

CASE STUDY

# Women Local Mediators Lead Tension Management in Food Assistance across Displacement and Recovery Settings in Lebanon

A Pilot Initiative by UN Women and WFP



**SUOMI  
FINLAND**



**World Food  
Programme**



**FOR ALL  
WOMEN  
AND GIRLS**

## Project Overview

Between April and November 2025, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the World Food Programme (WFP) partnered for an innovative pilot initiative aimed at operationalizing women-led local mediation in displacement and recovery settings in Lebanon. **A total of 13 local women mediators helped de-escalate food security-related tensions in Aley, Beirut, and South Lebanon during 14 aid and food distributions benefiting 5,663 individuals (53.4% female and 46.6% male).** Through training and field engagement, they worked alongside WFP frontline staff and implementing partners to assess and monitor tensions and lead community dialogue, ensuring food assistance was delivered in a conflict-sensitive and gender-responsive manner, directly contributing to the advancement of the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus.

## Context and Challenges

Lebanon has been emerging from a major armed conflict<sup>1</sup> which exacerbated already complex and protracted crises, compounding the impacts of economic collapse, climate vulnerability, and structural gender inequalities. Throughout the conflict, women have been at the frontline of the humanitarian response, while promoting social stability. Yet, they remained largely excluded from peace and humanitarian decision-making and coordination mechanisms.<sup>2</sup>

Repeated cycles of violence and displacement, alongside severe damages to infrastructure, natural resources, and agricultural land, have directly impacted food security. These challenges, combined with a sharp increase in population in need, cuts to humanitarian funding, and the rising cost of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB), have significantly heightened pressure on both displaced and host communities across the country. Yet, women, men, girls, and boys are affected differently by these intersecting crises. Women and girls, in particular, face heightened risks of gender-based violence, food insecurity, and loss of livelihoods, often bearing the brunt of unpaid care and subsistence work.

Intensified competition over resources, employment opportunities, and access to aid, particularly in sectors such as food security and agriculture, where services are both lifesaving and politically sensitive, creates a volatile environment in which humanitarian and stabilization interventions are being delivered.

**The Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus** is an approach aimed at reducing humanitarian needs, addressing systemic causes of conflict and vulnerability, while building community resilience and strengthening broader economic and governance systems. In protracted crises or conflict settings, the HDP Nexus aims at enhancing coordination, collaboration and coherence between humanitarian, development and peace interventions, the first step being the mainstreaming of conflict-sensitivity.

In such a context, gender-responsiveness, conflict sensitivity and 'do no harm' approaches are essential in assisting humanitarian organizations to mitigate risks of tensions over access to food and improving the quality of the response, both in humanitarian and recovery settings, ensuring women's needs are met and increasing their meaningful participation in these efforts.

1. UN welcomes ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1157521>
2. Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) Working Group (2025). [3 Priority Actions for Gender Equality in the Lebanon Humanitarian Response.](#)



Training Session for WFP Staff and Implementing Partners in Saida, April 2025.

Credit: Media Booth

## Localizing a Women-Led and Conflict-Sensitive Approach to Food Assistance

WFP in Lebanon has been critical in responding to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis, which displaced nearly 900,000 individuals at its peak (including 51% female),<sup>3</sup> by providing assistance to Syrian refugees and marginalized Lebanese with food and cash assistance, ensuring equal assistance for men and women and providing tailored support to persons with disabilities. Yet, throughout the humanitarian response and following the ceasefire announcement, WFP frontline workers identified and reported cases of local tensions erupting before, during, or after food distributions. Across locations, tension triggers among communities included scarce resources, frustration, perceived feeling of injustice, discrimination, or biased aid distribution, often fueled by misinformation, fake news, and sectarian affiliations.

Since 2020, UN Women has supported the establishment of 32 women-led groups – including 22 women-led peacebuilding and

reconciliation groups and 10 mediation groups – involving more than 400 women from different age and ability groups, geographic areas, nationalities, political affiliations, and religious backgrounds. Contributing to the advancement of the [Women, Peace and Security \(WPS\) Agenda](#), a network of more than 130 trained women mediators has been established across Lebanon, working to defuse local tensions, monitor conflict, and promote cross-community exchange.

Leveraging their respective mandates and complementary interventions, in 2025, UN Women and WFP joined forces and implemented a pilot initiative<sup>4</sup> with the aim of ensuring that men and women from displaced and host communities in Aley, Beirut, and South Lebanon safely accessed food assistance as a result of women-led mediation and peacebuilding efforts. As shared by one of the local women mediators, initiatives like this help increase the visibility and recognition of women in peacebuilding roles.

Together, and with technical support from the Professional Mediation Centre of Saint Joseph University (CPM-USJ), 37 WFP team members and implementing partners (24 women and 13 men) enhanced their capacity on gender- and conflict-sensitive distribution of aid through needs assessment workshops, feedback sessions, and 3-day trainings on “Managing Stress and De-escalating Tension Related to Field Work and Food Distribution” which covered essential skills, including self-awareness, emotional intelligence, self-care, tension management and de-escalation techniques, active listening, and non-violent communication.

According to Yollande Semaan, a local women mediator, the training:

**“Focused on creating a safe space for expression, enabling participants to identify their needs, emotions, and behaviors, and better understand their reactions and responses to conflict.”**

3. OCHA (2024). Lebanon: Flash Update #45, available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/lebanon/lebanon-flash-update-45-escalation-hostilities-lebanon-18-november-2024>.

4. This project builds on the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) existing between UN Women and WFP in Lebanon since 2023, where both agencies work together to support the development of gender-sensitive policies and programmes; establish joint programme, research, evaluations, and capacity strengthening on gender mainstreaming and conflict-sensitivity; exchange information, experiences and good practices; while elaborating shared approaches in national regional and international fora and events.



Food Distribution in Nabatieh, September 2025. Credit: Media Booth

## Transforming Theory into Impact and Results

A total of 13 local women mediators helped monitor and de-escalate food-security-related tensions during 14 food distributions benefiting a total of 5,663 affected individuals, including 3,023 women. As a result of this initiative, specific gaps and opportunities were identified in the management of tension triggers. As highlighted by Khaled Abou Haykal, a Programme Assistant for Emergency Response at WFP:

*“We have started to understand and see things differently, to listen more, and to recognize their needs, which strengthens communication between people.”*

A Tip-Sheet on Gender-Responsive and Conflict-Sensitive Food Distribution addressing these challenges was produced jointly by UN Women and WFP and was successfully disseminated to WFP’s Staff and Implementing Partners across field offices. One of the recommendations included appointing trained focal points during food distributions to monitor, identify, and report community tension cases arising from food distributions. Where possible, reported cases will be shared with the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster, the Social

Stability Sector, and the Tension Monitoring System Team at UNDP to inform quarterly Tensions Monitoring Reports. Finally, conflict de-escalation skills, gender-responsiveness, and other skillsets will be systematically integrated into induction trainings of new WFP staff and partners.

## Paving the Way to New Practices: Lessons Learned and Opportunities

Following completion of the pilot initiative, all participants reported positive perceptions of women’s role in peacebuilding, promoting social stability, and mitigating crises and emergencies. Out of the 37 participants, a total of 22 completed a post-survey with 81 per cent of them now understanding better the difference between stress and tension, and 95 per cent demonstrating familiarity with the PIN Model which aims at understanding the position, interest and needs of each person involved and contributing to effective communication – a key component of tension management. Beyond knowledge, this collaboration also successfully contributed to changes in behavior and daily work. One participant, for instance, reported how she used the concept of empathy from the emotional intelligence training to manage a tense discussion with colleagues and keep the conversation respectful and solution-focused.

Looking at behavioral changes, 91 per cent of the participants reported a change in how they handle stress and tension following

the training, while 100 per cent reported practicing at least one of the techniques acquired during the training and feeling more confident in using empathy and active listening in their daily communication. One participant shared:

*“A beneficiary was angry, so I used active listening to engage with him”.*

Moreover, 91 per cent of the participants reported feeling more comfortable engaging in difficult conversations compared to before the training and 95 per cent are now paying more attention to non-verbal communication in order to create connection and trust. These behavioral shifts demonstrate institutional progress towards more empathetic, inclusive, and locally grounded humanitarian practice, informing both WFP’s operational model and UN Women’s mediation and leadership training approach.

Building on this successful pilot initiative, the established model will be disseminated to other regions, contributing to enhancing social stability. The approach also holds potential for replication across other sectors such as shelter and health, where women-led mediation can strengthen community trust and the delivery of essential services. As reported by one of the participants:

*“I hope this training is held on a wider scale to include all workers in the humanitarian field as this strengthens communication between service providers and beneficiaries”.*

While acquired skills and tools have been particularly useful, more efforts are needed to continue applying those in practice, and future efforts should include regular refresher sessions and advanced modules on mediation and negotiation skills.

**This pilot initiative demonstrates that when women are meaningfully included in the design and delivery of humanitarian aid – especially in politically sensitive sectors like food assistance – tensions can be de-escalated, trust rebuilt, and communities empowered. As Lebanon shifts from crisis to recovery, this approach offers a model for localized, gender-responsive, and conflict-sensitive action.**



**WFP** is the world's largest humanitarian organization saving lives in emergencies and using food assistance to build a pathway to peace, stability, and prosperity for people recovering from conflict, disasters and the impact of climate change.

**UN Women** exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead UN entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviours and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

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