

# The Peace Building in Lebanon



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## Special Edition on #LeaveNoOneBehind

This supplement is produced by the UNDP «Peace Building in Lebanon» project funded by Germany through the German Development Bank (KfW). The Arabic version is distributed with An-Nahar newspaper while the English version is distributed with The Daily Star and the French version with L'Orient-Le Jour. The supplement contains articles by writers, journalists, media professionals, researchers and artists residing in Lebanon. They cover issues related to civil peace in addition to the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon and the relations between Lebanese and Syrians, employing objective approaches that are free of hatred and misconceptions.

Special supplement on #LeaveNoOneBehind  
issued in collaboration with



## News Supplement

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## Our Commitment to Leaving No One Behind

**Ayaki Ito**, *UNHCR Resident Representative*

**Celine Moyroud**, *UNDP Resident Representative*

**Claudio Cordone**, *Director of UNRWA Affairs, Lebanon*

As Lebanon faces the worst socio-economic crisis in its modern history, all communities – Lebanese, refugees, migrants, and others – are struggling to survive and endure the compounded emergencies affecting the country. The situation is highly precarious, with needs and vulnerabilities growing ever more urgent and acute.

For UNDP, UNHCR and UNRWA, leaving no one behind means making sure that all human lives are at the center of our responses. This is about ensuring that the most vulnerable people of our society, those most at risk of not enjoying their civil, cultural, economic, political, or social rights, are able to access services, live in safety and dignity and are not left behind in recovery processes. It also includes ensuring that promoting human rights is at the heart of our interventions – that they are central to them.

The UN's people-centered approach in Lebanon prioritizes sustainable development, peace, and humanitarian aid by adopting an inclusive rights-based approach that ensures no one is left behind, notably in matters of gender equality. Our response must address every person in need. With so many people falling below the poverty line and the survival threshold, we are joining forces with our partners to improve the socioeconomic conditions, including through basic service provision, in which people at risk – men, women and children – can live in safety, security and dignity, and can develop their human potential.

To prevent a further deterioration of services and instability in Lebanon that would take long to reverse, efforts should be focused on developing a medium-term strategy to both address structural problems and mitigate the immediate adverse effects of ongoing crises on individuals, whoever they are. We continue to support Lebanon in dealing with the refugee crisis in a way that is geared towards enabling the refugees to find a longer-term, sustainable, and fair solution to their situations outside of Lebanon, while supporting their dignified stay. We know from experience the longer a crisis endures, the more vulnerabilities rise among affected communities. With more than half of the Lebanese estimated to now be living in poverty, and even higher rates among refugee communities, we know how critical it is to support all communities in need to ensure no one is left behind.

Going forward, the UN reaffirms its commitment side by side with national and international stakeholders to uphold human rights and human dignity as critical to humanitarian response, development, and resilience interventions. We must continue to address the challenge of leaving no one behind, and we must do this through concrete action.

In this regard, UNDP, UNHCR, and UNRWA collectively dedicate this special issue of the peace building news supplement to every individual in Lebanon – regardless of ethnicity, gender, geography, disability, race, or other status. Their stories must be heard, their needs assessed and addressed, and their rights safeguarded.

## Female domestic Workers Are Our Sisters

**Ghassan Hajjar**, *Editor in Chief, An-Nahar Newspaper*

I do not condone the concept of self-flagellation since everything we are going through is difficult enough. We we are flogged every day at the altar of this country because of the successive economic, financial, and social crises surrounding us, especially after the tragic explosion of August 4, 2020 at the port of Beirut.

However, oppressed people sympathize with each other. It is not acceptable that the oppressed make up for their oppression by oppressing and bullying others, whether they were subordinates, people with special needs, poor, displaced, or vulnerable. This includes female domestic workers, who have suffered severe injustice due to the economic collapse and the repercussions of the horrific fall of the Lebanese pound against the US dollar. Lebanese employees can no longer afford to pay the average worker's salary (200 US dollars). Previously, Lebanese employees used to earn about three million Lebanese pounds, making it possible for them to deduct 10% of their salaries in order to pay domestic workers. However, two hundred dollars are now equivalent to four million pounds, which exceeds any employee's budget. Accordingly, foreign domestic workers found themselves helpless overnight, without any salary, shelter, or food. We can go as far as to say that abandoned pets found more people willing to take care of them than those workers, who were wronged by people oppressed in their homeland.

Kindness does not stem from fear of karma, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or from the laws in force, but rather from humanity itself. All humans are brothers, and every injustice inflicted on those around us only detracts from our humanity above all else.

## Making Voices Heard and Count

**Mr. Sascha Stadler**, *Director, German Development Bank KfW, Lebanon*

Germany's Sustainable Development Strategy states that up to 2030 "even greater efforts than before will be required to reach all disadvantaged people and populations and to counteract rising inequality." The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the deep importance of strengthening outreach to ensure that the needs and capacities of the most vulnerable are recognised and addressed through policy, services and programmes. For this reason, we believe in the overarching principle of leaving no one behind and reaching people with fewest development opportunities first and focusing on the rights-based approaches to development, inclusion, and social cohesion. We are committed to work collaboratively to drive an agenda for change and ensure livelihoods, rights, disability, gender, and age are at the heart of change. As events continue to unfold and become distorted, we believe that media is the cornerstone of leaving no one behind. Safe and positive media spaces are vital to make the voices of the most marginalized heard, promote constructive dialog, and reduce inequalities.

The Peace Building in Lebanon News Supplement you are reading is one such space. The articles here explore values, challenges, fears, aspirations and stories, and show many common grounds between people from different nationalities. In this supplement you have in hands, several topics ranging from economic, social, and cultural aspects of the repercussions of the socio-economic and health crisis on refugees and host communities are highlighted. The supplement is published with funding from Germany through the KfW Development Bank and through the common vision of peace building shared by journalists, activists, researchers and artists in Lebanon.

We stand together to promote women's empowerment, to encourage sexual orientation and gender rights, to foster refugees full and equal access to basic human rights, to defend the rights of all people including those in older age, and to promote people with disabilities' full participation in society.

Now it is upon all of us to reach the destination of making voices heard and count, always keeping the pledge of joining forces to Leave no one behind!

## Children supersede political considerations

**Nadim Ladki**, *Editor in Chief - The Daily Star*

Of all the misfortunes that have plagued Lebanon over the past two years, perhaps none have as long term an impact or are as consequential as the severity of the damage inflicted on the country's children.

A simple glance at the concerning numbers should be enough to awaken politicians and officials, both here and abroad, to the gravity of the hardships Lebanon's children are facing. According to UNICEF, more than 30 percent of children are underfed, skipping meals and frequently going to bed hungry. Nearly 80 percent of households lack the means to secure sufficient food. Three-fifths of the population has to resort to borrowing to even purchase food. Health care, meanwhile, has become beyond reach except for the most affluent. Even medical insurance coverage has become a mockery, with hospitals refusing to treat any but the most critical cases, and in the process impacting children's health and lives more so than any anyone else's. And the gravest of all calamities is the harm being wrought on education as the devaluation of the local currency has priced a significant portion of the country's children out of a decent education, and even forced many families to put these youngsters to work just to survive instead of sending them to school to prepare for their future.

This is not a climate that is even close to conducive to preparing this generation of children to steer Lebanon toward a brighter future. Yes, at some point the currency may recover a modicum of stability, the economy may crawl back toward sustainability, and incomes may rise, but when a child's education and health are compromised, that's a tragedy from which they will likely never recover. Let us not forget, these children are the country's only realistic hope for the future. It is these kids who, once they reach adulthood and are armed with a robust education, will build the economy of the future, assume roles of leadership and raise Lebanon out of the morass. As things stand now, that hope is fast fading, and we encourage all of Lebanon's leaders to set aside their petty differences and feuds and instead think of the children. As for the international community, with children's lives and futures at stake, the onus is on you to step up and act instead of making any assistance contingent on political considerations. To save the country, we must save the children, because without them Lebanon will be nothing more than a very dilapidated and bankrupt convalescent home for a terminally ill population.

## Well Ordered Charity

**Gaby Nasr**, *Managing Editor, L'Orient Le Jour Supplements*

It is quite naive to think that a government that neglects its own population so badly would simply take care of foreign residents on its territory, and especially when they are refugees in a precarious situation or completely destitute!

How foolish to imagine for a moment that a State that has failed in almost all of its obligations towards its own citizens, whether in terms of security or basic public services, would suddenly turn its attention to the trials and misfortunes of people who have settled on its territory unwillingly, and who moreover are accused of being at the origin of the catastrophe that has struck Lebanon!

Of course, it is certainly more convenient to disengage oneself by evoking an imaginary "international conspiracy" and to evade responsibility by handing over the entire problem to UN relief agencies and NGOs.

So inevitably, all that the Lebanese population endures in its daily life: shortage of fuel, electricity and water, disappearance of medicines from the shelves of pharmacies, the announced collapse of the health system and hospitals, the increase in the price of bread, the disorganization of food distribution in shops and supermarkets... All this is therefore bound to spread and already affects in even more dramatic conditions the marginalized foreign populations.

Even with regard to the coronavirus pandemic, we had to wait for the last deliveries of the anti-Covid vaccines to think about including refugees and other migrants in the vaccination campaign. And again! It took several months for the term "foreign nationality" to be added to the field designated for it on the online registration platform. Some party leaders had even urged to give "priority to the Lebanese", showing a clear ignorance, when we know that the virus does not differentiate between nationalities, and that to achieve herd immunity, it is necessary to vaccinate the maximum number of residents in Lebanon.

It is truly amazing to see that in the end fanaticism, sectarianism and xenophobia, added to incompetence and corruption, originate from only one single defect: a shocking lack of civic education within the Lebanese political class.



# Lebanon: Making tomorrow's refugee protection by looking to the past

**Maja Janmyr**

*Professor, University of Oslo*

The on-going crises in Lebanon – including the economic collapse, Beirut Port blast and COVID-19 pandemic – are challenging to so many. For displaced persons, however, the impacts of these overlapping crises hit particularly hard; they are undoubtedly disproportionately affected and their limbo risks becoming permanent. However, we've seen time and again how rigid human rights protection systems may soften the blow to these affected communities. In this short contribution, I will focus on how, in our thinking about tomorrow's refugee protection, we should not forget Lebanon's past.

Lebanon's crises coincide with the 70th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, a legal instrument that together with its 1967 Protocol has long been seen as central to global refugee protection. Despite this recognition, the relevance and utility of the Convention has increasingly been called into question, not infrequently by state actors seeking to limit their obligations towards refugees. International refugee law is thus, in a sense, also in a state of crisis – a crisis made much worse by the number of mobility-related restrictions being imposed globally in response to the pandemic.

At the end of 2020, 149 states were party to the 1951 Convention, its 1967 Protocol, or both. Forty-four members of the United Nations, however, were not party to any of these core instruments. Lebanon is one of these non-signatory states, but its close relationship with the international system of refugee protection should not be underestimated or forgotten. It was precisely in the aftermath of crisis – the Second World War – that Lebanon engaged itself in the establishment of the international refugee regime.

Unlike many other States in the region, Lebanon actively contributed to developing the very core features of today's system of refugee protection. While Lebanon's adherence to international human rights norms is variable and debatable, its broad engagement with the development of such legal regimes warrants mention. First, it was one of only 20 States that formed the committee appointed by the UN General Assembly in 1946 to lay the basis for the International Refugee Organization (IRO). Following this, in 1949, Lebanon participated in creating the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and, later, UNHCR's Statute. In addition, between 1946 and 1951, Lebanon participated in drafting parts of the 1951 Refugee Convention. In the end, however, it decided not to ratify this key instrument. Lebanon also has an important history of participating in creating some of the earliest international human rights instruments. Through a leading Lebanese figure, Dr. Charles Malik, who chaired the UN Commission on Human Rights for two

consecutive terms (1951–1952), Lebanon was a member of the eight-person drafting committee for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Today we see Lebanon's close relationship with the UN human rights system reflected in the preamble to the Lebanese Constitution, which states that:

Lebanon is also a founding and active

refoulement is embedded in a number of international human rights law instruments and prohibits the removal of individuals to a real risk of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Both of these principles are under stark pressure in times of crises. In many signatory and non-signatory states alike, limiting refugees' access to asylum

world become increasingly nationalistic amid fears about borders and mobility. But we may also see a more optimistic turn of events. At the height of the Second World War few could imagine the development of a protection regime of the kind that materialized not long after. Sometime in the future there will be that post-crises momentum again, and when that time comes, Lebanon not only has a solid history of engaging with human rights norms, but also already has one foot in in several key forums.

Just like Lebanon participated in the history of global refugee protection, it is already well-placed to carve out the features of tomorrow's refugee protection. Since the early 1960s, Lebanon has been a member of UNHCR's Executive Committee (ExCom) which is tasked with advising the High Commissioner 'in the exercise of his functions under the Statute of his Office' and with approving the High Commissioner's assistance programs. By engaging here, Lebanon actively contributes to developing the substance of refugee law by means of drafting the annual conclusions that interpret this Convention. The ExCom conclusions, adopted in plenary by consensus, are highly relevant by expressing an international consensus on legal issues concerning refugees.

Lebanon also participates in other high-level forums setting the standards of tomorrow's refugee protection: first, in the UN General Assembly negotiations leading to the adoption of the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants – which sets out principles that would guide the global response to refugee displacement – second, in the UN General Assembly negotiations leading to the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in December 2018, and third, in the first Global Refugee Forum in late 2019 where pledges were made to put the GCR into action. Importantly, as is noted in GCR Article 5, the GCR is 'grounded in the international refugee protection regime, centered on the cardinal principle of non-refoulement, and at the core of which is the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol'.

In thinking about tomorrow's refugee protection, we may thus look to the past and find inspiring examples of a Lebanese engagement. In all of these arenas, Lebanon had – and still has – the opportunity of developing the meaning and content of key concepts of international refugee law. The assumption of refugee protection being superior in signatory states when compared to non-signatories may be widespread and entrenched, but the Lebanese example shows more than anything else that these issues are far more complex than they may seem at first sight.



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member of the United Nations Organization and abides by its covenants and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Government shall embody these principles in all fields and areas without exception.

Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out an individual right to 'seek and enjoy' protection from persecution. Its twin principle of non-

has arguably become an increasingly common political aim. In times like these, we may need to remind ourselves of Lebanon's special guardianship of these instruments.

As the old adage nonetheless goes, in every crisis lies an opportunity. So what will come next for Lebanon's engagement with global refugee protection? There is of course a risk that governments around the



# UNRWA and Lebanon Complex Crisis Repercussions on Palestinian Refugees

## What Response; What Role?!

**Jaber Suleiman**

*Independent Researcher in Refugee Studies*

This article addresses the repercussions of the “complex” Lebanese crisis on the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon from the beginning of 2019 till present. It sheds light on the role that UNRWA, by virtue of its legal responsibility for relief, employment and protection of Palestine refugees, has played and is playing in mitigating those repercussions and the limits of its response to the negative impacts of the crisis on the lives of Palestinian refugees.

Since the beginning of 2019, Lebanon has been suffering from this worsening complex crisis with its economic, financial and monetary components, as well as repercussions of the cosmic coronavirus crisis and the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion (4 August 2020). It is well known that the combined repercussions and effects of the crisis have affected all categories of the Lebanese population and all those residing on Lebanese soil, including Palestinian refugees. However, the Palestinian refugee community was already suffering before the crisis worsened and continues to suffer from various forms of economic, social and spatial marginalization, and the lack of national and international protection guaranteed to refugees by relevant treaties and agreements, with the exception of the limited protection provided by UNRWA - a type of “relief” protection that does not live up to the protection granted to refugees, in accordance with international standards. This has made this community more fragile and more vulnerable to the repercussions of the worsening crisis in its various dimensions.

### Crisis Repercussions: Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Two studies by United Nations organizations operating in Lebanon, UNICEF and ESCWA, denote the depth of the crisis experienced by Lebanese and residents on Lebanese territory alike, including Palestinians. These two studies agree that according to 2020 estimates, poverty rate in Lebanon increased from 28% in 2018 to 55%, and extreme poverty tripled from 8% to 23%. The UNICEF study specifically asserts that “the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a dramatically worsening economic situation caused by the Beirut explosion, have had a devastating impact on children and families who are increasingly in greater need of crucial support and ever more vulnerable to risks.”

It should be noted that according to a survey conducted by UNRWA and the American University of Beirut in 2015, 65% of Palestinians in Lebanon were living below the poverty line and that unemployment rate was 56% at that time. These percentages have certainly been steadily increasing since 2015 until, in light of the current crisis, they approached the 80% threshold according to various estimates.

In fact, the Palestinian community in Lebanon has become more fragile and more vulnerable to marginalization and deprivation, compared to other refugee communities. This situation was exacerbated by the weakness of the official Palestinian situation and the absence of a unified socio-economic reference dealing with the situation of Palestinians in Lebanon at a time when social and economic needs have doubled. This is all amidst a decline in the support provided by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the factions, not to mention the fact that UNRWA services, both in quantity and in quality, have been affected by its ongoing financial crisis. Today, the most prominent current needs of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon range from the provision of decent jobs to the need for emergency and sustained food assistance in light of the food insecurity of the refugee community.

### Crisis Response: Whose Responsibility?

There is no doubt that confronting the crisis and mitigating its devastating effects on the Palestinian refugee community is a joint international, Palestinian and Lebanese

responsibility, borne first by UNRWA, by virtue of its international responsibility in accordance with the mandate assigned to it by the United Nations, as well as by the PLO (and Palestinian factions) and the Palestinian civil society organizations, and the host country, of course, is not exempt from this responsibility, especially with regard to confronting the coronavirus pandemic.

But here we limit our area of research, as required from this article, to the scope of UNRWA's responsibility, capacity and effectiveness in responding to the crisis repercussions.

UNRWA launched several urgent appeals to address the crisis repercussions in its five areas of operation: the first in March 2020 to provide an amount of US\$ 14 million; Then the second was in May to provide \$93.4 million. However, according to its sources, it was only able to raise less than 65% of its value, according to its sources, prompting the launch of its third appeal in September 2020 to raise US\$ 96.6 million.

In that connection, the Director of UNRWA in Lebanon, Claudio Cordone, stated that despite the difficulty of funding, UNRWA has been able to achieve some important results in the area of health and education, and is in constant contact with Lebanese official authorities in order to assert the economic and social rights of refugees, the provision of which does not cancel the right of return. He said: “Despite all the efforts made by UNRWA, the prospects and opportunities for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon remain bleak and will remain so for some time, especially as the political financial crisis in Lebanon continues, and I fear that unemployment and poverty rates will continue to rise.” In this regard, it should be acknowledged that UNRWA, represented by its former Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl and current Commissioner Philippe Lazzarini, has made strenuous efforts in the face of its worsening financial crisis since 2018. The said year saw a fierce Israeli/U.S. campaign against UNRWA's very existence by working to drain its financial resources, pushing for the revocation of its mandate or the transfer of its powers to UNHCR, and even seeking to change the definition of “Palestine Refugee” that UNRWA adopts in providing its services in order to reduce the number of refugees eligible for its services. As is known, this campaign culminated in the Trump administration completely cutting US support to UNRWA on 31/8/2018, which amounts to one-third of its budget, after at the beginning of the same year it reduced its support for the first half of 2018 by nearly half.

Over the past two years, UNRWA has taken several practical steps in response to the crisis:

In the health field, it sought to form a joint health committee to deal with the spread of the virus, whose members included UN agencies, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Palestine Red Crescent Society, Médecins Sans Frontières, and several local NGOs. It also established a mechanism of coordination with the Lebanese Ministry of Health. In the field of vaccination against the coronavirus, UNRWA is coordinating with the initiative launched by the “Taawon” (Welfare Association), a Palestinian donor organization, in order to raise funds to cover the cost of vaccinations for Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon, and to ensure that they include all categories of Palestinian refugees, including refugees without identity papers and refugees from Syria, and this in coordination with the Lebanese Ministry of Health within the framework of the official platform of the ministry, and with the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee.

But the main challenge for UNRWA and all parties to the initiative is the low turnout of Palestinian refugees to register on the Ministry of Health platform for various reasons. According to Dr. Abdul Rahman Bizri, Chairman of the National Committee for the Administration of the Coronavirus Vaccine, the proportion of Palestinians enrolled in the platform is only 3%. This requires UNRWA strengthening its cooperation and coordination with Palestinian civil society organizations and all relevant stakeholders in order to encourage refugees to register on the platform and employing its educational and health

facilities in the service of the vaccination campaign.

In the area of relief, UNRWA, in collaboration with some donors and outside its programme budget, has provided modest cash assistance to all Palestinian refugee families residing in Lebanon, not to mention continued routine assistance to Palestinian refugees from Syria.

However, the limits of UNRWA's response to the crisis repercussions remain tied to its ongoing and unresolved financial crisis, even as the Biden administration resumed its support to UNRWA by providing US\$ 150 million at the beginning of April 2021. Lazzarini commented on the US decision by saying: “The US contribution comes at a critical time when UNRWA continues to adapt to the challenges of the coronavirus. And it encouraged other member states to contribute to UNRWA support.”

Despite all of the above, UNRWA remains in the eye of the storm and is subject to criticism from representatives of the refugee community, including NGOs and Palestinian factions. In fact, the three reported appeals launched by UNRWA in response to the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic did not respond to the minimum needs of refugees, which have compounded in light of the worsening crisis. All things considered, UNRWA has so far failed to meet the refugee priority requirement of a relief emergency plan, given the worsening Lebanese crisis and its compounded impacts on Palestinian refugees.

This requires:

- The need for UNRWA to pursue issuing urgent appeals to meet immediate needs in the near term, including the launch of an emergency relief project to provide for the basic needs of Palestinian refugees affected by this complex crisis for at least one year, and by inviting donors to include Palestinian refugees in Lebanon's emergency response plans.
- The establishment of a medium-term social and economic safety net or umbrella to ensure the daily protection of Palestinians rights in Lebanon, with the participation of UNRWA, the Palestine Liberation Organization/Palestinian Authority, and key United Nations agencies such as UNICEF, UNDP and WHO, all in coordination with the Lebanese State.

#### References:

- 1- UNICEF, “Comorbidity of Crises in Lebanon” (December 2020); “Poverty in Lebanon: Solidarity is Vital to Address the Impact of Multiple Overlapping Shocks”, E/ESCWA/2020/Policy Brief 15
- 2- A segment of Lebanon's Palestinian refugee community, among the poorest families, benefits from the “Social Safety Net Programme” contributions sponsored by UNRWA in its various areas of operation. The contributions included food and cash assistance, before the program was modified in 2016 for reasons of increasing its returns in alleviating poverty and is currently limited to cash transfers through the use of an e-card. However, the program's contributions - regardless of their sufficiency and effectiveness in alleviating poverty - do not cover all poor families according to the figures given above, but are rather limited to a segment slightly exceeding 60,000 refugees.
- 3- Refer to the virtual seminar organized by “Association 302 to Defend Refugees Rights” on the occasion of the 71st anniversary of the founding of UNRWA, with the participation of UNRWA directors of the five areas of operation (15/12/2020)
- 4- A number of international donor bodies have joined this initiative, namely: The American Anera, the German GLZ, and The Palestine Children Fund. Sources from the Taawon (Welfare Association) report that the initiative has successfully raised more than \$150 million to cover the cost of vaccines for Palestinians of all categories actually residing in Lebanon.

# The Living Crisis and the Coronavirus are compounding the Pressures on it

## UNHCR Expands the 'Safety Net' to Provide Living 'Sufficiency' and Meet Health Needs

**Nazeer Ridaa**

*Journalist*

Syrian refugee Rabih, 34, settles for a bottle containing one liter of vegetable oil at a small shop in Beirut's Tariq el-Jdideh area. His current financial capacity does not entitle him to purchase a 5-liter bottle, as was the case in the past. "I can't," Rabih says, "because its cost exceeds what I keep to feed my children until the end of the month," given the high prices and inflation resulting from the economic crisis afflicting Lebanon.

Rabih is one of hundreds of thousands of Syrians who, like the Lebanese, have been deprived due to the crisis of opportunities for a decent life. The deterioration of the currency exchange rate and the rise in prices have exacerbated their suffering, and these people no longer aspire for more than achieving "sufficiency", a part of which the United Nations organizations contributed to, by increasing their financial and in-kind contributions to meet the growing needs of refugees throughout Lebanon. With the increased needs as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak, contributions have doubled, including medical assistance in terms of equipment and rehabilitation to assist the government in providing a medical infrastructure that benefits refugees and Lebanese.

As the economic crisis intensified, United Nations intervention to mitigate the effects of the crisis began in April 2020, with monthly cash assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its partners doubling from 260 thousand Lebanese Pounds to 400 thousand per household per month, in an effort to partially offset inflation in commodity prices in the Lebanese market, and this in consultation with the Lebanese authorities and the World Food Programme to ensure compatibility with social assistance programs for the poorest Lebanese families. Food assistance of the World Food Programme has also doubled from 40 thousand Lebanese Pounds per person per month to 100 thousand.

UNHCR Lebanon spokesperson Lisa Abu Khaled states that "in the light of the increasing depreciation of the Lebanese Pound, UNHCR and other United Nations agencies continue to advocate for increased assistance to both refugees and Lebanese in need." Noting that UNHCR has expanded the safety net as far as possible to cover more families as extreme poverty increases, and to increase the amount of assistance in order to partially compensate for the severe inflation, but she acknowledges that this "remains largely insufficient".

As of July 2021, the funding currently available for humanitarian assistance prevents UNHCR from providing monthly cash assistance (LBP 400 thousand per family) to more than 57% of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, UNHCR and the World Food Programme can only provide cash and/or food assistance to 80% of the total number of refugees. But this remains insufficient by far.

The economic situation of the Syrian

refugees in Lebanon has deteriorated to record levels, owing to the devaluation of the local currency, with about 91% of Syrian refugees living on less than \$3.8. Nine out of every Ten Syrian refugee families in Lebanon reached extreme poverty in 2020, compared to 55% just a year ago, according to UNICEF data.

The United Nations stresses that such assistance must be accessible to all families living in extreme poverty. "We continue to work with partners and donors to increase humanitarian assistance for both refugees and Lebanese communities in need," Abu Khaled asserts, noting that all cash assistance programs are currently being paid in Lebanese Pounds.

### Host Community Support

As the crisis worsened, UN agencies gradually stepped up to match the needs that included the Lebanese who received refugees in more than 1,700 locations, and the government allowed the refugees to benefit from the already-worn infrastructure including health, education, water, sanitation and electricity, thus adding more pressure on it. The record number of refugees relative to the population has contributed to social tensions at multiple backgrounds, including competition for job opportunities.

In light of this reality, UNHCR has allocated over the past years a portion of its budget to support Lebanese institutions and projects that benefit both local communities and refugees. Since 2011, it has invested US\$295.1 million in Lebanese institutions and infrastructure in order to support a number of ministries in providing public services to a larger population and support projects that provide infrastructure and equipment to the host community, with the aim to mitigate the impact of refugees, as well as support Lebanese institutions and communities to better address the repercussions of the Coronavirus outbreak and the repercussions of the Beirut Port explosion on 4 August 2020.

Former Minister of Social Affairs, Rachid Derbas, does not hide the effectiveness and importance of these contributions, but points out that they are "insufficient", recalling what he previously told a senior UN official upon his visit to Lebanon that donors "have become cold", expressing concerns that donor countries' contributions to UN organizations would gradually decline, and that the aid would vanish. While noting that the contributions to international institutions do not exceed 65% of the promised support, Derbas does not however deny that the UN assistance expenditure in Lebanon "secures some foreign currency and also provides acceptable sufficiency for Syrian refugees at a time when Lebanon cannot bear this huge burden."

The average UN expenditure in Lebanon ranges between \$ 1.3 billion and \$ 1.5 billion annually. About one billion dollars is spent through UN agencies and the rest is

provided through other partners and other organizations in the country.

Since 2017, the United Nations Development Program in Lebanon (UNDP) launched the 'Stabilization and Recovery Programme' in support of Lebanon's crisis response plan and has set for itself three goals centered on "enhancing the stability and resilience of host communities", supporting key public institutions in order to develop their crisis management capacity, and coordinating stabilization and recovery activities throughout Lebanon.

### Meeting the Needs of the "Coronavirus"

The emerging health crises resulting from the spread of the "Coronavirus" have prompted additional United Nations intervention to relieve pressure on the Lebanese health-care system and help it deal with the sharp increase in cases of COVID- 19 that require urgent medical care. UNHCR's response to prevent the spread of the virus began very early, and efforts focused on ensuring that all residents of Lebanon, including Lebanese, refugees and others have timely access to treatment. UNHCR allocated \$31.4 million to implement its plan to prevent the spread of the "Coronavirus" in Lebanon in 2020.

The strategy was based on three principles: prevention, containment of spread and infection, and treatment. At the contributions level, UNHCR provided 13 hospitals throughout Lebanon with 100 beds for the intensive care unit (including ventilators and screens), 800 hospital beds and 8 dialysis units for COVID-19 patients. As part of the winter assistance programme, UNHCR provided 1.2 million litres of fuel to support 17 hospitals receiving patients throughout Lebanon to ensure uninterrupted power generation.

In terms of awareness, UNHCR teams worked around the clock to enable refugees to reduce infection and transmission within their families and the community since February 2020. UNHCR collaborated with the Ministry of Public Health, the World Health Organization, local authorities and other partners, to support the national response.

According to the General Supervisor of Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, Dr. Assem Abi Ali, more than two hundred thousand bottles of sterilizers have been distributed, as well as other prevention needs, as part of an awareness-raising and guidance campaign involving social volunteers and the Lebanese authorities, which covered the refugee camps and included explanations on the importance of health prevention, appropriate measures and the need to comply with procedures. In addition, UNHCR teams supported seven isolation centers with a capacity of 431 beds, currently operating throughout Lebanon and receiving all residents independently of their nationality.

### Support to the Affected by the Port Explosion

The Port of Beirut explosion on 4 August 2020 marked a disaster that exacerbated the Lebanese economic and living crises, and left its effects on thousands of Lebanese and refugees who found themselves homeless as their homes were damaged. Accordingly, UNHCR mobilized a total of \$35 million, which was urgently provided to the most affected and vulnerable families in Beirut. The package included \$32.6 million for shelter provision and \$2.44 million for protection activities for the following three months. The first package included shelter provision and maintenance of damaged homes, and the second included psychological support and legal assistance.

UNICEF and partners carried out a wide range of interventions and provided emergency humanitarian assistance to those affected by the explosion, with focus on the importance of psychosocial support to address the trauma to which the population was exposed during and after the explosion, as reported by the United Nations one day after the port explosion.

In October 2020, UNHCR launched the Cash Assistance for Shelter Programme, benefiting more than 11,500 families, mostly Lebanese, as well as refugees, non-registered and others, to provide \$600 to help them pay for repairs to their damaged homes. It was a one-time grant exceptionally paid in US dollars as it was expected to be spent on the purchase of housing rehabilitation materials that are often imported and sold in US dollars.

From the very beginning, the United Nations Development Program in Lebanon has looked beyond the reconstruction of buildings and infrastructure to ensure a people-centered and inclusive response that addresses in fair and equitable ways the structural weaknesses faced by the most disadvantaged and impoverished groups, including women and girls, migrant workers, refugees, the elderly, children and young people.

All United Nations agencies operating in Lebanon demonstrated a strong commitment to meeting needs, and UNICEF has distributed emergency cash assistance under a scheme to cover 80 thousand children and the most vulnerable individuals affected by the Beirut Port explosion, at a value of \$120 to eligible family members up to a maximum of three members per family, along with humanitarian assistance.

A joint initiative and call for action was also launched by UNDP and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to support persons with disabilities, especially after the port explosion, aimed at addressing the immediate and urgent needs of techniques necessary to maintain the health and well-being of persons with disabilities. The United Nations agencies contributions have been applied to meet health, educational and pedagogical needs.



# Desperate journeys: for many Lebanese and Syrians, the sea route to Cyprus offers false hope

Abby Sewell

Journalist

Last September, Shamseddine Kerdli, a barber from Tripoli, boarded a fishing boat bound for Cyprus with his three children and some 50 other Lebanese and Syrian would-be migrants, paying 6 million LBP, or the equivalent of about \$1,500 on the black market exchange rate at the time, per person.

"There is no future here," Kerdli told me, when asked why he had gone.

On top of country's ongoing economic and political crisis, an concerns about the security situation in the country, he said, the Beirut port explosion was the final straw: "Maybe there will be an explosion at the port in Tripoli like in Beirut. ... Why should I die, why should my children die, for what?"

between January 2020 and the beginning of May 2021, with 229 of them having departed in the first four months of 2021. In recent weeks, Lebanese officials have reported stopping multiple boats as they attempted to leave Lebanon's shores, with the Army most recently intercepting a vessel carrying 125 Syrians off the coast of Akkar on May 20. In contrast, UNHCR reported that only about 270 passengers had attempted to reach Cyprus from Lebanon by boat in all of 2019.

While by far the largest number of passengers are Syrians, accompanied by smaller numbers of Lebanese, Palestinian refugees and other nationalities, UNHCR reported that 2020 had showed a notable

number of people in Tripoli's Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood who were contemplating the sea journey. One of them, Rouba, a widowed Lebanese mother of five, told me that the economic crisis was more intolerable than the years when Bab al-Tabbaneh was at war with the neighboring area of Jabal Mohsen.

"We've lived in war before and we're used to it. When you would hear bullets at night, we got used to it," she said. "We would escape, go down and stay with the neighbors, for instance, but everything wasn't expensive then like now... To the contrary, things got cheaper. True, it was a war, but we were able to live. Now there's no war, but we're not able to live."

The rest of the would-be asylum seekers were either intercepted before getting out of Lebanese waters, drifted into Syrian waters, or were pushed back by Cypriot authorities – a practice that has drawn condemnation from international authorities and human rights groups. Thirteen people died at sea or are still missing, UNHCR reported.

Others have fallen victim to con artists who promised them passage to Cyprus but ultimately disappeared after taking a "deposit."

Two young Lebanese men who I spoke to last summer had agreed with supposed smugglers on a price of 10 million LBP (the equivalent of around \$1,200 at the black exchange market rate at the time). After giving a deposit of the equivalent of \$100, in both cases, the "smuggler" disappeared and changed his phone number.

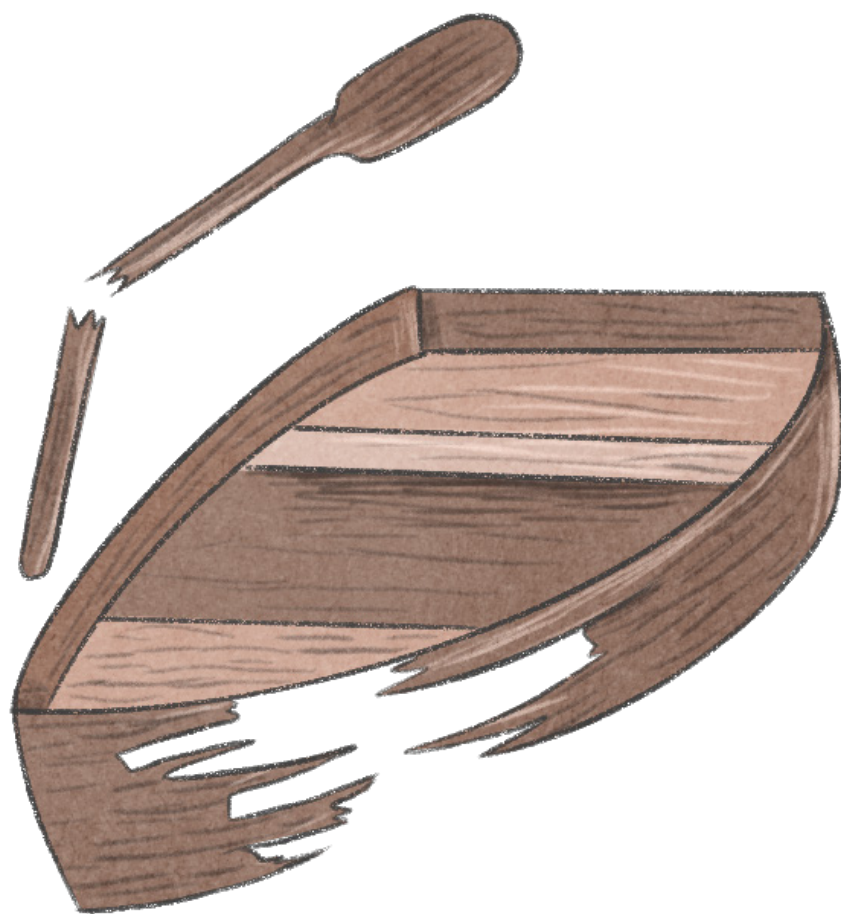
More recently, "Mohammed," a Syrian refugee from Hama told me he had been scammed by a supposed smuggler who disappeared after receiving a \$500 deposit from him in November. Desperate to leave Lebanon because of threats to his safety as well as his inability to continue paying for medicine his wife needs for a chronic heart condition, Mohammed's family had sold their valuables, including his wife's gold jewelry, to pay for the trip.

After the attempted crossing to Cyprus fell through, Mohammed said he had paid another smuggler to take him to Idlib, where he is now waiting, under periodic bombing, for a chance to cross into Turkey.

Kerdli and his children initially thought that they had been more fortunate. They arrived safely on the shore of Larnaca, where they expected to apply for asylum and start a new life with help from family members who had migrated to Cyprus before him.

But after a few days in a cramped and unsanitary refugee camp, Kerdli said, Cypriot authorities loaded them and four other Lebanese families, along with a group of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, on a boat and sent them back to Lebanon. Drousiotou noted that while any Lebanese nationals who arrive on the Cypriot shores should be given the chance to apply for asylum, in most cases it would not be granted, since unlike Syrians who are designated as refugees, most Lebanese would likely be classified as economic migrants.

"For the Lebanese nationals, it's a dead-end road," she said. "They would be putting their lives in a lot of danger and paying a lot of money to smugglers for a route that's not going to lead to a future."



Rafik El Hariri @rafikillustration

Even before the Beirut port explosion, economic desperation had been driving an uptick in the number of people – mostly Syrian refugees, but accompanied by an increasing number of Lebanese – who were willing to pay smugglers to ferry them across the Mediterranean.

The United Nations estimates that as of 2020, 55% of Lebanese were living below the poverty line and 25% below the extreme poverty line, while some 89% of Syrian refugees were below the extreme poverty line. For many, like Kerdli, the port explosion added a further incentive to leave.

The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) reported that some 977 individuals attempted to cross from Lebanon to Cyprus by boat

increase in the number of Lebanese citizens taking the journey.

The Cyprus Refugee Council reported that 34 Lebanese citizens had applied for asylum in Cyprus last year, although it was not clear how many of them had arrived by boat.

Lisa Abou Khaled, a spokeswoman for UNHCR in Lebanon, said, "From UNHCR's conversations with the individuals who were intercepted, rescued or returned to Lebanon, it is evident that these are desperate journeys undertaken by people who see no way of survival in Lebanon as the socio-economic situation is continuously worsening."

That was already the case last summer before the explosion, when I spoke to a

However, for many, the hope offered by the sea journey turns out to be a false one.

Out of those who attempted the crossing since January 2021, UNHCR reported that only about one third – 315 people – arrived in Cyprus.

There, many spent months in increasingly overcrowded refugee camps. The Pournara camp outside of Nicosia is meant to be a short-term shelter for asylum seekers to be processed and quickly released. But Corina Drousiotou, a coordinator and senior legal advisor with the Cyprus Refugee Council, said, "During the last year, because of the lockdowns and because of the measures taken by the government, we had cases that (stayed for) five or six months."

# Issues of the Marginalized and their Narratives in the Lebanese Media... Between Total Absence, Political Exploitation, Superficial Presentation and Display

**Rana Najjar**  
Journalist

Ghada, who works at a sewing factory in Bourj Hammoud, does not follow news bulletins or political talk shows. The 50-year-old woman who works about 15 hours a day between the factory and home, and has 3 teenagers, watches only Turkish soap operas on local television. "What we are suffering in these sub-poverty-stricken neighborhoods is far more serious than what is being said on screens, radio stations and newspapers. We are dying of hunger and disease alone without anyone hearing the growling of our stomach," Ghada says in a sad voice as she patches a shirt on the sewing machine in her small house. She adds: "Journalists wear the most beautiful clothes, suits and accessories, and sit in fancy studios where lights shine, to address issues of poverty, corruption, medicine and hospitalization, while we live without any necessities of life and hardly have electricity, soap or detergents, and we only smell meat at weddings." Ghada, daughter of the Bourj Hammoud suburb, does not trust the media nor does Yvonne, daughter of Akkar, count on its importance in helping change the condition of the troubled country. The majority of Lebanese traditional media outlets have not yet liberated themselves from the circle of clientelism, and do not adopt the language of the street and the discourse of the most marginalized groups, especially the pre-40 youth who have turned to alternative media, streaming and social media. These outlets are the product of the Lebanese environment which suffers from instability, the absence of a business model, the absence of strategies, and the absence of scientific feasibility studies for their existence and their goals achievement, with few exceptions sometimes in the same media where we may see a writer tweeting outside the flock, or a journalist venturing into a project that carries the banner of the oppressed and the marginalized who are excluded from the circle of attention (gays, communities living below the poverty line, people with disabilities, women, and children). These outlets have always suffered from the inability to finance themselves through the content they offer, which, despite the years passing by, has remained superficial, far from investigation and valuable and unique information, and repetitive whether in presenting the same topics or in hosting the same faces of politicians and analysts affiliated to political parties and movements. These media are based on political and party funding or external funding, and are now more than ever facing difficulties in terms of funding, especially after the "October 17 Revolution", the economic collapse, the decrease in viewership, and the atrophy of the advertising sector. All of this was and still reflects on the performance of the media outlet and the performance of journalists who become scapegoats, and work in uncomfortable economic, psychological, health and security conditions, and face many problems, the most important of which is freedom of expression... "Too much talk and reports without hearing our voice and pain, we are sick of it," says Yvonne, who works in a shipping office. "Why don't they film our homes, how we live and how we manage amid this economic collapse and the spread of the pandemic?" Yvonne, who is in her forties and supports her deaf daughter, believes that "televisions resemble glamorous paintings of nature praising Lebanon's beauty and climate, while the country is drowned in waste, darkness, and crises of gasoline, hospitalization and bread... A media that is driven solely by the agendas of politicians and corrupt people." She adds: "We need information and figures telling us who the thieves are, we want to reach a conclusion and do not want politicians and analysts repeating the same ideas." And wonders "Isn't my daughter entitled to understand what's going on in the country? Isn't she entitled to know how to prevent Corona? Why don't we have special programs for people with disabilities?

Or are the screens just for the illusion, elites, the rich, the super-intelligent and cultured?"... Ghada and Yvonne's distrust of the traditional Lebanese media does not come from nothing, as there is a study conducted more than ten years ago by "SKeyes" Foundation which indicates that the deprived areas and suburbs citizens, especially remote villages, meaning the marginalized, do not trust the traditional media. This rift between the media (especially the visual one) and poorer communities such as refugees, people with disabilities, gays, communities living below the poverty line, women and others, is historical in Lebanon, and is due to the lack of media representation of these groups of society, or the adoption of their discourse, or investigation on their issues, which mostly result from the spread of corruption, the lack of wealth distribution, and the plundering of public money.

Rafik El Hariri @rafikillustration



## The Hate Speech ... A Power Tool

Media professor Mahmoud Tarabay states that in any coverage or approach, the Lebanese media proceeds from the principle of its general association with political, partisan, banking and family interests, whether visible and declared or hidden under the table, which is reflected in the way it raises any economic, social or political issue. Here, the journalist and media official of the SKeyes Foundation (Samir Kassireyes) believes that "the traditional Lebanese media, especially television, has always overlooked the marginalized files, especially Syrian and Palestinian refugees." He noted that "the historical ownership of the Lebanese media by 12 wealthy political families associated with the ruling system made it deviate from the basic framework for which the media has been created, such as education on public affairs or fight against corruption, or actively seeking change in the laws and advocating for the marginalized, the poor and those whose rights are being squandered." After 2019, when the "17 October Revolution" emerged, the economic situation collapsed, the refugee crisis worsened and the Coronavirus pandemic broke out, instead of traditional media tending to provide people with accurate facts, information and data, and rationalizing it as the most influential means for the public, particularly during political detours, health and natural disasters, it exacerbated the hate speech against refugees, gays and transsexuals and the crowded popular areas which the media addressed during the worsening of the coronavirus crisis in a haughty racist manner that transcended customs and laws. Shahrour explains: "This hate speech is not new in Lebanon and is linked to political propaganda, which is driven by political parties and politicians to serve their electoral orientations, policies and programs" and adds: "The hate speech that the media contributes to spreading, is a tool that is exploited by the political authority which itself owns the media, and it is a speech related to the political event that Lebanon experienced. Let us not forget, for example, the hate campaigns by the popular

base of the March 14 supporters against the Syrian workers in 2005, at the time of political assassinations in Lebanon, and then the racist treatment of the Syrian refugees during the terror caused by the entry of ISIS into Lebanon and preventing them from moving around, and blaming them for the power outage, or the deterioration of the economic situation, and other issues..."

This was confirmed by a study by "Internews" and "USAID" on "the accumulation of information and its impact on the trust of Syrians in Lebanon," which revealed that the most widespread Lebanese media (radio and television) deal with politically controversial issues with bias and that these outlets rarely address issues specific to politically marginalized communities such as Syrian refugees.

## Volatility in Content Presentation

Dr. Tarabay distinguishes between traditional media, alternative media and social media in covering the issues of the marginalized. In his view, the latter two raised the level of awareness and incited the traditional media to break free from its almost past 3 years' inertia, and forced it to keep pace, even if shyly or superficially, with people's issues and concerns. Tarabay asserts that social media is the one that defines the custom in today's media, and prioritizes coverage according to what is raised on its pages and what is "trending". He adds that "the traditional media can no longer overlook the issues of corruption and the marginalized, because ordinary people have their own popular media through social media and streaming platforms and can now hold the media outlets accountable and denounce them if they fail to cover a protest, take sides with a politician or engage in racist rhetoric." But the question is, how does the traditional media outlets present this content and from what angle? Tarabay answers that "the presentation is still primitive in most cases and tends to be an emotional and showy approach to the problem without any solution and without follow-up, thus directing the topic towards excitement and action more than education and provision of accurate information and data that may help raise awareness, form public opinion, change laws or introduce laws that protect marginalized groups." He adds: "One program which is 'Yaskot Hokm El Fased' (Down with the Corrupt Ruling) may be excluded here." Tarabay points out that "the media's handling of quarantine and information on the coronavirus pandemic outbreak is the biggest evidence of the volatility in the media, playing the role of executioner, judge and security man at the same time, and dealing with fateful cases lightly and disdainfully, such as when a station calls citizens 'brainless', or a journalist insults another citizen and holds him accountable for violating the law, or issues orders against a third citizen on the pretext of defending women and children!"

He constantly reminds that the media structure always controls the manner of presentation and the space given to any topic. This what the aforementioned "Internews" study pointed out, considering that the media's engagement with the political elite and its reflection on the current situation explains turning the issue of the coronavirus pandemic into a matter of political debate through the traditional media, while the alternative digital media was more moderate to issues related to the marginalized communities, including refugee camps. In this context, Shahrour points out that "exceptions in the submission and presentation of the subject are sometimes due to the cultural and political background of the journalist, the extent to which he adopts the issues of the marginalized, his bias towards the truth, and exposing corruption or highlighting the suffering of the poor, the tortured and the abused, as has been done in cases of domestic violence and custody that were adopted by journalists who believe in the cause themselves, and of course, according to the margin that the policy of the station, newspaper or website might allow."

## Alternative Media as Source of Information

A study conducted by the non-governmental "Maharat Foundation", which deals with media issues and freedom of expression and opinion, on media and communication trends in times of change between October 2019 and 2020, confirms what Tarabay and Shahrour stated about the failure of the Lebanese media to play its role in accountability and denunciation, and mainly giving its platform to traditional politicians at the expense of the marginalized. The study showed that the alternative media succeeded in establishing itself as an important source of information and opinion-building and gained its legitimacy from the broad size of its followers because it seemed closer to popular trends and free from associations and shed the light on the issues from a different angle, especially those far from the circle of attention and taboo issues. The alternative media has also imposed itself on traditional media, which now take it into account and adopt it as a news source and an important indicator of the pulse of the people and the street.

## Low Percentage of Marginalized Issues Coverage

The study noted that "news coverage on key issues in general was not between 2019 and 2020, supportive of the demands of the revolutionaries, and therefore the marginalized, while awareness-raising and education topics on public affairs and elections were absent along with activists and representatives of the popular movement for the benefit of politicians." In terms of gender balance, the study found that "the share of women in traditional media was marginal, with 14 percent compared to men who still took the lead as keynote speakers in news reports by 86 percent." The study concluded that "women continue to be marginalized in the Lebanese media, just as they are marginalized in political life as if they are not taken seriously." In traditional media interests, it was notable that the press attributed women's issues (1%), camp issues and refugees (1%), as well as corruption cases that received only 2%, but granted social and demand issues 13%. In television, the interest registered 9% for demand issues, corruption 6%, and camps and refugees 5%. While for the alternative media, interest in women's issues stands out at 5%, and also camp issues and refugees at 5%, and corruption at 5%.



# Yazidi Refugees in Lebanon Live in Fear of Persecution

**Nisan Ahmado**

*Journalist*

When the Turkey-backed military operation in the majority Kurdish-Afrin area of northwestern Syria began in early 2018, Riyadh Nabo, 60, fled with his wife from their home in the village of Qastal Jando seeking refuge in Lebanon.

Nabo, who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal, along with the other Yazidi refugees mentioned in this story, arrived in the Chtaura area of Lebanon where other members from his family had relocated in prior years.

He said because of his age, he couldn't find a job to provide for his household, and his wife had to work as a housekeeper to put food on the table.

"Our houses are gone, our lands are gone, and here [in Lebanon] we can hardly manage. We lost everything in our homeland, we can barely survive here," Nabo said.

Nabo was arrested and imprisoned by extremist factions operating near his village. He later was released in a prisoner-exchange deal that included other Yazidis from the prisons run by various rebel groups.

Hundreds of Yazidis began seeking refuge in Lebanon after the onset of the Syrian anti-government protests in 2011 — many during the Turkey-backed military operation that captured Afrin, where an estimated 25,000 Yazidis lived.

Yazidis say they fear a repeat of the 2014 genocide in Iraqi Sinjar, when the so-called Islamic State attacked their territories, killed thousands of men and took thousands of women and girls as sex slaves.

According to the Syrian Yazidis Council, a Germany-based advocacy group for the Syrian Yazidi community, there are 124 Yazidi families in Lebanon, comprising about 500 people. They are scattered between different areas but the majority are

located in Aarsal and Chtaura.

The Council says in addition to being imperiled by Lebanon's triad crises of COVID-19, the financial meltdown and political unrest, the Yazidis' situation is largely dependent upon the community in which they live. Yazidis say they still do not feel safe to reveal their religion among different communities in Lebanon.

The Yazidi refugees are seeking resettlement to countries where their relatives live, such as Germany and Canada, and they say it is the only way they would be able to freely celebrate their religion.

Nabo is living in the same building where his in-laws live. His sister-in-law, Laila Isso, lives in a two-bedroom apartment with eight family members. Laila arrived in Lebanon in 2016 following the arrest for three days of her 75-year-old mother by rebel groups operating near their village of Qastal Jando.

Isso has been working with her two daughters as housekeepers to earn a living. "Women were kidnapped from Yazidi villages. We were harassed and neglected by the Syrian government when we fled our village to Syrian government-controlled areas. We sought refuge in Lebanon, and I worked with my daughters as housekeepers. But since COVID-19 hit, we could hardly find a job in any household," Isso said.

Isso added that she fears for her children if they return to Syria. She said her daughters could be kidnapped, and her sons might be forced to fight with the Syrian army. Even in their refuge in Lebanon, however, she and her family prefer to conceal their faith for protection.

The village of Qastal Jando, which is predominantly Yazidi, has been in the range of rocket attacks since 2012, located on the border of the rebel-controlled town of Azaz

in northern Syria. Most of the village's 1,000 residents were displaced in 2018.

Yazidi refugees say they are scared of congregating in a camp like other Syrian refugees because they then risk becoming an easy target. They prefer to stay among different local communities.

"We are divided between different religious groups in the country. Depending on the area we live in, we either do not say what religion we belong to, or we do say that we are Yazidis in certain areas, but we are still expected to convert to the community's religion," said Abdi Ali, the representative of the Syrian Yazidis Council in Lebanon.

Ali added that even if they only say they are ethnically Kurds without revealing their religion as Yazidis, they still get harassed and bullied, adding they also prefer to live in mixed religious areas rather than in an area predominantly of one sect.

Lebanon's political system has been operating in the framework of a sectarian power-sharing system that ended the 15-year civil war in 1990.

Waleed Reber has been living with his family of eight in a two-bedroom apartment in Chtaura since 2012. His children could not continue their education because the older ones had to work and the youngest faced harassment in school because they were not following the religious rituals of the other kids there.

"We don't have any protection or guarantees. Among all sects in Lebanon, we are the most vulnerable. We are not accepted as Yazidis, we are expected to change our religion to fit in and dissolve in the community," Reber said.

The worsening economic situation in Lebanon pushed World Bank to warn of an "implosion" in the country amid growing political discontent and anti-government

protests.

"Since COVID-19 devastated the country, it further complicated life for everyone. Work became scarce, and increasing numbers of families had to depend on aid from different organizations and family members living abroad as their main source of living," said the representative of the Syrian Yazidis Council in Lebanon Abdi Ali.

Despite operational challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR continued its resettlement activities in 2020 and 2021. The UNHCR confirmed that refugees in need of resettlement, including Yazidi refugees, have been submitted for resettlement from Lebanon in recent years. Ali noted that Yazidi refugees were mostly overlooked in the resettlement efforts.

"There are 50 Yazidi children in the job market here. They don't go to school because their families couldn't find a job, and the job market demands young working hands," Ali said.

Ali arrived with his family in Lebanon in 2013, and they have been helping to support Yazidi arriving in Lebanon.. He said the economic situation in Lebanon makes it difficult for everyone in the country to find medication for people suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes and other diseases. "There is no other solution for us but a resettlement in a different country that protects minorities and give us the right to express ourselves, celebrate our religion and practice our rituals without any fear of repression," said Ali of the Syrian Yazidis Council.



# Claiming Space: How Marginalized Communities in Beirut re-create Feelings of Home

**Lynn Kseibi**

*Journalist*

Across the road are sounds of Lebanese buse drivers honking at Syrian passersby while calling out destination names. Ethiopian women in flowing white scarves make their way home from church, while Sudanese sit in front of antique shops braiding their hair. A couple of blocks away is a Filipina man squatting in front of baskets of dried fish for sale. A Lebanese old man negotiating a customer over the price in front of his up-cycled vintage furniture and accessories store.

The Sunday scene in Burj Hammoud gives a rundown to the surprising diversity of Beirut. It's a city of polarity, where poverty exists beside extreme wealth, and distinct communities live side-by-side but almost completely isolated.

Throughout its history, Lebanon has offered shelter to thousands of displaced people who sought refuge from the neighboring countries, including Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and Sudanese. It has also attracted thousands of migrant workers from Asia and Africa. However, with the effects of the pandemic, economic crisis, and recently, the Beirut blast, this influx of expats is regressing. For the refugees and workers that remain in Lebanon, there is distance between the host and expat community. Shy interaction and isolation appears to dominate the scene as prejudice, and politics have created barriers that discourage interaction.

Simultaneously, attitudes of the Lebanese citizens have not only welcomed but encouraged intercommunal dynamics, especially when it comes to claiming spaces through food, art, music, and market through Beirut. This allows for an integrated experience with the expat communities and rewrites the intercommunal relationships.

More positive intercommunal relationships are made possible as more and more cultures grow within the city, looking to re-create the feeling of home within a country that is not "theirs".

## Food: Sri Lanka

The smell of foods lingers on the fabric of your clothes and invites you in to explore this hidden gem of a city.

Food is a great gateway for learning about people with different backgrounds. Cuisine creates connections through

shared platters, and it provides a great bonding experience. Located above a mini-market that sells Asian spices is a series of stairs leading up to a 25-year-old Indian-Sri Lankan restaurant that has been a hub for migrant workers and international crowds for years. "Tonodian", a restaurant common in Bourj Hammoud, is a gem unknown to most Lebanese. The place is a melting pot of cultures, languages, and heritage as you are transported into a portal that connects you to India.

A popular dish that they serve is "Karaikudi Chettinadu Special". Rice, bread, curries and various dishes are served on a platter on disposable plates made of leaves; also known as thali. Thali is a part of India's dining out culture, and is an integral part of festivals and celebrations. Favors of hot spices, sweet onions, pungent ginger and garlic and sour tomatoes will guarantee you an authentic experience of Indian cuisine.

## Market: Phillipine

In the heart of Hamra, Beirut's most popular area, is a street that is home to Filipino mini-markets. Souq Al-Ahad is a popular Sunday destination for Bangali, Filipino and Lebanese as streaming trays of freshly prepared Filipino food awaits them over long white plastic tables. Unique spices and freshly imported vegetables like ampalaya are only found there. Clothes, accessories, and beauty care are also there. The market roars with Filipino pop music fueling the souk with energy.

Among the sellers is a young couple: Elie, who is Lebanese, and Jenny, who is Filipino. They have been married for six years and they have recently opened up shop where they sell beauty products. "We tend to underestimate how beautiful the Filipino culture is," said Elie continued, "but here in Lebanon, they feel isolated. We don't give them freedom to express themselves." Jimmy turns to his wife, "I am very happy with her, and we are looking to move to Phillipine together."

## Art: Syria

Syrian artists have found in Lebanon a space through which they express themselves and tell stories of war and love through art. Arts have the transformative power to create

social change through the creation of a non-judgmental, safe space.

Visual artists have found their place in the city's art galleries and on the stage of international culture. A prominent figure in the Syrian art scene is Mohammad Khayat, whose work deals with concepts of migration, memory and identity. Through his pieces, Khayat examines refugee relationships with the political and societal environment, focusing on their jobs as workers and farmers, which are the professions they are allowed to practice in Lebanon. "I always believe that I can touch people through art and communicate with them through it," said Khayat, "It is a powerful tool that delivers powerful messages and raises awareness about issues that marginalized communities suffer from."

Mohammad Khayat is one of many Syrian artists who have found a home for their art in Beirut through local galleries and exhibitions.

## Music: Ethiopia

Colorful dark light plays along their intense features. The fast movement of their feet along the floor sounds in the ears of their captive audience. The skilled group of dancers create an air of cheerfulness when performing African dance. Mar Mikhael is a street with a long history, native to Beirut's nightlife. Everyone finds a home here for their musical taste: techno, house, Arabic, RnB, jazz, and African. At specific nights, bars and restaurants host African traditional food while playing African music. Power, eloquence and gesture dominate the scene as Ethiopian dancers re-create aspects of their society through dance performances that are deeply woven into the social fabric of Africa. Rolling shoulder blades, bouncing the shoulders and totting the chest; this is Eskesta, one of Ethiopia's most known dances.

The energy on the dance floor is plausibly inviting crowds to join hand in hand with African communities in Lebanon through dance. The body leads the conversation, allowing for intercultural relationships to be created. The environment is welcoming.

# Leaving No One Behind: Women and Girls

**Myriam Sfeir**

*Director of the Arab Institute for Women*

It is challenging to think of “leaving no one behind” during the dire circumstances that Lebanon is currently hostage to. The public health crisis brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, the tragic Beirut Port blast, compounded by one of the globally worst economic and financial crises in the past 150 years, have taken their toll on the Lebanese. The discrimination that ensued from the multi-layered crises is more intense for vulnerable and marginalized groups. However, “leaving no one behind”, specifically women and girls, does not require any “new” strategy. Instead, it necessitates a return to the demands made by women’s rights groups and activists during the October 17, 2019 uprising to ensure that gender equality is incorporated and respected in all sectors. This piece discusses the structural barriers that impede women and girls’ access to rights, and underscores the efforts needed to operationalize the concept of “leave no one behind”, bearing in mind that other articles in this issue will focus on the plight of marginalized groups. Despite the fact that “leaving no one behind” can only be achieved when an intersectional approach is adopted, this article emphasizes only women and girls. Women in Lebanon have been vocal in calling for their rights since the early 1900s. In 1950, women refused to be denied the right to vote and fought specifically for the right of illiterate women not to be excluded of this privilege. The war years were no different: women took charge and became heads of their households, taking care of the children and elderly, while simultaneously mending and re-stitching the fragile social fabric left tattered and torn by the civil war.

Women’s activism has been unwavering over the decades, and culminated in the October 17, 2019 uprising where women played a central role. Women took to the streets calling for long overdue rights and demands, namely their right to pass citizenship to their children and foreign husbands; the replacement of personal status codes with

civil codes; protection from gender-based violence; a political quota system; access to sexual and reproductive health services; and abolishment of the kafala system for migrant domestic workers. They were intersectional in their demands, and uncompromising in their requests. Moreover, women and girls were relentless following the Beirut Port blast. They were the first respondents; they assembled in huge numbers and took on several initiatives related to cleaning-up, fundraising, and volunteering. In addition, when the response plan failed to mainstream gender in all relief efforts, and given that women, girls, and vulnerable groups were the hardest hit, women and feminist groups were the first to mobilize their efforts. They issued the Charter of Demands, spearheaded by UN Women. Despite women’s activism, the current socioeconomic and political landscape is hindering gender justice. Specifically, as Suad Joseph argues, “patriarchy persists because it permeates social, economic, political, ideological, and psychological aspects of social and personal life ... and every part of society has to be studied for its patriarchal practices and beliefs”. Patriarchy is deeply-entrenched in Lebanese society, rendering women and girls disadvantaged and mere subordinates to their male counterparts. The clearest manifestation is the reigning confessional system, wherein religious laws govern family affairs such as marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance. These personal status codes rob women and girls of any chance of achieving an equitable legal standing in comparison to men and boys. Despite the work of women’s rights organizations in raising the custody age for women and in establishing the Domestic Violence Law of 2014, Lebanese women only have piecemeal rights. Women’s rights vary according to their confession and the subsequent applicable religious laws, with some women faring better than others. According to women’s demands in the October 17, 2019 uprising, it is crucial

to replace archaic personal status laws with a unified civil law that includes legislation condemning child marriage and marital rape; giving women the right to initiate a divorce; protecting women against gender-based violence; and enforcing a clear custody law that prioritizes children’s well-being. Alongside personal status codes, family structures and state institutions contribute to the inequality suffered by women and girls. For example, women are denied access to various sectors of the labor force, which consequently relegates women to the private sphere and the services sector, where they are mostly underpaid or unpaid. Women also resort to working in the informal sector where they are discriminated against and have no rights. Domestic work is an important example here: stereotypically considered to be “women’s work”, domestic work is not covered under the Lebanese Labor law. This affects poor Arab women (specifically, Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese women who work as domestics) and traps non-Arab migrant women domestic workers within the abusive kafala visa sponsorship system. In addition, women are sidelined from decision-making positions and from politics. Women are severely under-represented within Lebanese political structures, which run rampant with corruption and sectarian power dynamics. Women’s presence in the parliament and cabinet is negligent: even though women comprise 50% of Lebanese society, only six of 128 members of parliament and six of 30 ministers in the now-resigned cabinet are women, reflecting dismal women’s participation rates and representation. For instance, when a government committee was formed at the start of the recent economic crisis to determine goods that the government will be subsidizing, women did not have seats at the committee table. As such, sanitary pads and other menstrual products were not included among the list of subsidized products, while men’s razors were. However, integrating women in politics is not adequate. Even though the current number of women in the

government is the highest in Lebanese history, they did not take any action in favor of women’s interests. Rather, what is needed is for women and men in politics to advocate for gender equality, and to work in favor of full human rights and social justice. A feminist perspective in the cabinet that translates to policies—meaning that we can reform discriminatory policies that have been around for too long and implement policies that are in line with global standards for gender equality – is necessary. In conclusion, the overarching structure of the Lebanese state is unequivocally patriarchal and sectarian in nature. It disenfranchises women, girls, and vulnerable groups. The road to counter structural barriers that lead to discrimination is long. However, Lebanon does not need to devise new strategies to ensure that no one is left behind; rather, it should capitalize on those existing. There is a pressing need to mobilize for the implementation of strategies and demands that have been put forward by women’s rights and gender justice organizations and activists. Lebanon must honor women’s rights demands from the October 17, 2019 uprising to ensure better protection of gender rights. With the debilitating economic crisis, Lebanon must put in place a poverty alleviation strategy and a social protection plan that prioritizes women, particularly the most vulnerable.

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# Migrant Domestic Workers in 2020 Lebanon: A glimpse on the tales of Horror

**Farah Salka**

*Executive Director, Anti-racism movement*

Lebanon's track record with Migrant Workers (MWs) and refugees is an inglorious one. Everybody knows this by now. This has been established through countless reports from local and international human rights organization and infinite testimonies of horror shared by victims and survivors of its horrendous kafala system. The escalation of these tales of horrors for scores of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) and the remarkable increase in their rights violations last year was only a natural extension to all the normalized practices of dehumanization by law, institutions and society across the years preceding 2020. If we were able to get around with all what we let happen to migrant women in per-crisis years, then we can, have proven and have actively paved the landscape to be able to get away and let happen all atrocities of 2020.

## Economy is dead- and so is remote interest in monitoring efforts for labor violations against MDWs

Decades of unhinged corruption, leading to 2020's severe economic meltdown and unthinkable layers of inflation has affected the most well-off of Lebanese households, so the impact of the economic/ financial and dollars crisis has had its suffocating grip on everyone and that includes the most marginalized and vulnerable communities, including and not limited to MDWs who have been pushed to further isolation, poverty and destitution of terrible magnitude. MDWs have already been low-wage earners, excluded from the Lebanese labor law, and it's hefty minimum wage figure. After the devaluation of the Lebanese currency and the collapse of the economy, far too many have lost their jobs, been fired without due notice or process, received lower value of wages, getting paid in Lebanese currency as opposed to the agreed on hard USD currency- and what else is the point of being in harsh Lebanon if not sending good money back home to families that are growing apart from you and missing you dearly?

The Anti-Racism Movement's case work team has received hundreds of cases of all sorts of labor violations, particularly non-payment of wages in 2020, meaning that there were households that were enslaving workers, forcing them into free work, and blaming it on the financial crisis. That's a bad excuse, a really bad excuse, especially after we dig a little further and discover that many of these families and households haven't been respecting their contractual payment commitments, way before the financial crisis started. Some have been withholding wages for months, others for years. Present day Lebanon and its slave-mode kafala system enable this, plain and simple.

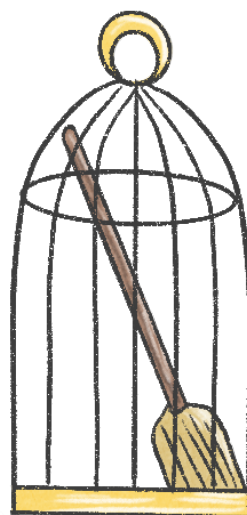
Has any sponsor been brought to questioning or court, held accountable or made an example of for illegally withholding wages for a considerable time period? Has any sponsor been forced to return all the stolen funds from his unpaid MDW? Has the ministry of labor or the justice system intervened effectively on that moving train wreck of 2020? The answer is short and simple: no, not on one case. So is it permissible to withhold months of pay from MDWs in Lebanon without fear of being held to account on this crime? The answer is also simple: yes.

As a result, most migrants have been pushed into severe poverty and exploitative, manipulative work conditions,

unable to secure their most basic needs, wishing to go back home and not being able to.

## The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and its spiraling effects

MDWs are either working in-contract, also known as live-in, or working out-of-contract/ live-out, in freelance mode, with one or several households/ employers and living in a cramped apartment sharing space with other workers. The crisis, followed and exacerbated by the pandemic has hit both communities intensely, but differently. Consecutive government lock downs, limited access and affordability of mobility, self-isolation policy for exposed daily workers, has caused massive loss of jobs, and MDWs have had to rely on their barely existing savings to make



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ends meet. Many jobs usually occupied by migrants have been canceled or working hours decreased, especially with so many companies moving to remote working and their offices closed for most of last year. In the first half of 2020, thousands of MWs were trapped in Lebanon, wanting to go back home because they can't afford food or housing, drinking water even, but couldn't leave because of poverty and homelessness, confiscation of papers by sponsors and closed airports, in Lebanon or back home.

Simply put, if you can't afford to pay your rent- (because with which money are you going to pay it if you are jobless with no hope for work or your job is simply not paying you what it owes you), get evicted with your children, are all suffering from hunger and lack of any hope, how can you be expected to pay off your tickets to go back home, or your PCR tests or all other travel requirements? How do you arrive back home after all this years with no money in your pocket for local transportation? What does this type of pressure do to the psyche of the human being? Do we even need to explain the dozens of cases of MDWs with severe mental illness signs roaming the streets of Beirut, not even

remembering their names or what has happened to them? Blabbering solo out loud, seeming aggressive, walking semi-naked, not even conversing with people who speak their own language? What kinds of traumas have they endured and who bears the responsibility for this with dysfunctional institutions and ministries like these? Anyone? Live-in domestic workers have faced enormous levels of psychological pressure, serving as the punching bags in families where domestic abuse has gone wild. They have been living and working in confinement for so long, and now with the pandemic, they mostly lost their right for a day off/ out, assuming they had it in the first place. Lebanon's last summer was marked by a pattern of discarding MDWs that Lebanese households did not want anymore, or wanted to get rid of (their burden), and did so by throwing them away like torn away objects at their embassies and consulates, on the streets, just like that. This was allowed in the middle of a pandemic. "Go on, just find your way out of the country." This happened to scores of migrant women, who have a lot to remember Lebanon and the Lebanese people for now. This happened shortly before the Beirut blast hit on August 4, 2020, some people would arguably say this is karma hitting Lebanon in some shape or form. Others would say although karma can be a solid scenario for those who believe in it, the impact of the blast itself on MDWs who were hit and forgotten, kept out of emergency efforts, speaks volumes too.

We can go on to speak about other modes of suffering for migrants in Lebanon, the systematic humiliation + racism, the hardships of migrant children, the housing and schooling crises, the evacuation crisis, the mental distress crisis, the suicide and un-investigated deaths crisis, the lack of shelters, the need for a political and solid union, the right to organize amid st such conditions without fear of retaliation, the absolute dire urgency for decent protection mechanisms in place, none of which exist right now. And most of all, the vaccination crisis.

But the fact remains: it is mind boggling how much work we must do as a Lebanese society to get ourselves out of this behavioral/ ethical/ moral/ historical mess that we are in vis-a-vis kafala workers and actually, how simple the work that we need to do is, how lacking the political will for it is, how lacking the individual will for engagement is as well. We have allowed too much wrong to go on for too long, we are either spectators or active partakers in these intertwined systems of oppression that allow for the misery of thousands of MDWs to sustain and grow. We debate the most basic questions like 'should we allow migrants and refugees access to free vaccination'? How doomed are we if such conversations are allowed in our homes, on our tvs, in our ministries?

We must abolish the root of all evil, the kafala system, we all know that by now. Are we doing the necessary work to push and pull all strings needed to get this system shaken and a new decent, fresh one in place? A dignified, human rights compliant one- one that doesn't allow a river of constant crimes against migrant women on the daily going unnoticed and unhinged? I think not and our ineptitude is causing ongoing misery and deaths.

# Lebanon's patchwork social security system leaves older adults unsupported in the economic crisis

Emily Lewis  
Journalist

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security.”

In Lebanon, this right is not guaranteed. As people reach old age, they are left unprotected and unsupported by the state due to the lack of a universal social security and retirement benefits system. Now, with the country sinking deeper into economic crisis and the cost of living soaring, the older population is particularly vulnerable.

Lebanon has one of the oldest populations in the Middle East and North Africa region, with around 10 percent of the population over 64, according to the Central Administration of Statistics.

This figure is set to continue growing over the next few decades due to decreased fertility rates, a longer life expectancy and a high rate of emigration, said Sawsan Abdulrahim, an associate professor in public health at the American University of Beirut who has written extensively on elderly care in Lebanon.

“The situation of elderly care in Lebanon has never been good, but now it has become really difficult” due to the rapid deterioration of living conditions, Abdulrahim added.

## Patchwork social support

When people reach retirement, the type of benefits they receive is linked to their career or profession.

Bodies in the public sector, including the civil service, the army and the internal security forces, all run their own social security funds, which pay employees a regular pension package throughout retirement. Professional syndicates also operate benefits systems, which members pay into throughout their career and can access upon their retirement.

Those working in the private sector but not affiliated with a professional syndicate, however, will not be supported once they stop working, as the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), which many employees contribute to while working, does not provide a regular pension, instead paying out benefits in one lump sum upon retirement.

However, many older people have no access at all to benefits upon retirement. An estimated half of working people in Lebanon are employed in the informal sector, Abdulrahim said, and are therefore not enrolled in a pension scheme. Women are also particularly vulnerable, she continued,

as many of those who are now reaching old age may have done unpaid domestic work throughout their lives rather than being formally employed, leaving them fewer savings to draw from.

“Elderly people work their whole lives and this is how we repay them?” said Henriette Haddad, the president of Kibarouna, an organization that helps to ensure older adults have an enriched social life via weekly

payout would have been equivalent to \$46,434. Now, at a parallel market rate of LL13,000 to the dollar, it is worth just \$5,385. “The current economic situation will have major implications for people in old age,” Abdulrahim said. “People who have worked all their lives and had savings or a pension are finding themselves with less than 10 percent of what they thought they would have.”

scheme, it is no longer worth what it was.”

## Emigrating care

The care of elderly relatives in Lebanon is usually handled by family members and, because of the lack of social security, there is a heavy reliance on children for income. However, with families' income being increasingly stretched by the soaring cost of living, they may no longer be able to provide the same levels of care, Karam said. “The whole burden of care is on the family but there is no remuneration for this care or any policies to protect caregivers,” he added.

In the past, many families employed migrant domestic workers from countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia and the Philippines to care for their elderly relatives. This practise can be cruel to both workers and older adults, Abdulrahim explained, as carers were often not properly trained to provide the specialized care needed by many older people.

“It's not fair that older people who gave so much for their families are cared for by someone who's not been trained, while the workers are put into situations of enormous stress,” she said. “It can become really abusive for the worker and the older person.” Employing someone to provide individual hands-on care is no longer an option for many, and hundreds of domestic workers have left Lebanon or been abandoned by their employers in the past year amid the economic crisis. Last summer, dozens of migrant domestic workers were essentially dumped on the streets outside consulates or embassies after families could no longer afford to pay them and failed to take responsibility for their wellbeing.

In other families, relatives themselves take responsibility for caregiving, but with more and more people looking to move abroad in search of better opportunities, Karam fears that older adults may be left behind. “In a country where there is no social security system, people depend on receiving support from children in old age,” he said. “But young adults are emigrating from Lebanon, so elderly people have no one.” This is likely to have detrimental effects on older people both economically and socially. “Social isolation is likely to get worse,” he added, explaining that while there are many organizations like Kibarouna and the Alzheimers' Association who work hard to care for older adults, “they are really stretched.”



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activities, summer camps, trips out and an annual “grandparents day” to celebrate the bond between grandparents and grandchildren.

“There is a major problem with the lack of retirement funding and elderly healthcare in Lebanon,” Haddad continued. “They have done a lot during their lives, for their children, for their family, for their workplace and for society. We owe them our support.”

## Losing value

Now, due to the collapse of the Lebanese lira, even those who do have savings or regular pension payments have seen their value plummet.

At the pegged exchange rate of LL1,507.5 to the dollar, a LL70 million retirement

“Poverty and old age together put a person in extreme vulnerability,” she added.

Back in 2004, the last time a nationwide survey on the wellbeing of older adults was conducted, over half were found to be “economically deprived” and facing shortages in health services, water and housing. The level of economic deprivation among older adults is likely to have increased significantly since then amid soaring inflation, the depreciation of the lira and declining standards of living.

“In this huge economic crisis, the elderly are among the most vulnerable,” explained George Karam, a geriatric psychiatrist and president of the Alzheimer's Association in Lebanon. “Their savings are either locked in the bank, or if they have a pension



# Really, Why Punish Anyone who does not Like and Desire "According to the Preferences" of Others?

**Maya El Ammar**  
*Journalist*

While the authority in Lebanon clings to its shabby systems and narrow visions of society, members of the LGBT are locked in a perpetually delayed battle, fighting systematic discrimination against them and suffering from the denial of their right to feel free and safe. They suffer double injustices and are deprived from their most basic human rights, even emergency and safe shelters, especially those displaced by the policies of criminalization and impoverishment, and from the basic elements of health care, such as hospitalization without having to hide their features— for those who were able to enter hospitals in the first place — and from the fair legal treatment of some of them that would effectively recognize who they are, rather than the false protruding image on their identities. As we watch bewildered by what our executioners are doing to our lives that they ripped apart, we remember that we had just causes which we brought before the Apocalyptic collapse to some safe ground we thought might be more solid than the previous ones, based on the promises made to us by the theories of cumulative payments. Among these causes, the rights of groups of people whose definitions of what they are have changed as much as their individual definitions of themselves have changed to bring them closer even more to how they feel and what they are at a certain moment in time. This feeling is actually the highest and the most accurate definition. It is also what the alphabet letters cannot accommodate, one of which we delete sometimes and add another at other times, maybe then we could more faithfully reflect the changes of identity and emotion, and the intimate connection between them. What is striking today is that this feeling is pulsating, moving and sustained against the will of the executioners and the dilemmas they created, starting from the collapse of the living capacity to the August 4 explosion and the ensuing series of collapses. If we look back

at all these collapses, it becomes clear that one of their goals was in fact to distract us from ourselves and ambitions, in favor of very obvious needs that now limit the interests of our entities to bread, medicine and fuel rather than, for example, freedom, growth and well-being.

In parallel, the field of flexible and free feeling continued to confuse many, even being almost forbidden to experience at times, so how to explore its depths at a time when calamities fall on anyone whose journey of feelings is not respected in the first place, and personality and preferences are rejected by his relatives, and is thrown with looks of astonishment or condemnation just by showing up in a public place, and is forced to remain alert for possible sexual harassment every day? We will not recount the crises repercussions on certain groups that a large part of society has been stigmatizing as anomalies, nor will we re-enumerate legal articles that denied us basic sexual and physical rights, but rather we are refocusing on our criminal leaders to expose some of the underlying reasons that keep them ingrained in criminalizing those who have “illegitimate” emotions and desires, or rather, ones that they dislike. In recent years, raids and prosecutions against LGBT people (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender people) have not ceased despite the successive crises being paid for like other residents in Lebanon, often at a double price. But against this backdrop, it's helpful to remind ourselves that we had bold rights groups that stood out and became more active, and we had lesbian and queer women who owned more space, and we had qualitative rulings from judges who refused to prosecute gay, lesbian and transgender people on the basis of Article 534 which criminalizes “sexual intercourse contrary to nature,” ushering in signs of a change in the social and judicial processes in dealing with this issue. The judicial process in 2019 and 2020 culminated in the decisions of the State Commissioner to the

Military Court, Judge Peter Germanos, which prohibited the prosecution of military personnel brought before him for the offense to Article 534, thus breaking a patriarchal tradition that established the classic link between normative masculinity and celebrated militarism. These judicial developments were preceded by other positive attitudes, such as those related to the Order of Physicians and the Ministry of Justice ban of anal examinations as a means of establishing male homosexuality, and calls by the psychiatric body to stop treating homosexuality as a mental disorder. On a parallel line, the country bristled with feminist workshops whose efforts have led to some amendments to the legislative system, specifically in terms of combating domestic violence, raising the age of the mother custody of her children in some communities, punishing sexual harassment, preventing employers from filing escape complaints against domestic workers, and other improvements. This legislative movement has not necessarily given the same impetus to other marginalized communities, including the LGBT groups. Rather, the latter were even more encircled and attacked, and some of their events and conferences were even forcibly closed under flimsy terms. With their close intersections and rich differences, the feminist and LGBT movements are recognized to have made important intellectual, social and political differences in the past five years, which have united, albeit unplanned, in the face of a patriarchal system that sees them as a threat to its foundations, including the structure of the family in general and the Lebanese family in particular. But in what sense? Simply put, non-normative relationships and non-stereotypical expressions, like the feminist-oriented reforms in the field of the family, would clearly not serve the strong alliance between the current system and a large segment of a society sharing a common obsession of perpetuating normative gender and sexual norms on the basis of gender

consistency, heterosexual procreation, and reproduction with the highest national value, through the multiplication of members of the same community or people. In this sense, any violation of the role, form, expression and expected tendencies of the individual would, in the eyes of the system, disturb the composition of the community in the country and the composition of the country with its communities, since mere acceptance of the possibility of a “violation” might open the door to other violations, thereby ruining the authority's calculations and bets on its future.

Therefore, the Lebanese system is confused in the face of everything that could literally twist its arms. And the patriarchal system, which is anchored in its once-bickering and occasionally coalescing groups, is in dire and constant need to ensure the continuity of the structures that it considers as allies, because these same structures shall constitute the vital artery that stores its interests and pass them on from generation to generation. But the fear remains, always and forever, of the ability of any exploitative and wealth monopolistic system to adapt itself either to old structures that previously survived from its clutches, or to emerging structures that appeared and seem to strengthen, sometimes seeking to secure its permanence by responding, albeit late, to them, in order to gain or swallow some of them, as it has already swallowed up parts of feminist and trade union movements in the not-too-distant past. However, nothing shows that the system is currently willing to give up any part of its patriarchal and religious arsenal in order to maintain its permanence, simply because, until now it has nothing to gain in return for such amputation, and also because those who negotiate with it, though harassing it, do not, in its view, summon major concessions on its part. Yet, all remains until further notice, until another feeling and another letter.

# “Roumieh” Prisoners Forgotten Amid the Lebanese State Collapse

**Myriam Sweidan**  
Journalist

"I live with damaged kidneys. If I don't do dialysis twice a week, I'll die immediately. Admission to the hospital was facilitated for me as a prisoner before, but after the medical crisis has worsened I can barely get my treatment, I'm at risk of dying at any moment...", says Ayman (alias), one of the prisoners of Block "B" in Roumieh prison in Lebanon.

Suffering from kidney failure, Ayman is one of hundreds of prisoners suffering from chronic illnesses in prison, and their health is now threatened by the medical crisis that has become Lebanon's biggest concern, especially in light of the collapse of the State and its institutions which are unable to shoulder their responsibilities. The inmates of Roumieh prison, which holds 3,000 of Lebanon's nearly 6,000 prisoners, according to the Prisons Directorate's figures, while originally it cannot accommodate more than 1,500 prisoners, recount their daily suffering, which exceeded the lack of sufficient food, to the difficulty of obtaining medical care. The prison pharmacy has become almost empty, even of first aid supplies, and they are deprived of medical care and surgeries in the hospital when needed, except at their own expense, especially since the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for their medical care, is unable to settle the costs.

Appeals from Roumieh inmates are mounting, while Lebanon's health sector is falling apart. Syndicates and hospitals have expressed this, due to the great shortage of laboratory reagents and various medical supplies and medicines, in relation to the inability of traders to import in light of the dramatic collapse of the Lebanese currency, as the exchange rate of the US Dollar on the black market exceeded 15 thousand Lebanese pounds for one US Dollar, at the time of writing this report.

## “Roumieh” Tragedy Returns to the Forefront

The Lebanese State's inability to secure the most basic rights of prisoners returns to the forefront every once in a while, especially in Roumieh prison, which houses the largest number of prisoners and where human rights violations are practiced against prisoners, according to human rights reports.

The tragic stories of Roumieh prison have recently captured public attention, following a television interview on the Lebanese MTV channel, in which it was reported that "They were released but they refuse to leave prison, because they eat and receive medical care and medicine." This prompted the prisoners to issue a warning

statement about "the explosion of the situation inside the prison" as a result of the poor nutrition and medical care.

The matter put the Lebanese in front of two possibilities, according to the commission concerned with prisoner issues in Roumieh, the first of which is that "the Lebanese State has a crisis in the reports that it receives from Lebanese prisons, and therefore it is not aware of the course of things inside these prisons," and secondly, "there is an attempt to mislead public opinion," especially that the facts refute those allegations.

Moreover, prisoners complain of long daily power outages and the discontinuity of "Telecarte" from the market, a card through which prisoners can communicate with their families, and are therefore also at risk of being cut off from the outside world altogether.

posted by the inmates of Roumieh prison, Lebanon's largest prison, on their Facebook page, clearly show the prisoners' deteriorating condition matching the country's general situation, which is experiencing a severe economic and health crisis, and compounding the problem of prisoners' ill-treatment and chronic poor care.

"The food was already bad, and the economic crisis made things worse... If the State can't feed us, our parents will, we just need permission to be passed on our food like the rest of the prisons," says one prisoner, explaining how the food ration inside the prison has gradually been reduced to less than half compared to before. The food ration was reduced from 3 meals a day to two (breakfast and lunch), and the amount of meat, poultry and dairy

to the prisoners, however this does not justify the ban. This shows a lack of imagination to devise solutions to a crisis that has become intractable and thorny.

Not only that, also apart from the food and health crises, Lebanon's prisons are full of people who "should not be there in the first place," including hundreds of people who remain behind bars because the judiciary is late in processing their cases, or because they are unable to pay the fines imposed on them and obtain release orders, according to Amnesty International report, which compounds the overcrowding crisis, particularly in light of the spread of the Coronavirus, although the Lebanese government has taken a number of measures, including the release of prisoners. However, thousands of people remain in detention pending trial or, in some cases, have already completed their sentences, according to the report.

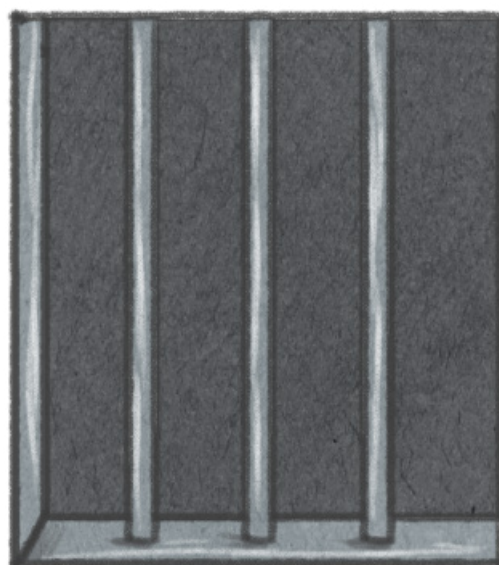
On 6 April 2020, the Lebanese Ministry of the Interior announced the release of more than 600 prisoners held in pretrial detention, as part of the Government's measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, some of whom have been imprisoned since the 2007 Nahr al-Bared events, that is, 13 years without trial.

According to the "Legal Agenda", the occupancy rate in all prisons reached 160% in 2019, mainly due to the long periods of pretrial detention. Conditions of detention remain deplorable as overcrowding and inadequate living conditions persist, let alone the critical health conditions of hundreds of prisoners.

The fear Lebanese feel for their freedom as a result of the accumulated crises is but a fraction of the anxiety of prisoners caught at the bottom of the Lebanese State's priority list, or even almost completely forgotten.

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## Poor Nutrition and Medical Care... and Racism

"Every two people get a wilted apple, and the bread is stale and most of the time it comes and mice have eaten it... The food served to us is not suitable for animals, I just want them to let my family pass the food to me..." complains an inmate of Block "B" regarding the poor food provided by the prison administration while preventing any products brought to the prison by his family from the outside world.

The poor health situation in Roumieh prison also applies to food, as prisoners suffer from the lack of diversity in their prison diet, which is often limited to some cereals and potatoes, and amounts are very limited, according to prisoners' accounts. The recordings, photos and testimonies

products has completely disappeared, according to prisoners, most of whom have confirmed that they eat meat once every two months or more. This is apart from the prisoner's share of apples, the only fruit that enters prison, one of which is shared by two prisoners.

All of this happens while prisoners are unable to afford the products at the shop, the prison private shop, which prices have doubled after the recent economic crisis, and became even higher than those of other stores outside the prison perimeter. The prison administration also bans the entry of any products or food from the families of prisoners, although this rule applies only to prisoners in Roumieh. This is after the security forces found, more than once, prohibited items in the food or consumables the families were supplying



# When leaving no one behind means ‘fixing’ those moving ahead: A call for collective action against disablism

**Grace Khawam**

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More than 80% unemployed, 45% under the poverty line<sup>1</sup>, 258 wounded and at least 42 newly disabled by the Beirut explosion<sup>2</sup>. Lack of inclusive education mainstreamed in schools, lack of implementation of legal protection frameworks, lack of affordable healthcare services<sup>3</sup>, and lack of accessible online learning, health information and vaccination venues throughout the pandemic. This is a quick snapshot of the current state-of-affairs of persons with disabilities in Lebanon. The needs and rights of persons with disabilities have been systematically deprioritized in Lebanon, not only historically, but with every new crisis, every new humanitarian response, and every new development action.

Why are people with disabilities in Lebanon constantly left behind? Contrary to what many may think, it is not because they are more vulnerable or need more special care: it is because they have been consistently marginalized in policies and practices, through socially imposed restrictions, and direct and indirect forms of institutional discrimination - this is what disablism means<sup>4</sup>. While refusing a discourse of victimization, let us unpack the underpinnings of this systemic marginalization. Let us first picture this: a world where pavements, buildings and public spaces are wheelchair-accessible; where sign language is a national language taught in schools; where quality healthcare is available for all; where school lessons are adapted to each learner's needs; where workplaces provide reasonable accommodations for each employee to excel at their work. If we remove all barriers, all restrictions imposed by the environment, by people's attitudes, by systems and structures, would persons with disabilities still be left behind?

The world I am depicting here is not utopian, this is a world where universal human rights are respected, where social justice is a collective strive. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) defines disability as the result of “the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”<sup>5</sup>. In other words, society creates disability. Therefore, to improve the lives of persons with disability in Lebanon, we should not “fix the disabled”, we should fix society. We should fight disablism in all its forms and representations. This is not a question of reaching out to those left behind, this is a call to action for all those “moving ahead”. An invitation to for all of us to pause, to halt for a moment of self-reflection; an appeal to collectively question the

status-quo, and an opportunity to break the business-as-usual towards a more equitable world.

Who is society? It does not only mean the state. While disability policy reform is a crucial and essential step towards advancing disability rights in Lebanon, and the consistent inaction and lack of political will from the leaders of this country has been a critical hindrance to any progress, this is not the only change that needs to be sought out. Society is every one of us, the working mom, the cooking dad, the neighbor next door, the dekkajji on the street, the school children, the community pharmacist, the businessman, the news anchor, the humanitarian worker, the popstar, the teacher, the hairdresser, the taxi driver, everyone. All of us “moving ahead”. We all have a role to play, we all can take part towards building a better country for all. With this, I present the following call for action, to society, to Lebanon:

**To my fellow members in disability organizations, workers, service providers and actors in disability rights: Let us learn from each other.** Let us shift away from the overplayed dispute between disability rights activists and disability service providers. Let us liberate ourselves from the confessional-sectarian order bolstered by our political elite. Let us capitalize on the expertise that some of our care institutions have built up over the years, and potentialize on the transfer of knowledge towards community-based mainstream settings and sectors.

**To my fellow activists and self-advocates in the disability movement: Let us sustain disruptions to the political system.** Even though advocating for policy reform in a failed state led by corrupt and incompetent leaders seems as much as a lost cause as waiting for cactuses to grow apples, let us not stop trying. Let us sustain strategic mobilization where it is needed. Let us foster small-scale nuisances and consistent nudges to the system, enough to bother, enough to disturb, enough to induce a reaction. And, when a window of opportunity arises, let us be prepared, in solidarity and unity of demands, to charge with all our forces, and push for the disability policy reform that is so much needed in Lebanon.

**To my colleagues in civil society organizations, international NGOs and UN agencies: Let us work together.** We do not need you to be implementers or coordinators, we need you as allies. We want to see you mainstream inclusion of persons with disabilities in your practices, in your programs, in your workforce and in your everyday business. We want to see disability-disaggregated indicators in your logframes, accessible monitoring &

evaluation tools in your procedures, and job opportunities for youth with disabilities in your offices.

**To the international donors and funding agencies: Let us invest together.** Let us strategically make use of donor money pouring in the country throughout its multiple crises. Help us guide funding in a way that places inclusion at the core - not at the margins - of development, reform, and the Beirut reconstruction. It is now or never the opportunity to direct funds towards not just building back better but building back more inclusively and more equitably.

**To my fellow citizens, protesters, revolutionaries, and reformists: Let us join hands in universal political action.** Let us raise our voices high for a joint cause: for human rights, for accountability, and a better nation for all.

**To my fellow journalists, media spokespersons and influencers: Let us speak the truth.** Let us stop sensationalizing disability, let us refrain from romanticizing, from tokenizing, from manipulating people's lived experiences for cheap media scoops. Instead of producing meaningless pity by exaggerating suffering and paternalizing supports, let us shift the focus towards the societal barriers that need to be removed, towards the change that needs to happen in communities and in society.

**Finally, to my fellow community members, civil society, religious actors and residents of Lebanon: Let us embrace inclusion.** Let us normalize diversity and differences. Let us move away from charity discourses and embrace a language of rights. Let us let go of the “harams”, of the false sympathies, of the exaggerated praises, and of the exclusionary special treatments. Persons with disabilities are not heroes. They are not saints. They are citizens, with rights. Let us all join the fight for equity and inclusion, together.

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# Stronger Together: A Message of Hope, Faith, and Solidarity

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As the World is trying to get back on its feet, people are facing all sorts of challenges and dilemmas. Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in political and economic crises, as well as the physical, moral, and financial devastation that hit Lebanese citizens and inhabitants since the August 4th explosion, it has been difficult to retain hope. This is why lucidity and solidarity are the most important values at this time.

During the past year, people in Lebanon have incurred several losses: loss of life, loss of jobs, loss of homes, loss of families, and loss of physical contact. On the other hand, we as Lebanese did gain something: we gained stronger bonds – even if virtual, we gained a sense of cooperation that transcended religious, ethnic, or national affiliations, we gained immeasurable acts of solidarity, and we gained confirmation that human life is priceless. We worked alongside each other during this battle, and we were highly aware of our collective responsibility as individuals, organisations, and faith activists. Despite the fact that working on these values and principles has been at the core of Adyan's work for years now, they became even more anchored at this point in time.

With the ongoing vaccination process and with people trying to regain some sort of normalcy, it is important that we do not make the same mistakes that we did in the past. Seeing the world suffer lately made me realize how selfish we all have been. It is easy for us to empathize with people who look like us, think like us, and believe in the same things we believe in. However, our mission as human beings goes beyond that. Our mission is to be as inclusive as possible and to involve all members of our communities in the decision-making processes.

Being part of Adyan Foundation for Diversity, Solidarity, and Human Dignity strengthened my belief that difference is something to be celebrated. It also made me realize that if we fight together for the greater good, then we can all emerge as "winners". While Adyan's work has always focused on the dissemination of positive and inclusive narratives and the promotion of Inclusive Citizenship and Human Rights, it did add another humanitarian dimension to its mission, during the year 2020, through the "We Stand with Beirut" project that further concretized the concept of solidarity after the August 4th explosion. Witnessing the amazing initiatives that were implemented by Adyan's Networks and the Forum for Religious Responsibility made me reflect on the following:

- Human dignity is at the basis of all human rights. We are all born equal, and it is imperative to treat each other as such.
- It is everyone's responsibility to promote a positive narrative on diversity – a narrative based on facts, statistics, and real-world examples rather than on inherited xenophobic ideas. This should be done on a larger scale in order to have the needed/ desired effect.

- Institutions need to adopt a multi-level approach that ensures that policies are being developed at different levels, and that they are inclusive of people that are usually "looked over".
- Education on living together is an important tool to engage all components of a given society, to promote the concept of inclusive citizenship, and not ensure that the younger generation is being taught to look at the human first – regardless of religious, ethnic, or national belongings.
- Young people play an important role in development; this is why we should always ensure that they have a platform to express themselves and implement their initiatives.
- Religious leaders and activists hold the responsibility of engaging with and supporting not only their own communities, but people from different religious backgrounds as well.
- Social solidarity is still needed now more than ever. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that all members of our community are given

access to the same treatment and are being equally respected.

## A Call for Action

When we speak about commitment, we do not only speak of being signatories on international agreements, pledges, or conventions; we speak about actually implementing what is mentioned in those. In Lebanon, for instance, the refugee situation is not getting better – with prejudice continually exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the deteriorating economic situation. In this case, both the refugees and the host communities are facing difficulties in adapting to the current situation; hence, the role of local stakeholders becomes more important when there is minimal or no intervention from the government itself.

This is why every person matters. Every positive post on social media matters. Every act of kindness matters. Every statement of solidarity matters. It is our religious and social responsibility to fight exclusion, injustice, inequality, and hatred – each in his/her own way.



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The UNDP «Peace Building in Lebanon» project works since 2007 on enhancing mutual understanding and promoting social cohesion by addressing root causes of conflict in Lebanon. The project has been also lately working on addressing the impact of the Syrian crisis on social stability in Lebanon. The project supports different groups from local leaders and local actors, to educators, journalists, youth and civil society activists, in developing medium and long-term strategies for peace building, crisis management and conflict prevention.

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