

# THE BEIRUT EXPLOSION: WHAT HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE NEEDS TO KNOW ON GENDER

Removing rubble-Karantina, Beirut, August 8, 2020. Photo: UN Women/Dar Al Mussawir

## August 4: Beirut Explosion

On Wednesday 4th August 2020, at 6:08pm, two explosions occurred at the Port of Beirut causing widespread casualties and material damage. As of Monday 17th of August, at least 178 have women and men have lost their lives, many are missing, and more than 6000 people are injured.<sup>1</sup> Emerging data suggests that men are overrepresented amongst the dead, likely due to the fact that they served as the majority of port workers and day laborers and migrant workers around the port area. Based on the estimates from the government, more than 300,000 people have lost their homes – with 50,000 housing units affected. The public devastation and outrage from the explosion has generated a new wave of protests across the country. On Monday, August 10th, the Cabinet resigned – remaining on as a caretaker government.

## Gender Inequality in Lebanon

The Beirut explosion is taking place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and a deep economic crisis, described by experts as the worst in Lebanon's recent history. It is also happening within a context of extreme structural gender inequalities: Lebanon falls 145 out of 153 in the global World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index and ranks 139 on women's economic participation, with the economic crisis already rolling back gains on gender equality. As an example, prior to the blast, it was estimated by UN Women that economic contraction rates would result in a 14-19% reduction in women's overall employment in Lebanon. In light of the economic impact of the explosion, this number will most likely increase.

It is critical to understand how the Beirut blast affects women, men, girls, boys, and other gender minorities to plan and implement an effective humanitarian response. In certain parts of Lebanon especially in poorer urban settings and rural areas, women are more likely to be food insecure, more likely to be unemployed, have less access to social protection, more likely to be a survivor of GBV, more likely to not have legal residence (as a refugee or migrant), and more likely to not have access to adequate shelter (as a female headed households). Taken in its totality, this makes women less resilient to shocks – they are less likely to have savings, a bank account, extensive social networks beyond their family, limited access to public spaces, and access to urgent social protection – all things critical in enabling individuals and families to respond

<sup>1</sup> Lebanon Flash Appeal, 2020. Determination of the numbers of the missing, fatalities, and injured is on-going. UN Women is conducting gender analysis of the casualties.

to disasters such as the Beirut blast. The gendered vulnerabilities of persons hit within the affected areas from Ras Beirut to Bouchriyeh, outside the capital are no exception.

An initial assessment undertaken by ACTED states that women, the elderly and people with specific needs (chronically ill, persons with disability, elderly headed households) are identified as the most in need of protection assistance across impacted locations. Women's and LGBTIQ+ service providers have also been emotionally and physical affected, from the well-being of their staff to the structural damage of their offices and community centers. Gender disaggregated data and analysis is being collected through the various assessments that are ongoing in Lebanon, with UN Women providing gender expertise to OCHA, the Lebanese Red Cross and the World Bank. As that information is generated, it will be shared and integrated into response and reconstructions plan.

In the events' aftermath, this initial gender flash report outlines immediate gendered issues observed, highlighting why gender must remain at the forefront of Beirut's humanitarian response. UN Women will continue to provide gender analysis throughout the response – paired with direct services, with a joint rapid multisectoral gender assessment forthcoming.



A man and a woman in front of the Beirut Port following the blast. Photo: UN Women/Dar Al Mussawir

## Immediate Gender Issues for Attention:

- 1. Increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence rise, including sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, with compromised accountability and justice in Beirut**
  - Collective temporary shelters or insecure shelters without doors, locks, and windows decrease privacy and protection for affected persons, especially women and girls.
  - Risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly amongst women, girls, and LGBTIQ+ persons are severe, amidst preexisting economic vulnerabilities. In 2019, a study found that for a sample of surveyed women, 23% stated that they had either experienced 'sextortion' (coerced sex in exchange for government services) or knew someone who had. The threats of exploitation and abuse are severe, especially in light of increasing economic vulnerabilities.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there has been a proliferation of new community-based aid actors, with limited accountability mechanisms for reported incidents.

2 Transparency International, Global Corruption Barometer: Middle East and North Africa, 2019.

- Law enforcement and justice mechanisms are overwhelmed by the response. The sense of lack of rule of law may provide perpetrators with a sense of impunity and limited protections by authorities.
- NGO and governmental (1745) hotlines for responding to sexual and gender-based violence remain operational; all clinical management of rape (CMR) facilities in Beirut remain functional, despite reported damage at 16 Primary Healthcare Centers.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Reduction in hospital capacity due to the blast will likely have a longer-term impact on the availability of SRH services in Beirut**

- Nurses, doctors, and mothers delivered babies during the explosions and during its immediate aftermath.<sup>4</sup>
- 50% of the hospitals in Beirut have had operational capacity affected, impacting women's access to sexual and reproductive health services.<sup>5</sup>
- Period poverty continues to increase as women and girls struggle to afford menstrual hygiene needs. Save the Children Assessment notes shortfalls in women's dignity items after the explosion and their rising costs.<sup>6</sup>

## **3. Women are on the frontline of the response, and must be engaged in the recovery leadership structures**

- Women have been responding in a myriad of ways: within the healthcare response, as nurses, doctors, emergency paramedics; within the home, as caretakers and domestic workers; and on the streets as community leaders or volunteers, social workers, engineers, and fire fighters. Groups of women and women's organizations come from Tripoli, Bekaa, Saida, and other areas to provide relief.
- Despite women's on-going work on the immediate relief work, women's representation in higher level decision-making bodies remains weak. Photos of President Macron's meetings with Lebanese politicians directly after the explosion repeatedly show him around the table with men only, an potential indication of sidelining women from recovery plans.<sup>7</sup> For example, 4% of the parliament are women,<sup>8</sup> and only 18% of the government inter-ministerial committee on COVID-19 are women.<sup>9</sup> As the Lebanese Armed Forces coordinate the disaster response under the LAF CIMIC Directorate, women's voices must be brought into this space, and women (from the LAF and otherwise) must be represented.

## **4. Women push for governmental accountability and urgent reforms in light of the explosion**

- Women affected and female activists have been at the forefront the outpouring of political activism in the aftermath, which are demand accountability and justice for the perpetrators of the port explosion, and governmental reform. Daily protests as well as peace marches and vigils have taken place in the weeks following, including within the Lebanese diaspora, often at embassies abroad.
- Female protesters were both attacked and among the 238 injured on August 8, when protesters demonstrated in Beirut, temporarily occupying 4 ministries, and the Association of Banks. Additional notable incidents include:
  - Documentation of two female protesters being attacked and shot by security forces.<sup>10</sup>

3 Reported by UNICEF, MOPH, UNFPA.

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bpkBYVgTzXw>.

5 UNFPA assessment forthcoming.

6 Rapid Needs Assessment: Beirut Blast. Lebanon Country Office, MEAL Dept. Save the Children. Accessed, Monday, August 17, 2020.

7 [https://twitter.com/j\\_zabaneh/status/1291439336181948423?s=21](https://twitter.com/j_zabaneh/status/1291439336181948423?s=21).

8 PM Paula Yaccoubian resigned; making current female representation within the Lebanese parliament, 5 out of 128.

9 UN Women, UNFPA, WHO, NCLW, IA, Gender Alert on Health, July 2020.

10 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CD07vqLj4P/>.

- Accounts of two females attacked by supporters of political parties.<sup>11</sup>
- Viral video of an elderly woman crying out to politicians: “Why did you burn Beirut? What did Beirut do to you to burn it?”<sup>12</sup>
- With many protesters calling for international stakeholders and governments to hold the Government of Lebanon and accountable for what has happened, diplomatic activism is also underway. Ambassador to Jordan Tracy Chamoun resigned from her position in protest against the corruption in Lebanon.

## 5. Significant urban displacement of LGBTIQ+ persons within the affected areas

- Achrafieh and the surrounding areas have been an important residential area for LGBTIQ+ persons, as it is recognized as one of the least homophobic and transphobic areas in Beirut, and the country, as well as in close proximity to LGBTIQ+ organizations. As hundreds of LGBTIQ+ persons have been displaced from their homes, they continue to face high levels of housing discrimination due to their gender or sexual identity, particularly transgender and non-binary persons. There remain no official LGBTIQ+ shelters in the country.

## 6. Female migrant domestic workers are more vulnerable than ever

- Many migrant domestic workers live and work in households in the affected areas. Already confronting dire circumstances and rising poverty under the exploitative Kafala system within the economic crisis, many (numbers being assessed) have been further abandoned and made homeless from their employers following the Beirut blast.<sup>13</sup>
- At least dozens of migrant workers still remain missing, and there is concern that they are not being included in the official count of affected persons and fatalities.<sup>14</sup>
- Migrant workers have had limited support from humanitarian assistance in Lebanon leading up to the explosion and migrant women’s needs must be addressed within the humanitarian response.

## Gender Action in Humanitarian Response



### Participation and Representation:

- Strengthen the leadership and meaningful representation of women, girls, LGBTIQ+ persons and excluded groups in all decision-making bodies related to emergency preparedness and response – specifically the LAF CIMIC Directorate.



### Analysis and Access:

- Promote the use and collection of sex and age disaggregated data (SADD) throughout the humanitarian response and the use of data to inform programming.
- Prevent male data biases in humanitarian household assessments which target a singular head of household by mandating enumerators to direct questions to women.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CD04JdKnHns/>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDgHO5ljDve/>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/07/africa/beirut-domestic-workers-ethiopia-intl/index.html?fbclid=iwar2g-s78bxy3gzeymyztwmzo2qq-lhsnoefbtwj1rnw5oxzdgwepyn8tjke>.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Aug-09/510066-dozens-of-migrant-workers-still-missing-others-abandoned-following-beirut-blast.ashx?fbclid=IwAR09Bwl3kdQdC-M5o3FhGosE\\_s7dPHJPx849vwp6FpcxyAn7p1CPumYO3U#Xy\\_UvXK7M-l.twitter](https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Aug-09/510066-dozens-of-migrant-workers-still-missing-others-abandoned-following-beirut-blast.ashx?fbclid=IwAR09Bwl3kdQdC-M5o3FhGosE_s7dPHJPx849vwp6FpcxyAn7p1CPumYO3U#Xy_UvXK7M-l.twitter).



#### Shelter:

- Ensure temporary shelters provide minimum standards for safe and dignified spaces for women, girls, female-headed households, people with physical disabilities and unaccompanied children, LGBTIQ+ persons, refugees, and migrants.



#### Gender Based Violence:

- Ensure that women's safe spaces, including Social Development Centers, are able to open/remain open and provide services in affected areas, ensuring risks of COVID-19 transmission are mitigated both for safety of staff and community at large; create a strategy including training of staff to carry out GBV case management and other life-saving services remotely.
- Monitor, prevent and respond to protection risks including GBV including intimate partner violence, human and sex trafficking, whilst guaranteeing that referral systems are safely utilized to facilitate GBV survivors' access to psychosocial support, safety and security, justice and legal aid and socio-economic support.
- Put measures in place to prevent and mitigate harassment, abuse or other forms of GBV towards female and male frontline workers and ensuring provision of women-friendly personal protective equipment (PPE) for female staff.



#### Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse:

- Mitigate the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by ensuring community feedback mechanisms are in place, and ensure staff are trained on PSEA and affected populations are informed of their rights and methods to report cases; particularly for new humanitarian actors and volunteer groups.
- Mandate mixed-gender field teams with both male and female front line responders always present.



#### Health and WASH:

- Ensure that SRHR and prevention and response to GBV services are deemed as essential services and protect continued access to menstrual hygiene management, sexual and reproductive health services, including for pregnant and lactating women and family planning.
- Advocate for nutritious food, particularly for pregnant and lactating women.



#### Livelihoods and Cash Assistance

- Continue recovery and resilience activities, to ensure rapid asset replenishment, such as cash for work and livelihood opportunities for women and LGBTIQ+ persons; including support to female-led businesses.



#### Funding:

- Apply [IASC Gender with Age Marker](#) into all appeals and funding mechanisms.
- Prioritize funding to national women's rights and LGBTIQ+ organizations.

In the aftermath of the crisis, UN Women is scaling up its resilience and recovery programming in Lebanon, while also strengthening its work on women's leadership and peace and security – key factors for stability in the country and the region. Read UN Women's Response Plan to the Beirut Explosion:

<https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/un-women-2020-beirut-explosion-response-plan>