

Country Update

Lebanon

(February 12, 2021)

Context and government response:

As of February 12, 2021, Lebanon has registered 331,159 cases of COVID-19, including 3,866 deaths. The Lebanese government eased COVID restrictions over the December 2020 holidays in hope to boost its crippled economy and devalued currency which has lost 80% of its value in the last year. However, only a couple of weeks later, and by January 14th, 2021, Lebanon recorded the highest number of daily COVID cases till date. With Intensive Care Units across the country operating at 90.5% of their capacity and at 100% in Beirut, and healthcare workers positivity rates growing to concerning levels, the Lebanese government imposed a tight 24-hour nationwide lockdown for over a month, and only cautiously eased restrictions by mid-February, allowing grocery stores and banks to open up.

Lebanon received its first batch of 2.1 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines in February 2021, which it could only afford by taking a World Bank loan to cover its costs. Current efforts for vaccine obtention, would, at best, cover just under half the population in Lebanon. And although the caretaker health minister has announced that vaccination will cover all those on Lebanese grounds, regardless of nationality, there is no operational plan in place to ensure this procedure. Additionally, other officials, including the lawmaker heading the parliamentary health committee, have publicly announced that the Lebanese government will not include refugees in Lebanon (over 1.6 billion individuals) in their vaccination plans, and that UN agencies are responsible to vaccinate such populations. This is particularly concerning

as the ICRC has warned that overcrowded areas such as refugee camps and detention centers are most vulnerable in face of this pandemic.

Similarly, the 400,000 migrant workers in Lebanon have not been included in the national vaccination program.

Summary of impacts:

Economic impacts:

COVID-19 has compounded the multifaceted crises Lebanon is facing: from the economic meltdown, to the sharp devaluation of its currency, to the Beirut explosion on August 4th, 2020 which left 300,000 people homeless and severely damaged already strained health infrastructure and medical supplies. These various crises have deeply impacted the economic landscape in Lebanon. In fact, in this last year:

- The officially estimated unemployment rate:
 - Has quadrupled and is now at 40% of the workforce and
 - Has reached more than 60% amongst young people
- Extreme poverty has:
 - Tripled amongst the Lebanese population (now at 23%)
 - Almost doubled amongst the Syrian population (now at 88%)
- Food price recorded over 440% inflation

The most impacted economic sectors are the construction, services and sales sectors. The northern part of Lebanon, which has historically known higher poverty rates, and has also welcomed larger ratios of refugees than other parts of the country, has particularly suffered from this economic downturn. The majority of Tripoli's residents receive daily wages. One such individual, a taxi driver, told Associated Press: "We are not allowed to work. We stay at home, we beg to get bread."

The World Bank has also underlined that women and young adults have been particularly impacted by reduced salaries. Similarly, UN Women has recorded higher rates of poverty and mental health issues amongst women and gender minorities than among their male counterparts. Additionally, the ILO has emphasized that women have had to disproportionately increase their household and childcare duties as compared to men.



Finally, the refugees have also testified huge unemployment rates with 61% of Syrian women reported job loss due to COVID 19, compared to 46% amongst Syrian men.

Women's rights and gender equality:

A sharp increase of calls has been recorded by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) hotline reporting domestic violence against women: 102% increase compared with last year's numbers, underlines the precariousness of women's situations under lockdown. Minors under the age of 18 years old comprised 14% of the reported abused women. A local NGO's, KAFA Enough Violence & Exploitation, 24/7 support center also noted an "abrupt rise in the number of phone calls for help" beginning from the first lockdown implemented by the Lebanese authorities in March 2020.

In February 2021, a young Lebanese woman who had filed for divorce due to domestic violence was found strangled in her apartment. Over leaked voice recordings, her husband seems to admit having killed her. This is not an isolated incident, but one that comes to confirm a trend observed in Lebanon, both among Lebanese women, as well as women from other nationalities. In fact, with the intersection of 'marginalized' identifies, women domestic workers in Lebanon have found themselves, especially during COVID-19, overworked, unpaid, unfed as employers prioritize their own families, ill, depressed and seven were driven to commit suicide between March and July 2020. Others have been beaten by their male employers when they refused their sexual advancements, and others yet had been placed by their employers 'for sale' on Facebook groups that mostly sold second hand items. Further, given the economic crisis compounded by the pandemic, hundreds of female domestic workers were stranded by their employers, claiming they could no longer afford them. Left at the doors of their embassies, many without their passports, money or a flight back home, they expressed they have been 'dumped like trash'.

Due to COVID-19, UN Women has pointed out that women have also struggled to access sexual and reproductive health services: a 45% decrease in the number of women accessing reproductive health services was recorded between March and May 2020, compared to the same period of 2019.



The Lebanese government's measures to address the pandemic have not been completely gender-blind. In fact, through the ministry of social affairs devised a solidarity basket of food and sanitizers to vulnerable families, and has prioritized female-headed households. However, these measures are largely insufficient. Further gender-sensitive policies are needed, not least of which would ensure the inclusion of women and young people in decision-making for an appropriate COVID-19 response. For instance, many more women face increased risks of exposure to COVID-19 as healthcare workers: 50% of registered nurses in Lebanon are under the age of 35, and 80% of all registered nurses in Lebanon are women. However, in governmental leadership positions and decision-making, women and young women remain under-represented. For instance, only 18% of the Government of Lebanon's Inter-Ministerial Committee on COVID-19 are women.

Peace and security impacts:

The various stressors mentioned above have exacerbated Lebanon's fragility and fueled tensions between local communities and Syrian refugees. In December 2020, an informal camp sheltering 370 refugees was burnt by the Lebanese host community following a dispute that escalated to gunfire. Security sources reported that this incident was set off when "Syrian workers demanded a wage which their employers refused to pay." These same sources also admitted that "the dispute could have been sparked by the harassment of a Syrian woman."

Fragility caused by COVID-19 and other socio-economic and political factors have become more palpable as the level of opportunistic criminal activities including armed robberies, carjacking and drug trafficking have been on the rise across Lebanon. One such incident recorded on a pharmacy's CCTV is that of a gunned man threatening the cashier in order to steal diapers.

Moreover, in the most recent strict 24hr lockdown imposed by the Lebanese government in February 2021, some of the poorest areas of the country took to the streets expressing their disapproval of government measures to deal with the virus. Lebanese protesters took a violent turn as rioters set fire to several buildings, including the municipality, in the northern city of Tripoli, reportedly outraged over the country's coronavirus lockdown and inaction of



the political class in the face of economic collapse. At least two rotesters in Tripoli died in clashes with the Lebanese security forces, and hundreds of others were wounded.

A notable increase in fake news both by media channels and individuals exacerbated the security and health threats, accusing, for instance, the WHO for fabricating lies about the virus. As such, UNDP and LBCI launched a campaign in May 2020 to counter these waves of fake news.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

Women's rights groups have been vocal and active to address many of the aforementioned challenges. For instance, following the explosion in Beirut, 46 feminist activists and women's rights organisations in Lebanon demanded governmental responses both to COVID-19 and the explosion of August 4th to uphold principles of gender-sensitive disaster response plans.

New policies were also developed to respond to the spike in gender-based violence that was correlated with the COVID-19 lockdown measures. One such policy was the facilitation of testimonies for court through online communication. In fact, UN Women underlines that "the first online protection order in response to domestic violence was issued on 23 April 2020 which provided protection services to the survivor, her children and extended family from the perpetrator. Moreover, an online mechanism was developed to accept and rule on complaints presented via emails before judges. The email addresses of all courts that deal with domestic violence cases across all regions of Lebanon were widely disseminated to increase access to justice for survivors."

Additionally, in December 2020, a new law criminalizing sexual harassment was passed after significant advocacy and pressure from various women's rights groups. This law also broadened the scope of Law 293/2014 on the 'Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence' to include violence related, but not only committed during, marriage.

Finally, the digital space has been utilized, most notably by UN Women and UNDP to launch the #TogetherAndEqual campaign aiming to influence "perpetrators of violence against



women, and to challenge men to do their part in domestic work and childcare to alleviate the burden on working mothers.”

