



GENDER ALERT ON COVID-19 LEBANON

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IN FOCUS: **WOMEN, GENDER, AND THE ECONOMY**

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The National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (UN Women), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are partnering to provide periodic Lebanon specific gender and COVID-19 alerts throughout the public health crisis, and its ensuing economic crisis. These updates aim to a) provide observations from frontline responders on issues of gender equality in Lebanon, b) compile available secondary data on these issues into one reference point, c) consolidate guidance and programmatic tools related to gender issues and d) offer recommendations to support a more gender equitable response. This issue of the Gender Alert on COVID-19 focuses on Women, Gender Equality and the Economy in Lebanon and has been prepared in partnership with International Labor Organization and in collaboration with the National Livelihoods Sector.¹

CONTEXT

The onset of COVID-19 has amplified Lebanon's economic crisis. Lebanon is currently facing a rising debt burden, large chronic fiscal deficits, inflation and a significant devaluation of its currency. The impact of this on the economy and the population of Lebanon cannot be under-estimated; GDP is expected to fall by 13.8% in 2020, with 50% of the population projected to soon be living under the poverty line. UN ESCWA estimates job losses of 1.7 million in 2020 across the Arab region, nearly 700,00 from women.² Within this context, attention must be paid to the differential impact of Lebanon's economic crisis on men and women, in order to mitigate a long term dip in women's engagement in the economy.

Lebanon has one of the highest overall gender gaps in the world (ranking 139 out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap report 2020), and amongst the lowest global rates of women's labor market participation, hovering at 29% for

¹ The National Livelihoods sector is a joint UN inter-agency and government coordination body which oversees the implementation of the livelihoods sector of the LCRP.

² UN ESCWA, "At least 1.7 million jobs will be lost in the Arab region due to the coronavirus pandemic," March 18, 2020, <https://www.unescwa.org/news/least-17-million-jobs-will-be-lost-arab-region-due-coronavirus-pandemic>.

women³ and 76% for men.⁴ These gender inequalities are mimicked in refugee and migrant communities across the formal and informal labor market. According to 2019 data, Syrian refugee women are roughly 6 times less likely to be working compared to Syrian refugee men, and confront an estimated gender wage gap of 0.44.⁵ The economic crisis in Lebanon, which poses serious threats to the country and its population as a whole, will significantly challenge women's livelihoods, their engagement in the labor market and the coping mechanisms they are able to employ – which in turn affects their ability to negotiate equal treatment and protections from violence at the individual, community and state level.

In 2018, the Government of Lebanon committed to increase women's labor force participation by 5% over 5 years.⁶ Despite the major role women are playing in the COVID-19 response as frontline workers (nurses, doctors, cleaners, and domestic workers), this target is unlikely to be unmet given the current context. Early evidence suggests that women are already leaving the labor market in higher numbers than men as a result of Lebanon's economic crisis.

ISSUES FOR ATTENTION

1. Women could be the hardest hit by lay-offs and income reduction during the economic crisis in Lebanon

- Analysis from a recent assessment on the impact of the crisis on vulnerable groups⁷ in Lebanon finds that from a sample of approximately 1,987 men and women surveyed on their reason for income reduction in March 2020, 48% of women reported being laid off, compared to 40% men, and 7% of women reported wage reductions, compared to 3% of men.⁸ In the same assessment, women agreed to the statement “my household's income has decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic” at higher rates than men (69% of women v.s. 54% of men strongly agreed).
- Given the already significant discrepancies between the rates of women and men in the labor market, that women are reporting lay-offs, and income and wage reductions at higher numbers is of significant concern and could result in a prolonged dip in women's engagement in the paid economy.

2. Women may have less access to cash transfers and social assistance due to legal and social barriers

- While cash transfer and social assistance programs are designed to financially assist entire households (whether Lebanese nationals or refugees), the assistance tends to be issued to a self-defined head of household, who is usually male. This can undermine women's financial decision-making power and access to resources. Moreover, a recent study by CARE International in Lebanon shows that providing women and female-headed households with unconditional cash assistance directly can prevent and reduce sexual exploitation and abuse.⁹
- The Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) is targeting vulnerable families with 400,000LBP¹⁰, which focuses on persons with chronic diseases, families with nurses working on the COVID-19 response, families of prisoners, families of those in self-quarantine sites, which should have a positive impact on some poor working and non-working women. Per NCLW's request, the household application for assistance includes a gender lens to enable analysis of women's socio-economic vulnerabilities. MOSA has confirmed that a significant portion will support female-headed households.

3 ILO and Central Administration of Statistics, Labor Force and Household Living Conditions Survey (LFHLCS), 2018-2019, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsps/groups/public/--arabstates/--ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_732567.pdf.

4 World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2020, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf.

5 UN Women, “Addressing Gender Amongst Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” September 2019, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/10/addressing-gender-amongst-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon>.

6 Lebanon's National Action Plan on Women's Economic Empowerment.

7 Surveyed Syrian refugees and Lebanese nationals.

8 ILO, UNDP, IRC, MC, SC, DRC and OXFAM, “Rapid Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Groups in Lebanese Labour Market,” Forthcoming.

9 CARE International and the Global Women's Institute, “Empowered Aid: Reducing Risks of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Aid Distributions,” January 2020.

10 This is approximately equivalent to 267USD at the official 1.5 exchange rate, or 125USD at the informal exchange rate of 3.2, at the time of this writing.

- With greater need and reliance on social assistance and protection, there are urgent gaps that need to be examined and addressed in Lebanon's social protection system. Workers in the informal sector, especially agricultural workers and those working in family enterprises, are excluded from labor code protections and benefits under Lebanon's social security law. In addition, the social security law does not extend social security benefits to the spouses of married women workers (spouses except in cases where the husband is disabled).

3. Women's unpaid domestic and care work is increasing¹¹, but may have the potential to open up new opportunities for more equality in household responsibilities

- Women do far more domestic and care work than men in Lebanon, where just over 50% of men say that they have ever participated in domestic work, compared to close to 90% of women.¹² The lockdown measures and school closures under COVID-19 have amplified this dynamic, with women at the forefront of homeschooling, caring for the sick and the disabled, and cleaning. This makes it ever more difficult for women to look for and maintain jobs.
- Economically vulnerable households report that their household duties have increased at home since the lockdown measures of COVID-19. This was reported by 81% of Lebanese women and 64% Lebanese men surveyed; and 73% Syrian women and 64% Syrian men surveyed.¹³
- Women working in the paid care sector continue to report being underpaid and overworked. In Tripoli, some women working in nursing homes are sleeping on-site in order to protect the well-being of the elderly residents during COVID-19.¹⁴

4. Migrants – workers and domestic workers – are at greater risk for exploitation, abuse and forced labor

- There are numerous reports that the measures taken as a result of COVID-19 are exacerbating the already oppressive conditions under the Kafala system for migrants. With more employers at home because of confinement, many migrant workers' workloads and working hours are increasing significantly. Several suicides of migrants have been reported during the lockdown.
- Some migrant domestic workers report that employers are giving unrealistic instructions in cleaning tasks and without considering their health risks and without guidance on safety measures, and increasingly withholding pay or paying lower wages.¹⁵
- Some migrant domestic workers have reported being laid off by their employers, and freelance workers being unable to afford remaining in Lebanon, and those who wish to return home are unable due to airport closure.¹⁶

5. Due to potential digital gender gaps, women may be left out or left behind as the active labor market temporarily shifts online

- As much of the formal labor force transitions to remote work in the short term, with potentially mid to long term greater reliance on remote work, workers will need digital access and skills. While Lebanon specific data on this area is sparse, global research shows that women are less likely to access to internet, possess mobile phones, as well as study and work in the information and technology labor market.¹⁷ These gender gaps are often further exacerbated in the low-income countries and communities. For example, Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon, UN Women data from 2018 estimates that only 1 in 3 women have regular access to a mobile phone for their own personal use.¹⁸

11 There remains dearth of research on Lebanon's paid and unpaid care economy.

12 UN Women and Promundo, "Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMA GES) Lebanon," 2017, https://imagesmena.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/12/IMAGES_Leb_Report_Final_Web_Dec13.pdf.

13 ILO, UNDP, IRC, MC, SC, DRC and OXFAM, "Rapid Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Groups in Lebanese Labour Market," Forthcoming.

14 ACTED-UN Women livelihoods project in Tripoli.

15 ILO, "Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Lebanon," March 2020.

16 ILO field trend, May 2020.

17 OECD, "Bridging the Digital Gender Divide," 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>. Lebanon's specific research on the digital gender gaps is recommended.

18 UN Women, "Unpacking Gendered Realities in Displacement - Lebanon," 2018.

6. LGBTI persons are an increasingly economically vulnerable population in the country

- LGBTI persons confront widespread employment discrimination and economic marginalization due to their gender expression and sexual orientation,¹⁹ including sexual harassment, blackmail, and underpayment. The financial crisis and lockdown measures of COVID-19 have further worsened these pre-existing socio-economic inequalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Government of Lebanon

- Enable eligible households of Lebanese women married to foreigners to be considered for financial assistance.
- Ensure that cash assistance reaches working poor women and female-headed households; consider cash transfer to the senior female in the family. Pass legislation to criminalize sexual harassment, which will provide a safer and more gender equitable workplace.
- Guarantee that economic stimulus package targets industries and businesses which employ large numbers of women (health and education), to buffer the exit of women from the paid economy.
- Social protection mechanisms should be expanded to introduce new schemes whereby those not already registered with social security, eg informal economy workers, own-business owners, can register and access benefits. Discriminatory social protection measures should be revised.
- To the Ministry of Labor: address the most exploitative elements of the kafala system by including domestic work under the national labor law, and immediately adopting the unified contract for employment of migrant domestic workers which was recently proposed by the ILO and CSOs.

Humanitarian and Development Actors

- Ensure livelihoods and economic development programs equally target men and women, particularly in ICT programs advancing digital livelihood opportunities.
- Closely monitor and evaluate distributions of that cash, vouchers, and in-kind distributions to ensure that they reach women and girls in ways that they have decisions over their use.
- Recognize women's unpaid care work as part of Lebanon's economy, and integrate efforts to change the traditional perception of men's roles and responsibilities of domestic work.
- Include outreach to migrants in protection, basic assistance, and livelihoods interventions.
- Ensure that humanitarian and development organizations to whom aid distribution might be outsourced have strict controls for the Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA).²⁰
- Include LGBTI persons in labor market assessments and monitoring of the economic impact on vulnerable groups.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, "In Lebanon's Covid-19, Aid the Vulnerable, Including LGBT People," April 16 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/lebanons-covid-19-aid-vulnerable-including-lgbt-people>.

²⁰ FMI see: Lebanon In-Country PSEA Network, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/working-group/250?sv=4&geo=71>.

Private Sector

- Support flexible work modalities²¹ and ensure that remote work modalities during the COVID-19 emergency measures consider both parents' responsibilities for childcare and homeschooling.
- Monitor gender inequity in relation to flexible work modalities, lay-offs, and wage reductions.
- Ensure minimum medical insurance and consider the inclusion of hazard pay to the remuneration of workers in the service industry, particularly cleaning services (a majority of whom are women).
- Consider extending telework and other flexible work modalities such as compressed working daily and/or weekly hours to all working parents, even as restrictions are eased, to allow parents to continue working from home until schools and day care facilities are fully open.

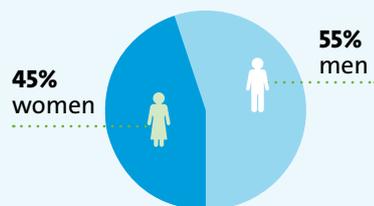
**Private sector companies seeking to enhance gender equity in the workplace are invited to become a signatory of the Women's Empowerment Principles, in partnership with UN Women and UN Global Compact.²²*

Worker's Organizations and Trade Unions

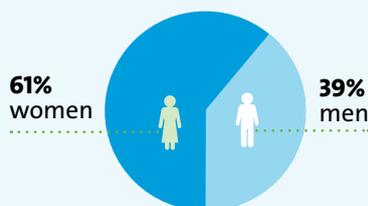
- Ensure that female and male workers, particularly in the health sector, are aware of occupational, health, and safety standards and have adequate access to proper PPEs.
- Promote knowledge of workers awareness of their rights in terms of wages and employment in times of crisis.

GENDER AND COVID-19 LEBANON – FACTS AND FIGURES²³

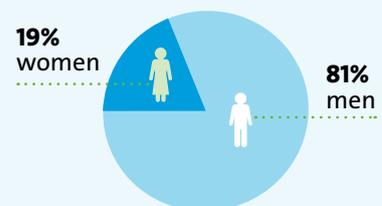
• **798** cumulative cases



• **64** health care workers infected



• **26** deaths



²¹ UN Women, "Family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19: Key steps employers can take," 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/family-friendly-policies-and-other-good-workplace-practices-in-the-context-of-covid-19>.

²² UN Women and UN Global Compact, Women's Empowerment Principles, <https://www.weeps.org/>. FMI in Lebanon contact, Frances Abouzeid: frances.abouzeid@unwomen.org.

²³ WHO and MoPH COVID-19 data, May 8, 2020.

RELATED LEBANON PUBLICATIONS AND RESOURCES:

- Abu Habib, Lina and Traboulsi, Yara, "Women's Care Burden Has to be Recognized: How Middle East & North Africa lockdown policies ignore unequal relations of power in households," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, April 29, 2020, <https://www.fes.de/themenportal-gender-jugend-senioren/gender-matters/gender-blog/beitrag-lesen/womens-care-burden-has-to-be-recognised>.
- Anti-Racism Movement, "Impact of the Economic Crisis and Corona Virus Lockdown on Migrant Workers," April 26, 2020. <https://www.armlebanon.org/content/impact-economic-crisis-and-coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers>.
- Aoun, Rana, "COVID-19 Impact on Female Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East," GBV AOR Help Desk, http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1953/covid-19-and-impact-on-vulnerable-female-migrant-domestic-workers_english.pdf.
- KAFA, "The Economic Crisis and its Impact on Women Workers," May 1, 2020, <https://www.kafa.org.lb/en/node/411>.
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- ILO, UNDP, IRC, MC, SC, DRC and OXFAM, "Rapid Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Groups in Lebanese Labor Market," May 2020. *Publication Forthcoming*
- Livelihoods Sector Brief: Support to Livelihoods of the Most Vulnerable Host Communities and Refugees During the COVID-19 Outbreak. *Publication Forthcoming*



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