve justice and gender equality, this task remains difficult as long as family matters are still linked to unjust laws that do not put women on an equal footing with men or with each other if they belong to different sects. Lina Abu Habib, Manar Zwaiter, Saada Allawa, Myriam Sfeir, Maya Ammar, Alia Awada, Hayat Mirshad, and Caroline Sukkar all consider the inevitability of fighting the personal status law, which can only be won long-term.

Human Rights Watch⁶⁰ followed-up on the 15 personal status laws in a detailed report, explaining the disparity the religious courts imposed on women of different sects, and expressed their concern in 2015 regarding the continuing blatant discrimination against women compared to men and each other. The feminist movement believes in and adopts a discourse that calls for a unified civil code for personal status. The call was also for the establishment of civil marriage, mandatory or optional, but the religious establishment strongly opposed these proposals, and most political forces stood behind them. In general, it is not possible to contemplate broad and serious reforms in this regard unless the official authorities put an end to the interference of religious institutions in the affairs of the country; reforms will remain confined to patriarchal systems in society, setting moral and non-legal standards in all women's issues.

58- The report is available through this link: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/lebanon0115_ForUpload.pdf

59- *A Question of Personal Status: The Lebanese Women's Movement and Civil Marriage Reform (2019)* by Nelia Rizk. Available: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/731005/summary>

60- The report is available through HRW website, via: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/lebanon0115_ForUpload.pdf

Sexual Harassment: The Feminist Approach to the Issue, the Law, and Its Application

At the end of 2020, the Lebanese Parliament approved the “law criminalizing sexual harassment and rehabilitating its victims”⁶¹ after years of human rights activists fought for its approval, and in light of long discussions of draft laws that were prepared and called for by women’s groups, the head of “Women and Children Committee” Parliament representative Enaya Ezzedine, and the National Commission for Lebanese Women, which merges a number submitted proposals. It is noteworthy that former Minister Jean Oghassapian and former MP Ghassan Moukheiber had submitted two draft laws on sexual harassment in 2017. This law is a step forward because it frames sexual harassment as a crime that requires punishment and protection measures, and it is the first law of its kind in the Arab region. However, the law still falls short of meeting the requirements of the Convention on Violence and Harassment and has many flaws, shortcomings, and broad and value definitions.

Perhaps the most prominent observations are those made by lawyer and jurist Karim Nammour of Legal Agenda⁶². Karim touched on the definitions of harassment, linking this definition to the act of repetition. The law described harassment as morally uncontrollable, using the word “bad”. The law also describes harassment in isolation, decoupled from the ties of power, especially in workplace hierarchy, and neglects to include moral harassment. The review also indicates that the law prevails over punitive logic instead of arbitral and preventive logic; punishment logic prevails in favor of public morality rather than the harassment rights of the victim herself. The law also tied the fine to minimum wage at a time when the Lebanese currency is deteriorating every day. Instead, the burden of proof remains with the victim. In addition, the law does not mention the obligations of the employer to ensure a safe environment, does not mention the penalty for harassing an employer, nor does it clarify the mechanisms for protecting victims and witnesses, among other considerations.

Several initiatives were launched recently in response to the aggravating issue of harassment and the absence of official reactions; the most prominent was “Salwa’s Adventures” emanating from the activist platform “Nasawiya”, which simulated the idea of confronting and protecting against harassment, but, unfortunately, stopped due to poor funding. Another initiative is, which was founded by feminist activists Nay Al-Rahi, Sandra Hassan, and Mira Al-Mir (Nay and Sandra still work on it today). Harassment Tracker empowers through reporting and raising awareness on sexual harassment in Lebanon. Launched on the web in 2016/2017, girls and women reported

61- The text of the law is available on this link <https://kafa.org.lb/sites/default/files/2021-05/qanwn-tjrym-althrsh-aljnasy.pdf>

62- Article by Karim Nammour, commenting on the law on the Legal Agenda Website: <https://legal-agenda.com/%D8%A5%D8%AB%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%B8%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A-D%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%91/>

an unprecedented 300 harassment cases in Lebanon. Nay has a human rights view of the issue, which is consistent with Karim's reading of the law.⁶³ Nay talks about harassment on a broad spectrum where only its victims endure. Nay also points out that public places are where if a girl/woman is harassed, she can report it because of the nature of the situation; the person is often a stranger to her. When it comes to the workplace or between family members, however, reporting becomes much more difficult. Nay also spoke about the importance of reporting, especially in the context of organizations that used to employ serial harassers and stopped them as soon as they became aware of their violations. Through her activist and field work, Nay confirms that official and classic media in Lebanon have a non-positive role in approaching this issue, making it problematic rather illegal. Media brought together the perpetrators of harassment and victims into one framework equally, as if the two had equal rights to attend and make statements. According to her, recurring awareness and the activist pursuit of a right and protective law left an impact. This resulted in female students in a Tripoli school besieging the school director on charges of harassment; and when a young man who violated a teenage girl's privacy in a restaurant in Beirut, she took him to Hobeish police station and filed a report.

It is important to note that many institutions and businesses in Lebanon have their own protocols for dealing with harassment, such as those adopted by AUB and LAU, known as Title IX. According to Fida Afiouni—a member of the Center for Inclusive Business and Leadership for Women (CIBL) platform that participated in drafting the civil society law and led a campaign against harassment from AUB—this protocol has proven very effective within the university. Fida recounted the complaints that reached professors, students, and administrators were dealt with confidentially and professionally, and appropriate measures were taken. On the other hand, other universities and many workplaces are still not accredited in this context with the absence of a national plan. Despite the law, the lack of a uniform national country-wide approach is the biggest challenge to comprehensive reporting and protection schemes. It is worth noting that adopting a methodology and approach based on an understanding of the context, social relations, family structure, and the individual's position in society—without the need for projections from other societies where the same data is not available with regard to individuality and social relations—remains one of the goals pursued by the feminist movement.

63- Karim Nammour's legal reading is available on the link: <https://legal-agenda.com/>-إثنتا عشرة-ملاحظة-على- /مقترح-تجريم-الت

Kafala System: Migrant Workers and the Lack of Legal and Social Protection

In order to be able to reside and work in Lebanon, female migrant workers must obtain both residence and work permits. Therefore, every migrant domestic worker needs a sponsor or “kafeel” as their sole responsibility. This type of employment relationship is generally known as the kafala system. The sponsorship system—rumored to be a system and not a law—coordinates the relationship between employers and some groups, including domestic workers, most of whom are migrant workers. Female workers are excluded from the protections of labor law, which makes them more vulnerable to physical and moral abuse, especially if they are migrants. Migrant sex workers also follow the kafala scheme through which many come to Lebanon. The Lebanese labor law is not limited to domestic workers, Lebanese or immigrant women, farmers, and agricultural workers, but encourages the Lebanese government to regulate the relationship “between employers and those who work in domestic and agricultural services through a special work contract”, which lends ambiguity to this relationship and leads to a wider area of hidden and overt violations. Today there is the standard labor contract; a procedure so vague that successive labor ministers are not fully aware of its nature and its implications, so each of them approach it differently.

The kafala system is one of the obstacles to gender equality and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa region, more specifically to Lebanon—it is implemented in many Gulf countries with varying mechanisms. It comes within a complex system of exploitation and a lack of basic supportive policies for families with children, elderly, and working members. Kafala is just a reflection of how the Lebanese system, through its official and private agencies, deals with the imbalance in the division of domestic work. This imbalance usually places the weight of domestic responsibilities on women outside any social support, effective protection, and awareness of equal duties. The main mechanism of the sponsorship system is the recruitment of migrant workers (mostly from Asian and African countries) to work in the areas of domestic services, construction, and organizational jobs for low salaries and under the supervision and control of employers and third-party recruitment agencies. We note that sex workers are often brought to Lebanon through the kafala scheme. While this whole process is wrongly seen as part of the global exchange of services, it simply reflects a blatant form of exploitation and discrimination towards male/female workers coming from specific geographic areas and socio-economic status. Gender intersectionality attempts to read this system more accurately in light of the dimensions of racial discrimination, as women under kafala are more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and harassment than men who are also unsafe under these conditions. It is also not possible to overlook how fixing the exchange rate contributed to creating a consumer glut in Lebanese culture that made most families, regardless of their income, rush to bring in a migrant domestic worker on a low wage.

In the midst of such uncertainty and the absence of protective laws, migrant domestic workers continue to suffer from human rights abuses and difficult working conditions. Over the past decades, cases of female migrant workers being physically and sexually assaulted by their employers, as well as cases of late payment or not receiving any salary, have been reported. Moreover, many workers were locked up in their workplaces and not allowed any free time or respite. Although there are contracts, this does not guarantee rights; even when the contract states that abusive behavior is not acceptable. Restricting the workers' freedom of movement, through practices such as imprisonment or confiscation of passports, was culturally and socially acceptable and sometimes even seen as a "precautionary measure". This position and the encouragement of recruitment agencies to restrict workers' freedom of movement is the reason behind the violations of workers' rights. According to Human Rights Watch,⁶⁴ Lebanon's sponsorship system puts workers at risk of exploitation and abuse, while the Lebanese judiciary does not hold employers accountable for abuses. Migrant workers lose their legal status if their sponsor terminates their contract, or if they decide to leave their employer after experiencing violence or abuse. A migrant domestic worker who leaves her employer loses her right to work and faces deportation under the terms of the contract. Domestic workers may also be detained if they leave the employer's home without permission or violate their terms.

According to the International Labor Organization in 2016, there were more than 250,000 migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, which is likely to be much lower than the actual figure. Over the past decade, the feminist movement took a position on the procedures taking place against female workers ranging from addressing the workers themselves, in order to respond to their needs, to trying various legal and social ways to alleviate their adverse living and working conditions. There has also been tireless work in influencing social and economic structures unfavorable to migrant domestic workers and attempts to raise awareness about their rights, the abusive aspects of the kafala system, and its monetary system.

Some organizations have worked alongside female migrant workers, while others have encouraged them to take full action. There have been movements emanating exclusively from the foreign workers themselves, such as the Ethiopian movement for justice for female migrant workers in Lebanon. In any case, the struggle to achieve the rights of migrant domestic workers faces a lack of supportive human rights mechanisms in Lebanon, and the rigidity of laws governing their status and work. Over the past years, women's organizations have tried to increase women workers' access to justice by defending their rights, promoting a supportive human rights environment, and providing legal and social support for all cases that can reach their services. However,

64- Human Rights Watch review by Aya Majzoub in light of the pandemic. Available via <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/life-lebanons-migrant-domestic-workers-worsens-amid-crisis>

the economic collapse significantly affects the conditions of migrant domestic workers through unfair salaries, arbitrary deportations, and unjust detentions, which adds to their pre-existing abuses.

During the 2020 lockdowns, the situation had become worse and certainly more visible to public opinion. Migrant domestic workers were sent to the countries' embassies and consulates in the most inhumane manner, without compensation or any plan to pay their salaries, or coordination with the respective representatives of their countries. The sight of the embassies was shocking to human rights observers and the media, who widely reported unprecedented abuses against workers. Given that the closure came in parallel with the economic collapse and the massive devaluation of the Lebanese pounds, most of the deported workers were deprived of their salaries for their final months or years of service.

At first, it was thought the winds of positive change could correct the working conditions of migrant domestic workers, based on the amount of violence that was revealed over the past two years, which faced many public and human rights objections. However, we were surprised to find the crisis had deepened. To understand the reality of this discriminatory aspect, we drew on our interview with Farah Al-Baba from the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) to inquire about the main challenges facing organizations in general. We also referred to the interview with Saada Allaw who wrote extensively for Legal Agenda on the issues facing migrant working women in Lebanon, noting that many of the legal loopholes that led to this situation are at the heart of Lebanese political economy, not only a product of neglect or racist practices.

With the onset of the lockdown, female migrant domestic workers have become more vulnerable to domestic violence and physical and emotional abuse. However, it is almost impossible to detect and measure this because of the many factors involved. It may be the reporting itself that had increased and not the cases (2019-21); it is certain that many cases are underreported. Statistically, the number was expected to increase because of friction between family members and migrant domestic workers with everyone staying at home and thus the number of working hours increased as well.

This opened a large space for abuse and exploitation, and consequently for violence in case the domestic worker refused. In parallel, it is reported that a large number of employers stopped paying domestic workers' wages, citing their inability to withdraw money from their bank accounts or their inability to exchange low-value money to pay the worker's salary in dollars. In parallel, many who could afford to pay used excuses, like paying low salaries or making promises to pay them later. The overtime allowance payment was also left to the self-determination of the employers without any commitment or oversight from the Ministry of Labor or any other guarantor of

workers' rights. Locking migrant domestic workers in the same place with their abusers undoubtedly reduced their chances of reporting cases of violence. Even the increased reported cases do not reflect the actual scale of the incidents involved; even if the reporting had increased, in reality, this figure is still very low.

Despite the high reporting rates, there were no serious consequences for the employers/aggressors: no one was arrested, punished, or fined. Even those who were put on "blacklists"—preventing them from recruiting other workers—were able to re-employ migrant domestic workers again through alternative recruitment agencies or to withhold their passports themselves, despite the abuses they had committed. When domestic workers were left on the streets next to their embassies, another problem surfaced regarding deportation mechanisms: most of them had neither financial resources nor passports (as most were seized). Also, since most of the workers came from Ethiopia, the Ethiopian embassy staff were unable to meet all the worker's logistical needs. It is important to note that discriminatory rhetoric towards male migrants working at gas stations, restaurants, and cleaning companies had increased, leading to more attacks and accusations of emptying the Lebanese state of cash and sending it abroad by assuming false numbers. Unfortunately, this narrative has had tremendous resonance in the country, reflecting badly on the situation of migrant domestic workers, and was not contained officially or in the media where harmful misinformation is widespread.

According to Farah Al-Baba, there was a narrative in the country stating that migrant domestic workers and migrant workers earn about a billion dollars annually and transfer these funds to their countries, which drains the country's financial and banking systems. These claims were supported by recruitment agencies that asserted that migrant domestic workers were paid more than their employers, whose salaries lost value with the collapse. The truth is the heads and components of kafala were reaping the profits from recruitment and employment. Kafala is a huge source of funding, estimated annually at more than 100 million dollars, going to recruitment agencies, public security forces, the ministry of labor, and others, which means the funds do not reach female migrant workers themselves, something that has continued through successive crises.⁶⁵ In addition, preventive measures overlooked the rights of illegal migrant workers during the pandemic, exposing them to real security threats if they tried to get vaccinated. These forms of discrimination were exacerbated during the aftermath of the Beirut Port Blast when efforts to rescue migrant workers were minimal according to official authorities and some local communities: 13 migrant workers disappeared after the explosion, and a group of Ethiopian activists tried to search for them throughout the Lebanese regions after the state refused their request. Only feminist civil society concerned with the rights of migrant workers played a role in reaching out to those who'd died or survived.

65- An study by Think Triangle <https://seureservercdn.net/160.153.138.203/f62.e5d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Cleaning-Up-The-Shady-Industries-That-Exploit-Lebanons-Kafala-Workers-1.pdf>

It is also on record that immediately after the explosion, some employers sent migrant workers to consulates and hospitals but refused to be accountable for transporting them there, claiming the United Nations is morally and financially responsible.

Another form of abuse during the crisis is the fact that landlords were asking migrant workers residing independently to pay their rent in US dollars, based on the assumption they earn their salaries in dollars and can cover these huge sums; in reality, it is assumed the value of their salaries has gone down, mostly paid in Lebanese pounds. When they could not pay, the landlords forced them to leave. Moreover, about 200 agencies that recruit migrant workers had closed, due to the financial crisis and the decline in recruitment requests, which prompted many of these agencies to change their services to cleaning companies. They forced former foreign domestic workers into daily labor for very modest wages, which exposed them to exploitation and violations, with illegal repercussions. Of course, these abuses were absent of any legal procedure by the Lebanese state. What made the situation worse is the consulates themselves were complicit to a large extent, with the exception of a few embassies that worked hard to help their own affiliated works to get out of Lebanon. Since December 2019, the Embassy of the Philippines worked with professionalism to rescue Filipino domestic workers and assisted in their evacuation; they legally pursue matters and cases with employers or sponsors who did not pay or partially paid workers' wages. The Ethiopian Consulate and the Nigerian Embassy have also made significant efforts to find shelter, offer protection, and assist with repatriation. Also, Caritas, the Lebanese charity, has been working to provide some support. This is in parallel with the limited attempts from the Internal Security Forces (ISF)—often complicit with users and agencies in profiting without performing their duty of protection—and the violent reactions from recruitment agencies who consistently try to expel migrant workers from their houses or deprive them of their rights (dismissing them as personal stories) without any attempt to dismantle or understand the effects of the kafala system.

Today, with the unprecedented economic crisis worsening, Saada Allaw indicates the rest of the recruitment offices are heading towards new African countries, rather than Ethiopia, in search of workers.⁶⁶ There, deals are being made between offices and clients, such as Sierra Leone and Kenya, poorer countries, which saves recruitment offices \$1,000 per transaction to Lebanon for each domestic worker. Although most of the signed contracts require employers to pay a minimum of \$200 per month, this does not happen. Most families pay \$100 or \$150 or threaten to send the worker back to the office. Legal Agenda indicates that General Security counted entry and exit movements of migrant workers from 2020-22 at only about 24,000 workers, meaning that employment shrank by 83,000 workers (estimated previously at 107,000 workers) over the two years of economic turmoil.

66- An article by Saada Allaw, *Legal Agenda* [https://legal-agenda.com/إلى-البلدان-الأكثر/العاملات-المهاجرات-](https://legal-agenda.com/إلى-البلدان-الأكثر/العاملات-المهاجرات)

On protection and defense, groups like the Migrant Domestic Workers Coalition have collectively assisted domestic workers who were left homeless to obtain temporary housing and to recover all or part of their salaries. Lebanese civil society organizations also played a supportive role in coordination with some of the embassies mentioned earlier. In addition to the Anti-Racism Movement and KAFA, the International Federation of Migrant Domestic Workers, the International Organization for Migration, the Migrant Domestic Workers Coalition, Legal Agenda, the International Labor Organization, Amnesty International, The Public Resource platform, and Engna Legna have been lobbying and advocating for the protection of female migrant workers, especially amid the pandemic and severe economic downturn. The approaches on how to talk about this issue have been subject to debate, whether it is important for workers to speak up for themselves or to speak with Lebanese activists. Farah Al-Baba explains that this sensitive topic depends on context: migrant workers sometimes ask to stay away from any attention (to protect herself) and at times embrace the discourse entirely through completely independent initiatives. There is another problem that lies in media coverage of the issue regarding migrant workers, as the traditional media approach is based on attack or pity and steering away from legal and human rights analyses. These raise calls for intervention to correct media messages that contribute to strengthening the societal environment comfortable with violations. It is worth noting, unlike many organizations working on gender issues, the goal of the Anti-Racism Movement is not to continue but to stop working on this subject within eight to ten years, either through reaching its goal to achieving justice for migrant domestic workers or by transferring full handling of the issue to migrant domestic workers themselves, enabling autonomy and speaking exclusively on this matter in Lebanon.

**The Official
Response to
All Violations
Against Women:
What Should
the Feminist
Movement and
International
Organizations Do
Today?**

The official national response to gender challenges and violations of women's rights in Lebanon remains weak, temporary, incomplete, contradictory, and paradoxical in many instances. This has become more evident with the escalation of the current problems as women's issues have been placed last on the list of political and policy priorities in a country where humanitarian conditions are deteriorating. Reforming discriminatory laws against women and members of the queer community, tackling pressing issues (such as menstrual poverty), challenging the hidden problem of unpaid domestic work and the unjust kafala system, protecting women and girls from various forms of violence, and other measures are still far from being adopted in any serious sustainable political framework.

The official Lebanese body for women's affairs is the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), headed by Claudine Aoun, daughter of the President of the Lebanese Republic Michel Aoun (usually commissioned to a woman chosen by the president of the republic). We note that such a structure can only be problematic and inefficient because of political interference that cannot but affect the agenda to be adopted. Every political party in Lebanon, no matter how open the ideology is to human rights, has its own interests and limits, which will inevitably prevent women, whoever and whatever their circumstances, from obtaining their full rights. We add to this, our main question about emergent state intentions of the entities to bring about change to women's reality that are mainly affected by the state's approach itself.

NCLW consists of sub-committees, such as the Legislative Committee, the Economic and Labor Committee, the Education and Youth Committee, the Studies and Documentation Committee, the Media and Public Relations Committee, the Health and Environment Committee, and finally the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women concerned with the implementation and follow-up of the CEDAW Convention. However, because it is linked to different political considerations and agendas, the commission does not respond holistically and effectively to key women's rights and gender issues and needs that overlap with the country's political and sectarian structures. For example, NCLW supports women's right to "conditionally" transfer Lebanese citizenship to children under the age of 18, as well as excluding those over that age.⁶⁷ Therefore, this suggests legal reform that is in itself discriminatory towards many people within the same family on the basis of political considerations and agendas and not on other legal grounds.

The question then arises is why should a body that delegates itself as an agent for women's rights take into account the concerns and fears of all parties except women, and ignore their interests to such an extent? Many activists refuse to communicate with the commission because they see this as normalizing the violence practiced by

67- *The legal draft of Claudine Aoun* <https://www.weeportal-lb.org/ar/-/مجلس-مشوه-ومجحف> أخبار/مشروع-قانون-جنسية-مشوه-ومجحف-وتستتكر
وجنسي-تستتكر

the Lebanese state against women, while others believe that a permanent dialogue with the commission would lead to change and improvements in the existing system; especially that it will not collapse any time soon. Therefore, a small, close win is better than none at all. In light of these two approaches, the question remains regarding the effectiveness of this body, in light of all the money and support it receives, and in light of the effort it takes to point out its poor commitment to human rights treaties and women around the world. Perhaps the feminist idea of a “glass ceiling” that talks about opportunity, if any, for advancing change that can actually penetrate top and existing systems, launched by Angela Davis; this can be an introduction for a serious feminist discussion about what should be accepted or rejected when negotiating change.

In 2016, the Lebanese Council of Ministers established the Office of the Minister of State for Economic Empowerment of Women and Youth (OMSWA) in order to respond to the needs of women and address discrimination against women in Lebanon. This ministry was taken over by Jean Oghassapian and succeeded by Violette Safadi. In this case, the Lebanese state established another official record for women’s affairs in a country where women’s issues are rarely placed on the official policy and political agenda without a prompt from civil society or external human rights bodies. Subsequently, and with funding from the Euro-Mediterranean Feminist Initiative’s Facilities Funding, the Office of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs launched the “National Gender Observatory in Lebanon”⁶⁸ in 2018. The role of the observatory was to support governmental institutions that promote and enhance women’s roles long-term, to monitor gender equality in law and general practices in the country, and to follow-up on Syrian refugee women.

However, OMSWA was terminated in 2019 after the government’s resignation post the October 17 revolution, and the observatory was transferred to the NCLW, according to what Claudine Aoun had announced.⁶⁹ It is worth noting, in March 2020, then-Minister Violette Safadi, prompted by feminist organizations and movements, asked the Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to devote a full Lebanese parliamentary session to discussing women-related laws in order to create a legal process for the first time regarding women in Lebanon. The irony is that the government resigned shortly after, and this session never took place. However, with the entry of some transformative forces that carry a feminist discourse in Parliament, it may be possible to push in this direction, despite the potential obstacles. Until now, it is not possible to talk about a feminist transformational moment within Parliament. Given the patriarchal political mentality in parliament, the current policy agenda will not take legislative lead action in favor of women. It will be challenging to break the ‘prioritization’ of electing a new president and in trying to find solutions to the current economic crisis. These attempts for change come in light of patriarchal and unjust formulas in which female representatives are confronted every time they present their views.

68- The Gender Observatory Website <https://www.nationalgenderobservatory.org/en/about>

69- According to the NCLW website <https://nclw.gov.lb/5417/كلودين-عون-خلال-اجتماع-اللجنة-التسيير/>

**Feminist
Initiatives in
Response to
the Breakdown:
Searching for New
Spaces and Voices**

Intersectional approaches are at the fore of the feminist scene and the current crises as a whole. We see how intersectionality is the actual basis for understanding all current issues, and are mandatory to getting out of these crises. In an examination of accompanying crises and the current feminist scene, Lina Abu Habib points out the general situation in Lebanon today bears a lot of disappointment, frustration, and intense anger. Some of these feelings or attitudes were directed at the feminist movement in the role they played in responding to this crisis; blame that is easy to direct without delving into what is happening on the ground. However, Lina considers that a very important change for the feminist cause took place in the October revolution and this is the necessity of an intersectional and inclusive reading of all women and LGBTQI people's issues. For example, Haven for Artists, Marsa, and the Yalla Care carried out activities and presented strategies that contributed to changing the reality of the situation post-explosion through protecting those in need. Lina talks about the fact that feminist and queer platforms are not alike; not everyone believes in intersectionality. But there was a decision and serious attempts to reunite in order to respond and convey the reality to local and global public opinion, and were able to change the equation and secure protection.

This intersectional endeavor has transformed the personal and public feminist experience into an advocacy tool. The feminist movement has made great strides, but the patriarchal system still exists. There is a complete lack of awareness of the extent of its interference in various spaces that affects women's destinies. On the other hand, when we observe the features of feminist and queer activism, we know the amount of effort expended. For example, if we go to Haven for Artists' new headquarters that many queer people consider safe. We recognize the real effort behind building a genuine horizontal, democratic activist leadership and safe space. According to Lina, this system is inherently patriarchal and unreliable for serious reform. The regime has two discourses: one for the inside and another for the outside; and here lies the feminist challenge: keeping the conflict with this system live and present in people's consciousness and conversations, as well as in the demands of their new candidates.

According to Maya Ammar, it is more useful today for feminists to engage in political battle without relying on "state feminism" because fragmentation is no longer feasible in dealing with feminist issues and there is no point at this time to rely on MPs who once supported some issues related to women or networked with them. Today, decisions

remain fragmented and do not guarantee rights. Feminism in the Lebanese state uses bargaining and negotiation between unequal forces as an essential part of the process of passing some proposals, given that they do not harm the political, sectarian, and economic system. What women get is five percent of the demands made by the feminist movement, so compromising on a few rights becomes more offensive, in her view. Maya adds that the laws will be truncated in any case, so it is imperative that feminists from no side lower the ceiling of demands, especially since communication is cut between feminists working on the ground and the regime, who perceive feminists as a group that do not take their interests into consideration, thus remaining suspicious of feminist intentions.

It is necessary to talk about the role of the media, which is subject to many funding criteria and ideological trends and cannot be considered positive or supportive, especially in terms of traditional media. It is subject to the political and economic system's handling of various issues of violence, harassment, killing of women, and economic rights. Many female victims of abuse appeared simultaneously with the men who abused or harassed them. The traditional media largely equate victims with their abusers, and subject human rights narratives that go to great lengths to be discussed again, as though no legal or social development had taken place in the past. Through platforms such as Daraj, Megaphone, Raseef, and others, alternative media present current feminist readings with a high degree of intersectional analysis that is both bold and rebellious in the face of political authority, exposing devices and revealing complicity between the authorities and violence.

In the midst of existing and growing challenges, many feminist initiatives and platforms carry a new and different dialogue that can be considered alternative and advanced to traditional feminist discourse and approaches. There are many platforms that offer cross-analyses to explain gender phenomena, such as violence and crimes against women through the emergence of young feminists commenting on specific events. For example, one of these feminist initiatives, "No2ta, the feminist lab", explains gender issues from the perspective of an intersectional lens and takes on multiple explanations, comparing internal, regional, and global levels, drawing on analyses and questions. This contributes to raising public awareness and feeds the advocacy process in many causes. This lab was founded by Alia Awada, feminist activist and researcher, in partnership with other feminists.

We also mention Haki Nasawi, founded by the activist Sarah Kaddoura. Among the initiatives that were referenced was Jeyetna that came out recently to respond to the necessities of menstruation. These initiatives can only continue through financial and logistical support to ensure decentralization of access to people and to use the most advanced techniques in spreading feminist knowledge and awareness. In terms of reproductive health and rights, there is also Mashrou' Al Alef that calls for several reading retreats and podcasts on women and girls' sexual health through clear intersectional feminist approaches. Amongst the platforms that provide an intersectional feminist analysis on women's affairs and gender issues in Lebanon, we mention the Knowledge Workshop: a platform dedicated to creating and preserving feminist historiography in the memory and lives of all women in Lebanon.⁷⁰ We also mention Kohl Journal⁷¹ for body and gender research that address the economic, political, colonial, and other dimensions in influencing gender, women, feminism, and queer movements. These initiatives and platforms demonstrate a deep commitment and preservation of women's rights, struggles, bodies, laws and a healthy future.

70- <https://www.alwarsha.org>

71- Kohl website: <https://kohljournal.press>

Shifting to Relief, Response, and Funding Issues

It's hard not to turn to relief because the needs are so dire in a crisis like this in Lebanon. Any talk about gender projects without responding to women's real needs will not be logical, and rather far from human rights frameworks. The problem is, in a situation like this, humanitarian relief becomes the *fait accompli*. There are two types of relief, one that prolongs the life of the crisis and coexists with it, and one that actually strengthens and empowers society. For example, field studies from Lebanon showed that the financial cards that are often given to male heads of family do not reach women or may not be spent on the family at all, which exacerbates distance between solutions and problems. On the other hand, there is a relief response that covers reproductive and sexual health in addition to period poverty, which is often responding to the needs of women and saving their situation and rights.

There are multiple definitions of relief, including priorities that have nothing to do with reality; it could have prepared people to be actors rather than passive recipients. In fact, this is what plagued relief paths, especially during the pandemic and after the explosion. Many activists talk about funding problems they often face that are inflexible in accommodating their changing activities, in a country that is not calm. Alia Awada and Hayat Mershad mention the importance of having flexible funding, and Dima Kaedbey talks about the approaches to funding feminist organizations that used to ask feminist researchers to prioritize their psychological and mental health over completing tasks and meeting deadlines, especially during times that accompanied the Beirut Port Blast. Some activists also talked about the Ukraine-Russia war and how most of the emerging initiatives, which rely heavily on support coming from European institutions, are now taking this war into consideration because it affects funding paths and cuts many off from urgent and fundamental issues.

During times like this, it is essential to direct funding towards feminist organizations working on the ground and adopting an intersectional approach. It is equally important to stay away from activist bubbles taking over social media platforms, especially that social media does not reflect their actual presence and work on the ground. Funders today need to stay closer to women's reality, away from preconceived notions about specific issues and assorted alliances. Migration is increasing, which is logical and understandable. For the survival of many initiatives to guarantee continuity, aid must go in the right direction, instead of being misspent in ways that are not beneficial to women. There is a problem with the whole concept of priorities, especially when in reality people suffer all sorts of oppression and have their needs denied.



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