

The disproportionate impact of Covid 19 crisis on women and adolescent girls in middle Bekaa and Women Now for Development's response.

Field research paper

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WOMEN NOW FOR DEVELOPMENT
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1 | Introduction

In most countries, women and girls go through different struggles on several levels, from the rigid structure of the patriarchal community to discriminating laws and the exclusion of women from decision making bodies. These struggles don't end there. The fight of these women becomes extremely difficult and complicated in countries like Syria and Lebanon, where past and ongoing conflicts generate ethnic and sectarian schisms, and cause economic and humanitarian crises manifested in the migration and refuge of millions, mostly women and children. These women find themselves between the hammer and the anvil, between fighting for their legal rights against constant threats of conservative social norms and exclusionary political forces, and the fight for their basic rights to life, safety, dignity and work.

Hence, during this humanitarian crisis, local feminist organizations continue to work in Syria and Lebanon on responding to the dire reality with limited local resources and inconsistent international funding. In different areas where this response has succeeded or failed, and given that a deep structural change requires time and joint international and local efforts, these organizations continue to work relentlessly to empower and support women in confronting these realities gradually.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst poor local and international preparedness amplified the difficulty and complexity of these realities. Shortly after many women overcame hardships and joined the public sphere with new gender roles, they were forced back into the private sphere, confined with no adequate support.

2 | Study Question

In light of these circumstances, particularly the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis, the following questions should be raised:

- What are the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on women and girls living in Middle Bekaa on the economic, psychological and social levels?
- How Can Women Now for Development respond to this crisis in a more leading and sustainable manner given governments' border restraints on foreigners, and the Lebanese government's incompetent response to the crisis?

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Study's importance

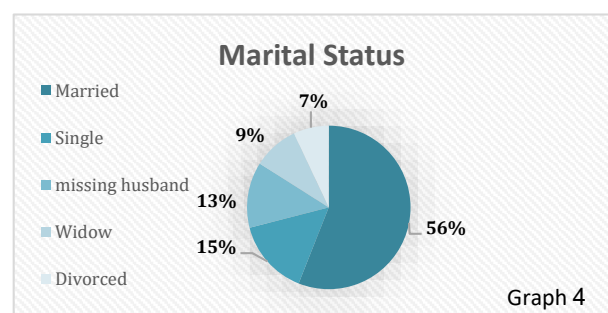
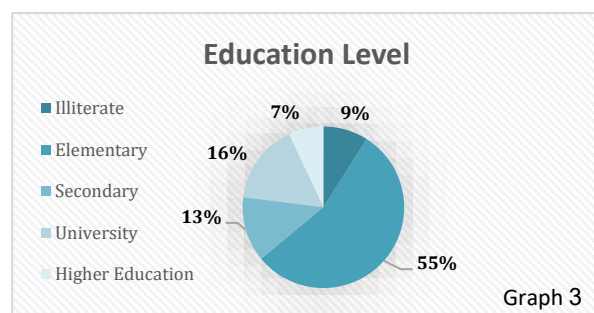
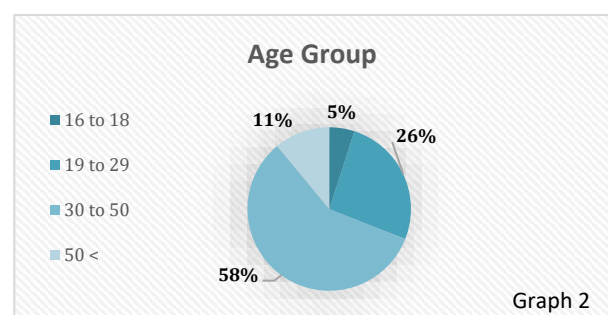
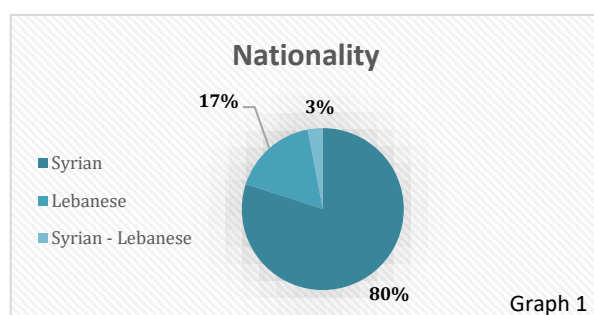
The COVID-19 pandemic took the world by surprise and its impacts are rapidly rising, especially on women in the communities we work with. This crisis highlighted the necessity of adapting our activities and identifying our urgent response to this emergency. In order to have an adequate response, we found it essential to conduct a study to identify the disproportionate impacts on women and girls as well as to identify their current needs.

3.2 | Objectives

- To determine the economic, psychological and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls living in Middle Bekaa.
- To determine the form and type of the response that meets the needs of women and girls in Middle Bekaa.

3.3 | Study sample

The study sample consists of 55 women and girls residing in the Middle Bekaa area, east Lebanon, where Women Now for Development carry out their activities. Graphs (1, 2, 3, 4) show the properties of the sample. To ensure diversity in answers, we have sought a diverse sample for our study.



3.4 | Study method

The study follows the analytical descriptive approach that examines everyday reality and provides analytical scientific descriptions.

3.5 | Study technique

Interviews conducted by our team were mainly open-ended questions in addition to some closed-ended questions.

An interview sample can be found [here](#).

3.6 | Study preparation

- Discussion session on the study's subject with the study's preparation team.
- Brainstorming session of the most pressing questions to be included in the interview.
- Identifying questions in a session to give the intended results of the interview, covering the psychological, social and economic aspects, in addition to the wording and logical sequence of questions.
- Meeting with the protection team to share the objective of the interview and its implementation process.
- Conducting 55 one-on-one phone interviews with participants to access more accurate and credible information. The interview period ranged between 40 to 90 minutes.
- Performing an analysis of the interviews.

4 | Part One: Women and girls in Middle Bekaa, from one confrontation to another

Lebanese authorities have been unable to administer Syrian refugees' affairs ever since they started hosting refugees escaping their war-torn country. Since mid-2017 the government's attitude has taken a more discriminatory turn that escalated in parallel with discriminatory discourse towards refugees at the official level, in addition to an ongoing economic crisis and the decline in aid from donors. These factors have all worsened the situation of Syrian refugees.

Women and children make up the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. These women are the breadwinners of their families in a new community that quite resembles their Syrian community. But as they came with a different social status, the majority arriving without providers, they had to work to support their families. According to UNHCR's report in June 2014, one out of four Syrian refugee families in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon is headed by a woman fighting on her own to survive.

Life in Lebanon for refugee women carries significant challenges, from difficulties acquiring a legal residency to the lack of access to justice and protection. Their refugee status makes them highly vulnerable to all forms of violence including sexual violence and human trafficking. In addition to the lack of access to adequate medical and educational services, safe housing, and work that, when available, comes with inhuman conditions. Such lack of access to justice leaves these women vulnerable in the face of continuous discrimination and racism.

The extreme discourse of the Lebanese government included organizing the repatriation of these refugees to "safe" areas, especially after the Astana Talks that declared de-escalation zones. Yet, despite pressures pushing refugees to return home, conditions remain unsafe in Syria. This creates more fears for women, particularly of the forced deportation of male family members to Syria, which would put them at risk of forced conscription and thus of their involvement in ongoing military operations in the country.

With the beginning of the Lebanese uprising in October 2019, and an economic crisis so serious that the World Bank warned in November 2019 of poverty rates increasing to about 50% in Lebanon, many women of both host and refugee communities were forced to quit their small businesses, and became in need of all forms of support.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the complexity of the situation with clear impacts on the whole community, and on women and girls particularly and disproportionately, especially in communities below the poverty line as is the case in Lebanon. This impact takes many forms, three of which are discussed in this study.

4.1 | Economic impact

The Lebanese government followed mass mobilization with strict procedures, including partial curfews. As these procedures were not accompanied by economic support, entire families have lost their daily source of income. Our study clearly shows that about 40% of the interviewed women have recently lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. That is a serious indicator of the deteriorated economic situation of the families in the studied area, especially as 40% of them are breadwinners, and 20% contribute to the household income.

While it is already difficult to find a job in Bekaa, it is especially hard for Syrian women due to a discriminatory labor law that restricts the labor of refugees to specific fields. The percentage of women who lost their jobs also reflects how easy it is to suspend women from their small businesses instead of keeping them through remote work and/or reduced pay, or compensating them in some form if that is not possible.

An analysis shows that 94% of the women in the studied sample rented a house, room or tent for shelter, indicating difficult living and economic situations. On one hand, these women were forced to quit their small businesses. On the other, a great percentage of them provide for their families and have to pay their monthly rent.

When directly asked, 96% of the women in the study sample highlighted the economic impact of this crisis and referred to the significant price increases, the unstable exchange rates of the Lebanese pound to the US dollar in the black markets, losing their work or getting salary cuts.

The current economic situation may lead to human disasters far more violent than COVID-19, and we have already begun to witness some of them. On February 5th 2020 a Syrian refugee in Middle Bekaa died after setting himself on fire as he was unable to handle the economic situation he and his family had been enduring. To add insult to injury, we should recall that even such a desperate act would not even be conceivable for women in a patriarchal society. If a woman attempted such an act, she would also have to contend with the additional burden of losing her “honor” whether she lives or dies, which would overshadow the reasons behind her action.

Undoubtedly, the situation worsens when municipalities, international organizations, community associations and civil society organizations all follow conflict-insensitive discriminatory policies in offering aid to certain families. When designated authorities apply discriminatory procedures towards Syrian refugees such as mandatory house confinement while also obstructing aid access, they impose impossible living conditions on refugee camps and groups.

4.2 | Psychological Impact and increasing gender-based violence

The psychological impact is inevitable in this deteriorating COVID-19 crisis, reflecting significantly and directly on women, children and people with special needs. These groups are more vulnerable to structural violence which worsens during such crises.

In this context, an article published by Annahar on the 6th of April 2020 reported an increase in the cases of violence against women from 44 cases in March 2019 to 88 in March 2020, or a 100% increase according to internal forces hotline data. On the same day as the article's publication, a five-year-old Syrian girl arrived lifeless in a hospital in Tripoli after being severely beaten by her father.

When asked about whether there's been an increase in violence against them during the COVID-19 crisis, 40% of the women and girls in the study sample answered yes, with violence ranging from psychological to verbal and physical abuse, against women and children, especially girls.

"My relationship with my husband is very troubled because of his constant stay at home, watching me and interfering in my daily chores that lead to verbal and moral abuse on me and physical abuse on my girls", says "D.H", one of the women from the study sample.

Women of the study sample recounted an increase in social violence during this crisis. With their mobility restricted, the women have stated that their phone usage mobility restricted too. At the same time, because they can't go to work anymore, they no longer have the 'excuse' of needing their phones as much when pressured by male relatives or the husband.

"I have always been physically abused by my brother, which increased in the corona crisis because of his constant presence at home. He is also beating my three children. Autonomy is not an option due to my poor financial situation." According to "M.T", one of the sample study's women.

It is worth mentioning that many women who are subject to violence on a daily basis do not report it due to fear of losing their children, social stigma or their financial dependence on the man in the absence of proper governmental support for victims. The number of calls therefore do not necessarily reflect the real number of violent cases. Calling and asking for help with an abuser in the household is extremely difficult especially when the house or tent is small and/or shared.

The protection team of Women Now for Development noted a 56% decline in women's and girls' participation between the first and second quarters of 2020 in psychosocial support and individual case management programs in Middle Bekaa, including complaints and reports of violence.

According to the monthly report of March, incoming calls from Syrian refugees to the Bekaa support center declined since March 13th. 70% of the calls coming in on this date were from Lebanese women, compared to 55% Lebanese and 45% Syrians callers in the previous months.

KAFA organization attributes the decline in call rates from Syrians to several factors: the COVID-19 confinement policy forcing people to stay in their apartments or tents; the tightened restrictions on movements in Syrian refugees' camps in Bekaa where it is no longer possible to leave the camp even for basic groceries or money withdrawals; and the lack of organization services for families.

Due to the situation, it is difficult to report violence, and leaving the house to file a complaint is impossible. In many cases women are too preoccupied with securing food and shelter to think about reporting violence.

This situation has psychological impacts, some of which take the form of mental disorders, while others might actually manifest in physical disorders as well. A great majority of the women in the study sample recounted having difficulties with any form of stability during this crisis, attributing it to: poor economic conditions; quarantine and the many forms of violence that accompany it; fear of a future linked to forced repatriation of Syrian women; fear of contracting the virus coupled with the stigma imposed on the infected in general; the general discrimination against Syrian refugees in Lebanon; and, for Lebanese women, the inability to own a family house. These challenges are reflected in symptoms apparent in the physical and mental wellbeing of some of the participants of the study such as complete loss of appetite, nightmares, isolation and short temper. The majority also reported high levels of nervousness and fear during this period due to the fear of leaving the house, of their children getting infected by the virus and of the economic and psychological impacts, while others attributed it to concerns about the future of their children's education.

These symptoms might be demonstrated as: yelling at and feeling rage when dealing with children; lack of sleep; nightmares; interrupted menstrual periods; headaches; stomach aches; nerve infections; short of breath; hair fall; and weight loss. Some reported no physical symptoms.

This reality reflects the dangerous state of women and girls, especially given that this crisis might be longer than predicted. It is worth noting here that women and girls struggle to access psychological and health support centers because of restrictions on their mobility imposed by local authorities implementing curfew or their families fearing harassment or stigma. These fears can also be caused by the fact that the women leaving their families can no longer rely on "leaving for work" as their excuse.

4.3 | Social Impact

This crisis has disproportionate social effects on women and girls, especially when most of these effects are linked to the patriarchal structure of the community. In this regard, most of the women in the sample recounted an increase in house and family chores, including teaching children, with men not participating at all in these chores. In cases where another family member participates it's usually the girls who do so, as the patriarchal community discourages boys from contributing to house chores and might even punish them were they to exert atypical social roles.

In the previous section, we have identified the increase in violence on women and girls during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet most of these psychological impacts intersect with social impacts as well, especially in communities where privacy is non-existent and the line between the public and the private withers away. This is significantly evident in refugee camps and adjacent residential centers where many family problems are linked to neighbors' and society's perception of women and girls, ultimately leading to more restrictions on their mobility even within the same residential space.

As for sexual exploitation, women in the sample spoke about being directly sexually harassed by municipality personnel in exchange for aid; when declined, these men would withhold aids from women, and spread offensive rumors about them. These rumors are often spread and believed due to power disparities between a municipality officer arranging aid distributions and a woman in need. One woman also spoke about losing all chances of accessing aid in this crisis after the responsible officer sexually harassed her and refused her aid when she refused. With her now outside the camp, her chances of accessing aid vanishes since aid by humanitarian organizations are strictly distributed inside the camps.

It is not possible to read this social reality without a gender sensitive lens. As per the answers of the women and girls in the study sample, this crisis had its economic, social and psychological impacts on the community as a whole; but reflected differently on women and girls due to discriminatory local laws and the patriarchal structure of society.

5 | Part Two: Women Now for Development's response

Women Now for Development believes that daily life experiences expose discrimination and injustice against women and girls the most. We believe in this approach more than the definitions in local and international legislation. Justice for women is economic justice that guarantees their right to basic livelihood, education for their children and protection from all potential forms of violence. That is their perception of justice. This approach becomes clearer when the woman is the main breadwinner of the family if the man is not present or is unemployed. We identified parts of this daily reality in the first section of the study which led us to determine types of local response needed in an attempt to better support women and girls during these crises.

5.1 | Essential needs of women and girls from the study sample

When asked about the family's health, 70% of women and girls from the study sample said that their families have special health needs. These needs ranged from pregnancy, breastfeeding and old age to war injuries, physical disabilities and chronic illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma and epilepsy as well as fatal illnesses like breast cancer and kidney failure.

These needs require effective and free access to healthcare that has significantly declined in the last few years following an international decision to reduce aid for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This aid has also been affected by the curfew restrictions on health organizations in areas of need.

On the subject of groups in need being able to access necessary health information, we asked women and girls of the sample study about accessing necessary information. Almost all of the answers were positive, assuring the importance of their access to this information through local and international organizations, local media and social media outlets. However, supportive and preventive mechanisms remain unavailable.

For example, around 38% of the participants use preventive hygiene products, while the rest of the women in the sample resort to household disinfecting products like chlorine, soap, vinegar and lemon. This is due to several reasons but mainly the cost of sterilization products given that their priority remains buying food. If the economic crisis continues to escalate, it is possible that even these disinfectants will be out of stock.

At the end of the interview we asked women and girls about their current primary needs. Most of the answers were similar and included monthly rent, housing in general, food, clothing, disinfectants, medicine, infants' supplies such as diapers and milk and feminine hygiene kits such as sanitary pads.

On primary long term necessities, the majority of answers focused on a steady income related to their access to sustainable job opportunities, followed by those who highlighted the absence of a father, a brother or a husband. These answers were provided by breadwinning women.

Some women pointed out the need to leave Lebanon to a resettlement country while others highlighted the importance of permanent aid from the UNHCR being resumed after it was suspended due to an international decision to reduce aid to Syrian refugees.

Girls in the study sample stated their need to go back to school after being forcibly interrupted, this is due to a number of reasons including the Lebanese state's requirement that official documents be brought from Syria for their education in Lebanese public schools, which is impossible for security reasons. If refugees do obtain the required paperwork, other causes such as the inability of the family to cover the costs and the fear of girls getting harassed prevent girls from having an education.

The COVID-19 crisis will likely take longer than expected, especially if a vaccination isn't discovered in the near future. This risks aggravating physical, psychological, economic and social needs which will leave us with a deteriorating reality in need of urgent international and local joint efforts to deal with.

This reality highlights the crucial need to promote the role of local humanitarian organizations and in particular local feminist organizations given ongoing government restrictions on cross border mobility of international humanitarian workers and the inability of these governments to properly respond independently from non-governmental sectors. It also calls for a crucial update in these organizations' programs and activities to go in line with the emerging reality of the COVID-19 crisis.

The main role remains to local feminist organizations working in the field, through monitoring violations and impacts on women and girls in times of crisis and developing special response mechanisms.

5.2 | Recommendations and Response Plan

In response to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, Women Now for Development continues to deliver its programs to women and girls remotely using electronic platforms as appropriate to participants as possible.

During our empowerment program that includes vocational and knowledge-based training sessions, we noticed a decline in participation by 23% between the first and second quarters of 2020. This is especially true of computer literacy training, as most women and girls did not have computers at home, which makes the practical application of skills more difficult. As for the participation program, namely the women leadership academy project, engagement ratio fell by 25% between the first and second quarters of 2020.

These engagement rates don't seem significant in comparison with the ability of women and girls to access the internet, use phones and specific educational programs in addition to proper spaces to learn remotely in their own homes.

As for the protection program that includes collective psycho-social support and individual case management programs, engagement rates dropped by around 56% between the first and second quarters in 2020 due to the aforementioned reasons.

In light of all of the above, Women Now for Development laid out some plans to improve its local response, some of which are already being implemented. As for the rest, these will be applied at a later stage depending on funding and capacity. Regardless, these are general recommendations that can be followed by all relevant actors:

- Increase and develop health awareness programs to highlight the importance and process of proper sterilization and prevention.
- Continue to deliver psycho-social support sessions to alleviate psychological pressure and anxiety and provide strategies to manage them.
- Continue to provide consultancy and case management associated with referrals to partner organizations.
- Promote networking and coordination with local organizations and authorities and all active actors in the area to guarantee the integrity of all forms of support and organized distribution.

- Promote and develop a referral system with local and international organizations to provide immediate protection for women and girls.
- Develop a phone-friendly curriculum of computer literacy training that includes cyber security themes to further protect women and girls from cyber abuse.
- Reallocate unspent expenses in coordination with donor organizations to small businesses, cash and crucial health assistance.
- Invest in and empower women and girls' skills in manufacturing home supplies and toys and share it with organizations supporting children.
- Conduct qualitative research that explains the disproportionate effects of crises on women and girls, such as studying the psychological impact of providing women during the COVID-19 crisis with a tailored response plan. Several topics are available for studying according to urgent shared needs that will provide volunteer opportunities to women and girls, leading to improving and expanding the organization's team and access radius.
- Design a special program for girls, particularly those that have dropped out of school, by engaging them in psycho-social activities, including those within residential spaces under the supervision of Women Now's protection team. Also, ensure capacity building to the girls with a monthly income for their volunteering.
- Design small projects for women in exchange for daily financial compensation to provide economic support with vocational and informational empowerment. That would in return mitigate psychological pressure they're enduring during periods of crisis.
- Disseminate these small projects in more than one residential center, each point will be specialized in making essential material to the COVID-19 pandemic such as detergents, masks, disinfectants, and so on.
- Train a group of women who have previously been trained with Women Now, particularly in leadership, on legal issues and gender-based violence as well as referral systems. Choose women geographically to guarantee direct access to cases of violence in residential space, case management and later internal or external referrals.

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