



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
& CITIZENSHIP

معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

STORIES BEHIND THE HEADLINES: HOW CIVIL SOCIETY IN LEBANON SHIFTED INTO EMERGENCY MODE

September 1, 2025

American University of Beirut



Stories Behind the Headlines (SBH) is a series launched by the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship in October 2024 to document how Lebanese civil society responded to the war, mass displacement, and state paralysis.

The series captures first-hand accounts of organizations, activists, and community groups that stepped far beyond their usual mandates to meet urgent needs on the ground. It highlights how civil society created queer-safe shelters, disability-aware relief systems, menstrual equity initiatives, community kitchens, youth-led care efforts, and even pet rescue networks.

SBH seeks to archive these experiences in real time and offering insights for rethinking how emergency systems and public policy can better recognize and build on diversity and ensure that no one remains unseen.

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PREFACE

Lebanon has been at the receiving end of Israeli aggression since the start of the war in Gaza on October 8th, 2023¹. By early October 2024, a full-fledged and brutal war was declared on Lebanon². The Israeli attacks on South Lebanon, the Southern suburbs, and parts of the Bekaa resulted in a massive exodus of circa 1.2 million people³. This constitutes nearly a quarter of the country that was displaced by Israeli air and ground operations. As a result, the Lebanese authorities opened 500+ public schools⁴ to receive the internally displaced, while tens of thousands slept in parks, open spaces, sidewalks, beaches, or with strangers who became instant hosts.

Meanwhile, the number of casualties skyrocketed with Lebanese officials citing 1,900 killed and 9,000 wounded by October 4, 2024⁵. A few weeks later, the government reported 2600 dead and many more wounded⁶. By mid-November, various sources were already tracking hundreds of thousands of people still living in internal displacement without access to basic needs or protection⁷.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese government activated plans and reached out to partners and donors. Aid-laden planes arrived from countries within and beyond the region, but the support to those in need was abysmally insufficient⁸.

This was the context for Stories Behind the Headlines (SBH)⁹, a series by the Asfari Institute, conceived and curated in real time to document what active citizenship looks like when government institutions stall and citizens refuse to wait. Launched on October 4, 2024, SBH traces how civil society organisations, ad hoc initiatives, student and youth groups, as well as the American University of Beirut, stepped up beyond their mandate to shelter, feed, map, triage, and serve with dignity people who suddenly became internally displaced in their own country.

The stories show three things that matter.

FIRST, CIVIL SOCIETY STEPPED OUTSIDE ITS COMFORT ZONE

Helem, historically an LGBTQIA+ rights organization, set up private shelters for queer people who faced harassment in collective centers, offering medication, hygiene supplies, and a safer door to knock on, because vulnerability is not one-size-fits-all.

At AUBMC, clinicians and students from multiple faculties mobilized an ad hoc primary-care circuit across seven Ras Beirut shelters, moving from diabetes education to pediatric vaccination to Saturday OB-GYN consults, to care for women during menopause, because acute conflict does not suspend chronic illness.

Nation Station revived communal kitchens as a method of relief and dignity, as cooks and activists experimented with modular school kitchens capable of 500 meals/day and even circular composting to keep value in communities.

Animals Lebanon pivoted from wildlife relocation to emergency pet rescue, 420+ pets saved and 3,800 kg of food delivered, because care ecosystems include the non-human, too.

SECOND, THE WORK TARGETED THE “INVISIBLE” AND THE MOST VULNERABLE

The Deaf Aid initiative mapped and served 200+ Deaf families scattered from Beirut to Akkar to Zgharta, confronting the obvious yet ignored, as displacement severs not only housing but also interpreters, devices, and access to information.

Mousawat in North Lebanon re-organized shelters across 50 sites for circa 4,800 people, with specific provisions for women's privacy and menstrual needs, thus turning classrooms into temporary safe homes.

¹ Al-Shamahi et al. (2023, October 8). [Israel-Hamas war updates: Death toll rises as Israeli jets pound Gaza](#). Al Jazeera.

² Al Jazeera. (2024, October 4). [Israel Rocks Beirut with huge attack and cuts off Main Lebanon-syria road](#). Al Jazeera.

³ Fawaz, M. (2024, October 11). [On the ground with Lebanon's displaced population](#). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁴ Stezycki, K., & Alkousaa, R. (2024, November 12). [Lebanon's public schools reopen amid war and displacement](#). Reuters.

⁵ Rabinovitch, A., & Gebeily, M. (2024, October 3). [Israel says eight soldiers killed in clashes with Hezbollah in Lebanon](#). Reuters.

⁶ Naharnet. (2024, November 7). [Lebanon death toll tops 2,600 since Israel intensified strikes](#).

⁷ UNRWA. (2024, November 7). [UNRWA situation report #12 on the Lebanon emergency response](#).

⁸ Al Jazeera. (2024, October 17). [How is Lebanon's cash-strapped government responding to war?](#)

⁹ The Asfari Institute for Civil Society & Citizenship. (2024). [Stories Behind the Headlines](#).

WingWoman Lebanon took on period poverty through reusable pads, thus supporting tens of thousands of women whose periods do not stop because they have been forcibly displaced.

Beyti turned a youth hostel into a protection space, combining food parcels with psychosocial support for those who arrive after a long and uncomfortable journey carrying trauma, fear, and uncertainty.

Migrant domestic workers who are already excluded and oppressed by the kafala system in Lebanon mobilised to and improvised community support schemes.

THIRD, CREATIVITY AND ORIGINALITY

As needs multiplied, volunteers built a wartime classroom so that children continued to be motivated to learn. Souk el Tayeb designed farmer-relocation micro-grants so that agriculture could continue.

MMKN re-tooled its education programs for displaced learners, adding psychosocial scaffolding where the public actor offered crowded halls that were often unsafe. AUB students formed their “Kulluna lil-Watan” initiative to coordinate donations, triage, and caregiving while sitting their midterms.

The stories we share are living proof of the power of active citizenship and the importance of a robust and responsible civic space. Civil society stepped up to address, with very few resources, major problems it did not cause, and moved way ahead of any formal coordination. We do not seek to romanticise these initiatives. Rather, we seek to document and archive what happened in real time while meeting our mandate to bridge academia and activism.

What we noted through data, testimonials, and recording observations was the way in which civil society actors were able to frame and implement queer-safe shelters, disability-aware relief, menstrual equity, pet reunification, farmer recovery, shelter-side clinics, youth-led joy, and communal food. Taken together, these initiatives argue for emergency systems that recognize diversity as design logic.

We invite you to read these accounts as field notes and observations on how a community based on care, inclusivity, and diversity might look like, and what learning can be extrapolated for public policy setting processes.

The Asfari Institute is indebted to the generosity of the engaged activists who spoke to us during very difficult and stressful times. The information and data they shared are invaluable. I am grateful to the thoughtful work carried out by the writers of these stories, namely Tala Nassif, Charbel Chaya, and Sarah Al Bouery, and to the coordinator of this extraordinary project, Carla Akil.

Lina Abou-Habib

Director

Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship

American University of Beirut

September 1, 2025

SHELTERED IN SILENCE: HELEM'S RESPONSE TO THE ONGOING WAR'S IMPACT ON THE QUEER COMMUNITY IN LEBANON

As the war in Lebanon intensifies, Israel's daily strikes have caused the deaths of over one thousand people¹⁰ and displaced nearly one million people¹¹. Behind these huge numbers and atrocious statistics are personal stories, struggles, and individuals whose lives are shattered today. Amid the chaos, we often forget that among war victims are some of Lebanon's most vulnerable populations, including queer individuals, domestic workers, refugees, and others who often find themselves marginalized and forgotten.

HELEM'S MISSION IN CRISES

Doumit Azzi Draiby, Communications Coordinator at [Helem](#)—the first LGBTQIA+ rights organization in the Arab world, founded in Beirut in 2000—speaks to the experiences of those made invisible during the war, particularly queer people. Helem, with its mission to lead the struggle for the liberation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Lebanon and the SWANA region, has been, since the start of the Israeli escalation, at the forefront of providing relief to the community.

"Everything started in early September," Doumit shares, "with the first phone call we received from a group of trans women amid the escalation of Israeli airstrikes." This led Helem to immediately organize relief efforts based on early indicators they were able to identify: Even before the war, especially since Lebanon's economic crisis began, queer individuals have faced increased marginalization in the public sphere. "During crises", Azzi Draiby explains, "this marginalization intensifies, particularly for transgender individuals, who often cannot hide their gender identity and become more vulnerable to all forms of violence."

PRIVATE SHELTERS: PROTECTING QUEER INDIVIDUALS FROM VIOLENCE

Recognizing the risks queer individuals face in shared shelters—where they might encounter violence, persecution, or simply feel unwelcome—Helem rushed to establish [private shelters](#) for those who reached out via [their helpline](#), operating from early morning until midnight. Beyond offering safe spaces, Helem is also providing medication, hygiene products, and essential food supplies. Helem hopes it can soon extend mental health support to queer individuals affected by the conflict. To support these efforts, Helem called for volunteers to assist in the relief operations. Tens have joined this call so far.

However, it is important to note that many queer individuals, both Lebanese and foreign residents, struggling to find shelter, remain out of Helem's reach, especially as the Lebanese government has not included Helem in its emergency response plans. This absence of official cooperation leaves no formal mechanism to direct vulnerable queer individuals to Helem.

A LONG ROAD AHEAD: NO QUICK RECOVERY FOR LEBANON'S QUEER COMMUNITY

As the war continues, Doumit highlights that the challenges facing the LGBTQIA+ community are far from over. Even after the end of the war, many will likely lose their jobs and struggle to pay rent. "Most of the community," Azzi Draiby explains, "are daily workers, and with the ongoing war, they are losing their source of income." With rents likely to rise, the situation will become even more difficult for those already living on the margins.

Despite these overwhelming challenges, Helem remains on the front lines helping tens of queer displaced individuals, but as Doumit notes, "the road to recovery will be long and full of new obstacles for Lebanon's queer community."

¹⁰ L'Orient Today. (2024, September 28). [Over 1,000 killed, 6,000 injured in 10 days in Lebanon.](#)

¹¹ Johnson, D. (2024, September 30). [Lebanon crisis: Over one million people flee strikes amid invasion fears.](#)

REFLECTIONS

The road to recovery will not be easy. It is evident that as Lebanon continues to fall into crisis, priorities become more pronounced, suppressing the voices of marginalized groups. The reality is that, in the coming period, the war will take precedence over all other issues, silencing the queer community alongside other marginalized groups. We will find ourselves in a time when “no voice should rise above that of the battle.”

However, it remains important for us in civil society and among activists to make this our battle for all voices to matter, especially those who suffer in silence. Defending these initiatives and highlighting the struggles of vulnerable groups through an intersectional approach is our responsibility and will always be our response to systemic oppression.

Charbel Chaaya

October 7, 2024

HOPE AMID THE RUBBLE: AUB'S NEIGHBORHOOD INITIATIVE AIDS DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

As crisis unfolds, glimpses of hope and resilience emerge from under the rubble.

In response to the escalating situation in the country, the American University of Beirut's (AUB) ['Neighborhood Initiative'](#) has stepped up, providing essential assistance to displaced individuals from all over the country.

NEIGHBORHOOD INITIATIVE'S RELIEF RESPONSE

In a recent interview, [Mona El Hallak](#), director of the Neighborhood Initiative, detailed the community's efforts over the past weeks. *"We have managed to fully support the needs in two public schools designated as centers for internally displaced persons (IDPs), by supplying them with hygiene kits, warm meals, mattresses, pillows, and medical assistance,"* she said.

Ten days into the crisis, the initiative has successfully supported 560 individuals in one public school, and 280 in another, while extending limited assistance to over 1,200 people in various centers and buildings.

"Our success is rooted in the strategic partnerships we've cultivated over the years, which are proving invaluable now," El Hallak noted. Collaborating with NGOs, supermarket chains, and university students, the community's relief efforts are succeeding in making sure IDPs are well catered for.

Through [PROCOL Lebanon](#), the Neighborhood Initiative has established a long-term partnership with the [Institute of Global Prosperity](#) (IGP) at University College London (UCL) and participates in its' Citizen Scientists Academy. This collaboration focuses on community-based training, empowering communities to advocate for social change and influence policies that impact their livelihoods from within. In that lens, the Neighborhood Initiative has made it a point to empower members of displaced communities by involving them in the relief process.

'Some members have been recruited to help coordinate and distribute donations, fostering self-sufficiency and resilience among those affected,' El Hallak mentioned.

Given the urgency around the displacement crisis, the Neighborhood Initiative and its partners have also created an on-site pharmacy, gathering medical supplies and medications to provide urgent care, particularly for those with chronic illnesses who have been displaced.

MAINTAINING AN ECO- CONSCIOUS APPROACH DESPITE THE URGENCY

An eco-conscious approach is integral to their work – El Hallak emphasized, *"We try to operate on a zero-waste principle, minimizing single-use plastics. Displaced individuals are provided with multi-use cutlery and plates to reduce waste resulting from food packaging. All water bottles in the Ras Beirut Public School are being collected for recycling by volunteers from the displaced community staying there."* This commitment not only addresses immediate humanitarian needs but also promotes sustainable practices, which are at the core of the initiative.

Furthermore, in response to the situation, the ['EcoHub'](#)—a community space founded by ['Ahla Fawda'](#) in collaboration with the Neighborhood Initiative—has been transformed into a humanitarian center. This eco-friendly space, which promotes environmentally responsible practices, now serves as a key logistics hub for the humanitarian relief operations in Hamra.

In the EcoHub, the ['Eco Dekkene'](#), a community store where residents can exchange plastics for vouchers, has been mobilized to support displaced individuals. People can retrieve essential items from the store, including clothing, hygiene products, and non-perishable foods, all while participating in recycling efforts by bringing back refillable bottles and containers – though participation remains voluntary.

As the crisis continues, AUB's Neighborhood Initiative stands as a beacon of hope, demonstrating the power of community solidarity and innovative thinking in the face of adversity. Through collaboration, empowerment, and sustainability, the initiative not only addresses immediate needs but also lays the groundwork for a resilient future.

Tala Nassif

ENTANGLED IN CRISES: THE PLIGHT OF LEBANON'S MIGRANT DOMESTIC WORKERS

Lebanon is home to more than 250,000 migrant domestic workers from African and Asian descent working in private households and businesses¹². In the 1970s, Lebanon saw an influx of migrant domestic workers from Africa and Asia. Over time, a system of exploitation was established¹³, specifically targeting individuals from economically disadvantaged regions, who were recruited to fulfill domestic care needs.

LOCKED IN THE SPONSORSHIP TRAP

Migrant domestic workers' labor in Lebanon is not governed by the Lebanese Labour Law¹⁴. Instead, it is regulated by the Kafala sponsorship system. Described as "modern-day slavery," this system ties the legal status of migrant workers to their employers, meaning their residency is dependent on their employment relationship.

This gives employers significant control over the workers' lives, allowing them to confiscate passports, restrict movement, and deny basic rights like days off, fair wages, and adequate living conditions. The sponsorship system leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and forced labor, with little to no legal recourse.

In September 2020, caretaker Minister of Labor Lamia Yammine proposed a new labor contract for migrant domestic workers, which aimed to give them more rights and better working conditions, such as the ability to quit their job without losing legal residency. However, the proposal faced significant pushback from employers, recruitment agencies, and Lebanon's Shura Council, the country's top administrative court¹⁵.

CRISIS-HEIGHTENED ABUSE

Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon have long been trapped in a cycle of neglect and abuse, a situation that has been exacerbated by successive crises.

In the wake of the October 17, 2019, Revolution in Beirut, many migrant domestic workers were dumped on the streets or in front of their embassies by employers, left with nothing but a few belongings and little to no money. The devaluation of the Lebanese currency reduced their already meager salaries, often paid in local currency. Many of these workers were never compensated for years of unpaid care labor, plunging them into even greater financial hardship.

The COVID-19 pandemic only added to their isolation. Workers were forced to live in overcrowded spaces, unvaccinated, and with minimal access to healthcare, and lockdowns left them quarantined in homes where they faced increasing violence and exploitation at the hands of their employers.

The August 4, 2020, Beirut Port explosion also displaced migrant workers along with Lebanese citizens. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), around 24,500 migrant workers were directly impacted by the blast, losing their jobs, homes, or sources of income¹⁶. Their needs were deprioritized in relief efforts, a reflection of the racist attitudes and neglect they frequently experience.

ISRAELI ATTACKS LEAVE MIGRANT WORKERS HOMELESS AND ABANDONED, AGAIN

Ten days into the escalating Israeli war on Lebanon since September 23, 2024, more than one million residents fled their homes in South Lebanon, the Beqaa region, and the capital city of Beirut and its southern suburbs, seeking refuge from the relentless Israeli carpet bombings.

¹² Amnesty International. (2019, April 24). [We want justice for migrant domestic workers in Lebanon](#).

¹³ Rak, P. (2020, December 21). [Modern Day Slavery: The Kafala system in Lebanon](#).

¹⁴ Ministry of Labour (Lebanon). (1946). [Labour Law: Law No. 32 of 1946 \[PDF\]](#). United Nations ESCWA SME Digital Enabling Portal.

¹⁵ Majzoub, A. (2020, July 27). [Lebanon: Abolish Kafala \(sponsorship\) system](#). Human Rights Watch.

¹⁶ International Organization for Migration. (2020, October 16). [Well-being and security of migrant workers in Lebanon deteriorate since Beirut blast](#).

Many families, described by some migrant workers as “very strict,” abandoned their homes, but left behind their migrant domestic workers without legal documents, leaving them to face the danger on their own¹⁷. Hundreds of migrant workers, mostly from Kenya, the Philippines, and Ethiopia, fled their employers’ homes amid airstrikes, gathering in Martyr’s Square in downtown Beirut, with nowhere else to go. Most of these workers had their passports confiscated by their employers, preventing them from leaving the country.

To make matters worse, their respective embassies have been largely unresponsive, failing to mobilize the necessary support for their repatriation. On October 1st, 2024, many of these workers returned to Beirut after being denied shelter and housing in relatively safer areas. The municipality of Tripoli evicted migrant workers from shelters “because they are not Lebanese”¹⁸. With no access to travel documents, they are left to navigate this situation alone, an all-too-familiar scenario over the past five years.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND RELIEF EFFORTS

Amid the absence of government support, community mobilization has become crucial in supporting displaced populations, particularly vulnerable groups like migrant domestic workers. Grassroots organizations such as the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon and community leaders like Eгна Legna and the Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon have stepped in to fill the void, organizing mutual aid efforts and raising funds to support migrant workers in the face of these overlapping disasters¹⁹.

These initiatives aim to provide immediate relief, such as food, shelter, and medical assistance, but also to bring attention to the longer-term systemic injustices migrant workers endure. Given the Lebanese government’s repeated absence and neglect during crises, it is no surprise that once again, community and grassroots mobilization have become the only lifeline for migrant workers, as they face yet another dire situation. This pattern of neglect has left collective action as the sole means of survival²⁰.

Despite the increasing crackdown on civic space that Lebanon has been witnessing, civil society organizations,

activists, and grassroots community groups continue to find ways to meet the urgent needs of displaced populations. In the face of shrinking freedoms, these actors are stepping up where the state has failed, organizing relief efforts, providing essential services, and leading advocacy efforts for displaced communities. Mobilizing under restrictive conditions only highlights their determination and the critical role they play in addressing the humanitarian crises that disproportionately impact the most marginalized.

INTERSECTING OPPRESSIONS: GENDER, LABOR, AND CRISES

According to UN Women, “women make up an estimated 76 per cent of all migrant workers and 99 per cent of migrant domestic workers who come to Lebanon for employment”²¹. The reality that the overwhelming majority of migrant domestic workers are women compounds their vulnerability. These women face not only the exploitation inherent in oppressive labor systems like kafala but also the weight of gender-based discrimination, which deepens their marginalization. Their struggles are shaped by the intersection of multiple barriers: patriarchy, racism, and economic exploitation. This creates a web of oppression that heightens their exposure to abuse, injustice, and precarious living conditions.

It remains disheartening to witness vulnerable groups, especially migrant domestic workers, continue to bear the brunt of Lebanon’s ongoing crises, disproportionately affected and further marginalized in times of conflict and humanitarian aid. The recurring neglect of these communities emphasizes the urgent need for systemic change, not just in addressing the immediate fallout from these crises, but in dismantling the structures that have perpetuated their exploitation for years.

While grassroots mobilization continues to offer a crucial lifeline, it is undeniable that lasting change requires deep institutional reforms that not only recognize but actively safeguard the rights of all workers, especially those who find themselves at the intersection of gender, migration, and labor exploitation.

Sarah Al Bouery

¹⁷ Edwards, M., & Sousa, J. (2024, September 26). [Lebanon’s migrant workers left stranded and homeless by Israeli attacks](#). The New Humanitarian.

¹⁸ Anti-Racism Movement. (2024, January 17). [Situation brief and forecasted needs of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon](#).

¹⁹ Shukr, R. (2023, December 13). [Historicizing migrant domestic workers’ community organizing and class struggle in Lebanon](#).

²⁰ Hassan, T., & Shukr, R. (2019). [Migrant domestic workers’ community organizing within the Lebanese sociolegal context: A feminist participatory action research](#). Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women.

²¹ UN Women, International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), and Arab Institute for Women (AiW). (2021). [Migrant workers’ rights and women’s rights – Women migrant domestic workers in Lebanon: A gender perspective](#).

JUSTICE FOR DISABLED COMMUNITIES: HALTEK'S RESPONSE TO WAR

"More than ever, we have realized over the past years that all vulnerable groups face the same issues and struggles, but they are affected differently. Therefore, an intersectional response to these challenges must take place," shares Amal Charif, founder and managing director of [HalTek](#), an advocacy and awareness association working for disability justice. I spoke with Charif for the ["Stories Behind the Headlines"](#) series, as it aims at highlighting initiatives that support vulnerable groups during the ongoing war in Lebanon.

HalTek, which Charif leads, is a grassroots organization formed by and focusing on persons with disabilities, specifically women. Over the past few years, it has provided support and training for women with disabilities, whom Charif describes as *"the most vulnerable among the whole disabled community."*

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON THE DISABLED COMMUNITY

When asked how the war has impacted the disabled community, Charif explains that even prior to the 2019 economic crisis, unemployment was high amongst the community.

"Those who had a job were usually individuals with mobility impairments, as others faced even greater marginalization", she adds, thus hinting at the multi-layered complexities that folks with disability face. Furthermore, essential items like wheelchairs, which organizations used to provide occasionally to initiatives like HalTek, are now either no longer distributed or, when they are, of poor quality.

With the current war, the situation has deteriorated for the community. Charif predicts that the number of people with disabilities will rise and reach over 3000, especially after Israel's latest pager attacks²², which led to many permanent injuries, with some people losing limbs and becoming disabled.

RECONNECTING WITH THE COMMUNITY: HALTEK'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

In response to these difficult circumstances, HalTek is preparing to launch, in the coming weeks, an initiative to reconnect with the people they had been in contact with before the war, and with whom they lost touch due to the conflict. This includes approximately 80 people, mostly women. *"We will not be supporting all members of our community the same way,"* Charif says. *"What is most important is that they communicate to us their particular needs,"* highlighting how some NGOs dehumanize and disrespect people with disabilities in the way they treat them.

"We might also launch crowdfunding campaigns to support our community," she adds. To do so, HalTek plans to call for volunteers and partner with other associations working on similar issues in different cities.

POST-WAR CONCERNS: WILL VULNERABLE GROUPS BE FINALLY HEARD, AND WILL JUSTICE MATERIALISE?

Finally, reflecting on what could happen after the war, Charif fears that history will repeat itself and justice will not be served. She is concerned that the government, which has failed to create an efficient emergency plan, will not be held accountable and that all vulnerable communities will be in a more difficult situation than ever. *"The priority is to have vulnerable groups sitting on the tables where decisions are made and be part of any justice process after this war",* she tells me, *"We have been marginalized for long... I think for once, it is high time for us to be a priority".*

²² OHCHR. (2024, September 19). [Exploding pagers and radios: A terrifying violation of international law, say UN Experts.](#)

REFLECTIONS

As I continue to interview inspiring individuals working on initiatives to support their marginalized communities, I find myself thinking about what justice should look like once this war ends. How will those who have been affected live again? How will they heal? What constitutes transitional justice for them? Can we talk about justice if they are not part of it? We need to consider these questions. Through these articles and stories, the Asfari Institute aims to document the struggles faced by “invisible” groups in order to respond to some of the questions raised.

Charbel Chaaya

HEALTHCARE CHALLENGES IN CONFLICT: A FOCUS ON MATERNAL CARE AND SRHR

During times of war, the health sector undeniably faces significant challenges.

Interruptions in care, overwhelmed emergency services, and targeted violence against medical facilities create an environment where healthcare takes the backseat. In this interview, [Dr. Faysal El Kak](#) emphasizes how, during conflicts, the health needs of individuals often become secondary to immediate survival.

‘It’s always a given that under conflict, war, and natural disasters, the health sector is seriously affected. Unfortunately, healthcare goes down the priority list during a crisis.’ – outlined Dr. El Kak.

IMPACT ON MATERNAL CARE AND PREGNANCY

Among the most affected areas of healthcare during crises is maternal care, given the delicate nature of pregnancy, which makes it particularly vulnerable to the disruptions of conflict.

Dr. El Kak noted a concerning trend in the past three weeks: women are increasingly unable to attend clinic appointments due to safety issues.

To adapt, healthcare providers have turned to telehealth solutions, similar to what was done during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We use WhatsApp and other online tools to offer care, which isn’t ideal,” Dr. El Kak explains. *“When urgent needs arise, we strive to relocate patients or connect them with nearby facilities.”*

The psychological toll of conflict cannot be overlooked – in fact, the stress and anxiety experienced by expectant mothers can lead to mental health issues, which pose additional risks to both mother and child.

For couples seeking to conceive, the situation can be even more challenging. Many have had to pause IVF cycles, halting medications and putting their dreams of parenthood on hold. Some even find themselves navigating the complexities of shipping frozen embryos abroad.

SRHR: A PRESSING CONCERN

Similar to maternal health, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) often become marginalized during crises.

“In times of conflict, issues related to SRHR, including maternal care and access to contraceptives, are typically the first to suffer,” Dr. El Kak notes.

Recognizing this urgent need, Dr. El Kak, the [Faculty of Health Sciences](#), and the [Faculty of Medicine](#) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) have mobilized to raise awareness around SRHR. By training 520 social workers and frontline responders, they aim to empower these individuals to address the needs of displaced communities effectively.

“There is a common misconception that SRHR is not important because it doesn’t have direct physical health impacts that can directly lead to death,” Dr. El Kak mentioned – *‘However, in this context, SRHR awareness covers issues such as bleeding during pregnancy, ectopic pregnancies, infections, and so on, which can all be direct repercussions of lack of awareness.’*

These training sessions cover crucial topics such as family planning and maternal health, equipping participants to identify vulnerabilities and promote health within their communities. The program emphasizes a comprehensive approach, integrating mental health practices and utilizing engaging methods to reach a broader audience.

LOOKING AHEAD

Following the escalation we have witnessed in recent weeks, it’s clear that certain health issues will be prioritized while others may be overlooked.

“The response has been chaotic and unorganized due to the overwhelming scale of the crisis,” Dr. El Kak observes. With one-fifth of the Lebanese population displaced, effective planning becomes increasingly challenging.

The current government’s inability to address these urgent needs raises questions about the future of healthcare in times of crisis – a seemingly recurring topic over the last five years. Without a stable, democratically elected government, sustainable solutions to providing essential needs in health are impossible to foster.

Tala Nassif

‘DEVELOPMENTAL ACTION TO ALL PEOPLE – MOUSAWAT’ RESPONDING DIVERSE NEEDS IN IDPS CENTERS IN NORTH LEBANON

With the urgent demand for accommodation for 1.2 million displaced people, ‘[Mousawat](#)’ has taken the lead in providing shelter and food portions, training, as well as psychological support for a growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the North.

‘Mousawat’ is an NGO that operates in the north of the country, working mostly in the Baddawi, Tripoli, Akkar, and Danniyeh areas, providing aid to IDPs, including Lebanese Palestinians and Syrians.

‘14 days ago, our needs have more than doubled. For example, each school previously hosted six or seven families, but now four to five families are crammed in one single classroom, adding to 300 to 400 individuals in each school’ says [Mohammad Younes](#), the organization’s director. So far, ‘Mousawat’ is supporting around 4,800 individuals across 50 shelters and informal settlements in the North.

A GROWING NEED TO CATER TO WOMEN’S NEEDS

Over the past month, ‘Mousawat’ has given special attention to women’s needs in these exceptional conditions and focused on distributing tens of hygiene kits, including shampoos, soap, and menstrual pads.

‘Women clearly need more privacy than they currently have. The rooms are overcrowded, denying them the space to remove veils, relax, attend to their bodily needs and hygiene in peace, without feeling rushed or embarrassed,’

says Younes.

In addition, ‘Mousawat’ continues to offer its usual training programs and work on disseminating information within Palestinian refugee camps in North Lebanon, which include topics such as Sexual and Reproductive Health, Gender Equality, and Peacebuilding.

To ensure women are heard, ‘Mousawat’ has offered support by using their hotline, available 24/7, where women can report any incident (hotline number 81-434224). Women can report incidents anonymously, and for those who prefer, an online complaint submission through the ‘[Ishtaki Application](#)’ is also available.

COMMUNAL COOKING – AN EXPONENTIAL DEMAND

Prior to the crisis, ‘Mousawat’ prepared hot meals in their communal kitchen located in Nahr El Bared Palestinian refugee camp in North Lebanon. Today, they cook and serve warm lunches for 800 individuals.

With the support of UNRWA in supplying ingredients, the ‘Mousawat’ kitchen is fully operational to cater to the growing need for warm meals for IDPs. Nevertheless, the demand continues to grow with new challenges arising every day.

‘We need to be able to cater for breakfast and dinner as well, while improving food quality and nutritional intake. At this rate, our pots and pans are not large enough to cook for such high numbers of people.’

Support in the form of cooking equipment is urgently required to sustain this initiative.

THE NEED FOR A YOUTH CENTER

Younes and his colleagues are working on setting up a youth center to allow children and young adults from IDPs to have a sense of normal community life.

‘The idea is to create a space where young refugees and IDPs can relax, access the internet, do sports, cultural activities, and take classes, to install a sense of normality for people who have lost everything,’

Younes mentions.

‘Mousawat’ is trying to secure the necessary support for this project to materialize, namely in the form of basic furnishing and internet connectivity. This initiative will turn this space into a safe haven for women and youth to engage in activities they like during these harsh times.

COMMUNITY IMPACT AND VOLUNTEER EFFORTS

‘Volunteers are the core of our operation, working 24/7, and everyone is offering a helping hand. They are the heartbeat of our initiative. Their commitment fosters a genuine sense of community and reminds us that there is still goodness in the world,

Younes reflects.

Currently, there are no government-led initiatives to take care of the growing needs in the areas where Mousawat operates. However, the communal response has been extraordinary, with all initiatives driven by people eager to make a difference. With 30 volunteers during normal days, the numbers have now tripled, with more and more people joining. This is increasing the need and necessity of training and building the capacities of the new volunteers.

Tala Nassif

“KULLUNA LIL-WATAN” INITIATIVE: STUDENTS UNITE FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE

In a remarkable show of solidarity, several student societies from the [American University of Beirut \(AUB\)](#) have come together to launch a humanitarian initiative called [Kulluna Lil-Watan](#). These societies include the Faculty of Health Sciences Student Society, the Engineering Student Society, the Biology Student Society, the Chemistry Student Society, and the Pre-Medical Student Society. Their goal is to collect donations to buy medications, food, blankets, mattresses, and clothing to help displaced people in need or to gather direct in-kind donations.

With the support of the AUB's [Medical Humanism Fund](#), the students were able to link donations directly to a bank account, ensuring greater transparency and efficiency in managing the funds.

CENTRALIZING EFFORTS FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

I had the chance to speak with Reine Abdo, a biology junior and pre-medical student, and one of the main organizers of this initiative: *“It all started when students and friends from different AUB initiatives met while trying to help displaced people. We wanted to join forces, centralize our efforts, and take advantage of the connections we had, as well as the lists of shelters and people in need we had already compiled”*, Abdo shared with me, reflecting on how the [Kulluna lil-Watan](#) initiative began.

Currently, around twenty students are leading the project, but Abdo is confident that the pool will grow and attract a larger number of volunteer students in the coming days.

DISPLACED STUDENTS HELPING DISPLACED PEOPLE

One of the most remarkable aspects of [Kulluna lil-Watan](#) is the involvement of displaced AUB students themselves. Many of them are actively participating in gathering donations and needed supplies for other displaced

individuals. This proves how vulnerable groups, or those directly affected by displacement, are stepping up to create initiatives to support others in similar situations.

Abdo also mentioned that students are helping in the areas where they have been displaced, allowing the initiative to extend beyond Beirut and into various villages. The presence of displaced students in these areas simplifies the distribution process, ensuring that donations quickly reach those in need.

BALANCING STUDIES AND RELIEF EFFORTS

As the conversation came to an end, I found myself wondering how students, who are already experiencing displacement or are otherwise affected, are managing to find the time, bandwidth, and energy to organize and assist others in need. Furthermore, how are they balancing their studies, given that students are one of the groups most affected by the ongoing war, with their education at risk?

Abdo explained that many students are struggling to stay productive under these circumstances. Fortunately, with most courses now being held online, the situation is a bit better than it was, for example, during COVID: *“The hybrid mode that was used back then was a difficult experience for many students,”* Abdo shared. *“Today, the context is different. Students are displaced or outside of Lebanon, and university classes cannot keep getting postponed.”*

REFLECTIONS

It's fascinating how the most vulnerable groups are the ones stepping up to take initiative, especially in the absence of an efficient and responsive government capable of coming up with an emergency relief plan. The more I speak to these frontliners, the more I realize that this instinctive solidarity is not just about providing aid — it is also a necessary response for society. It helps communities feel alive, effective, and perhaps offers a way to cope with the collective trauma society is experiencing.

But this is also a dilemma. One must be careful not to romanticize students, people with disabilities, migrant workers, and queer individuals who are organizing themselves. While the [Stories Behind the Headlines](#) initiative's purpose is to document and visibilize these efforts, our aim is to advocate for state accountability and transitional justice.

Charbel Chaaya

COOKING FOR A CAUSE: NATION STATION'S GRASSROOTS RELIEF EFFORTS FOR THE DISPLACED IN LEBANON

With the war raging now in Lebanon alongside an economic collapse and a displacement crisis, communal cooking emerges as a powerful tool for healing, solidarity, and support. In this interview, [Meheiddine Al Jawhary](#), a talented chef specializing in Middle Eastern cuisine, shares his journey of using food to provide relief and kindness to those affected by war.

Al Jawhary has been supporting [Nation Station](#), a grassroots organization born from the devastation of the August 4th explosion. Over the past three weeks, Al Jawhary has dedicated his skills to supporting displaced communities in need. *"Once I heard about the huge number of people affected, I immediately went to our headquarters to start cooking,"* he recalls. Today, over 300 volunteers are working tirelessly across seven kitchens to prepare warm meals for those in need.

'The response from the community has been nothing short of overwhelming.' Al Jawhary says. Nation Station's volunteers come together to cook, package, and deliver meals, as well as handle cleaning and hygiene duties. *"It is a collective effort that showcases the resilience and strength of our community,"* he explains.

Several restaurants along the Geitawi-Mar Mikhael line have also opened their kitchens to support Nation Station's initiative. *"These restaurants are operating at a loss, with their own kitchen staff helping us prepare meals every day for displaced individuals,"* Al Jawhary notes. The scale of this operation is impressive, with approximately 3,400 warm meals emerging from the Nation Station central kitchen daily. When combined with contributions from the coalition restaurants, that number expands to an astounding 8,000 to 9,000 meals per day.

A CRISIS COMPARABLE TO ANOTHER

When comparing the current relief efforts to those following the August 4th explosion, Al Jawhary observes, *"The scale is much larger. After the explosion, things returned to normal much quicker. The blast was centralized and time-bound, but this crisis is on a national level and continues to unfold."*

Despite the incredible efforts, Al Jawhary acknowledges the challenges they face. *"We are doing band-aid work,"* he admits. *"We are not equipped to respond to a crisis of this magnitude. Without support from international organizations and governments, we do not know how long we can keep this up."* As funding dwindles and volunteers begin to taper off, the future looks uncertain. *"Some days, there are individuals who do not even receive one meal. The demand is so high that we are on the brink of burnout,"* he shares.

From newborns to the elderly, individuals of all backgrounds rely on these meals. *"We try to find solutions, but it often feels like we are just drops in the ocean,"* Al Jawhary reflects. He emphasizes the urgent need for government intervention and international support.

REFLECTIONS

As we survive crisis after crisis, I begin to wonder, have we not learned from our mistakes? Must civil societies always bridge the gap that governments are supposed to cover? The road to recovery is a long one, and the crises are becoming too many to recover from. What are the developmental standards we are leaving our future generations? Inequalities are only likely to grow even more following this war. Despite the unity of folks locally and their collective action for relief, will this war leave the country more divided than ever?

Tala Nassif

MANAGING CHRONIC DISEASES IN DISPLACEMENT

Displacement presents a unique set of challenges, especially for individuals living with chronic diseases. In this interview, [Dr. Assaad A. Eid](#), the director of “[AUB Diabetes](#)” and Chair of the Department of Anatomy, Cell Biology, and Physiological Sciences, discusses the reality of managing chronic diseases in such circumstances.

‘Chronic diseases do not just stop with displacement,’ Dr. Eid says. ‘The team of endocrinologists is observing a significant number of people who had to leave their homes within minutes, often without their essential medications.’

A substantial percentage of those displaced have longstanding histories of disease, and in many cases, may be unaware of the specifics of their medications. Many relied on their local pharmacists, healthcare centers, or friends and family to supply the medication they needed in exact dosages.

Community accessibility and support were key for elderly patients to receive care and medication, but now many of them find themselves alone, unclear about the treatments they have been on for years.

‘Blood test results are crucial to determine the exact medication and dosage needed for these chronic illnesses,’ Dr. Eid explains, ‘Without access to this information, interruption or mixing treatments can be dangerous.’

A COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVE

To tackle these challenges, the “AUB Diabetes”, The Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism in the [Department of Internal Medicine](#), along with the [Family Medicine Department](#), and the [School of Nursing](#), are dispatching their medical teams, and students Volunteer, to assess and medicate displaced people in the nearby schools. By sending teams including fellows, residents, and attending physicians, they aim to identify patients needing additional medical exams.

Once these patients are identified, professionals will draw blood samples from patients, which will then be transported for analysis. This initiative is financed by “AUB Diabetes”, which is ensuring proper prescription of medication.

This program is currently covering 3 primary health centers, each housing around 350 people.

ACHIEVING MEDICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Following the recurring waves of crises sweeping through Lebanon over the past decade, health care and access to medicine are constantly put on trial with new difficulties rising every day.

‘Digitalization of medical records on a national level is the key,’ Dr. Eid reflects. ‘Facilitating the exchange of patient history and information through a unified digital format can improve care in dire and fluid situations like displacement.’

While there have been discussions with the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, there is still no comprehensive system for entering patient information online, which is crucial during crises.

HYGIENE REQUIREMENTS TO MAINTAIN PUBLIC HEALTH

Public schools and centers have been established to accommodate as many displaced individuals as possible, yet questions remain about hygiene and basic needs for those still on the streets.

‘Hygiene is part of health, and the living conditions of those in displacement are very wanting,’ Dr. Eid says. He emphasizes that mobile housing and restrooms are vital to maintaining minimum hygiene standards and preventing further medical issues.

The medical community in Lebanon faces significant challenges each day, stepping in where government action is needed during this crisis. With only temporary solutions in place, the gap in a national disaster management plan is felt more than ever.

Tala Nassif

FOOD SECURITY AMID WAR: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

Food security during conflict is a pressing issue, particularly for internally displaced person (IDP) communities. In this interview, [Dr. Rami Zurayk](#), leading the ‘[Development Movement](#)’ initiative, highlights the importance of emergency food chains and food security systems in the current crisis.

A YEAR-LONG RESPONSE

“Our work began last October when Israeli attacks on South Lebanon forced people from their homes,” reflects Dr. Zurayk. He notes that food safety and security challenges have persisted over the past year, regardless of the recent escalation in violence.

In recent months, Dr. Zurayk has contributed to the establishment of an emergency food system that prioritizes healthy diets for those displaced in chronic crises. Collaborating with organizations such as UN Women, the World Food Programme, and Dr. Inaya Izzedine, the National Food System Convenor, the initiative focuses on food production by engaging displaced communities.

As the current escalation unfolded, the demand for food safety mechanisms surged. Initially, the needs included mattresses, pillows, blankets, hygiene kits, baby formula, and diapers. The initiative successfully provided thousands of these items to those in need.

“Out of the 1.2 million displaced, 200,000 are in shelters, while around 800,000 have been redistributed to homes and are now unreachable through the network of shelters,” Dr. Zurayk explains.

RESTORING DISPLACED LINKS THROUGH FOOD

Once emergency aid was delivered, the focus shifted to finding those who had not yet received help, such as individuals living in rented accommodations or staying with others. *“It was initially challenging to trace their whereabouts, but we eventually established a village-based system to create a network for the displaced,”* Dr. Zurayk elaborates.

The initiative also focuses on shelters, collaborating with public schools to reach approximately 3,000 people across Hamra, Clemenceau, Hammana, and Beit Chabeb.

Dr. Zurayk discusses the method of providing aid and relief, aiming to develop sustainable and autonomous ways for IDPs to secure their meals. *“The effort of communal cooking is remarkable, but it has its drawbacks,”* he notes. *“In the long run, it risks infantilizing members of the IDP community, as they lose their autonomy over food and fall into a pattern of waiting for meals to arrive. Additionally, we cannot overlook the single-use plastic waste generated.”*

CREATING A SELF-SUFFICIENT FOOD CHAIN

To address this, Dr. Zurayk and his partners are working to fully equip kitchens in shelters, promoting long-term autonomy within the community. *“These kitchens are funded entirely by donations, to be managed by the community itself,”* he explains. This setup allows community members to decide what to cook. Food supplies come from three sources: WFP food rations containing basic commodities, purchases of fruits and vegetables from local farmers, and meat from local butchers.

The long-term vision is for those dispersed in the area to collect their food from central kitchens located in schools. The cooking training program emphasizes food safety, healthy diets, and skills for catering and food preparation for large groups.

Through this initiative, community members become active and empowered, gaining the skills needed for self-sufficiency and participation in a micro-economy. Furthermore, organic waste is composted and returned to farmers, contributing to a sustainable food chain.

The design of the kitchens is adaptable; while some schools prefer individual cooking stations for each family, others opt for communal setups. *“So far, we have installed a prefabricated house in Beit Chabeb, which is currently being equipped to serve 500 meals a day,”* Dr. Zurayk shares.

“Restoring people’s agency over their food choices gives them a sense of normality,” he adds. Sharing meals fosters community bonds. *“The communal kitchens serve as an entry point for people to connect with others in the community.”*

The long-term goal is to find a way for individuals to earn wages for work done in these centers, thereby contributing to financial autonomy, and to a built circular economy within communities for IDPs.

Tala Nassif

HOW ANIMALS LEBANON IS SUPPORTING PETS AND WILDLIFE AMIDST WAR

In times of crisis, various stakeholders face unique challenges, each driven by different needs. Since the outbreak of war, [Animals Lebanon](#), an NGO founded in 2008, has shifted its focus primarily to providing relief for animals, particularly pets in areas ravaged by the Israeli raids.

In a recent interview, Jason Mier, a representative from Animals Lebanon, shared the significant hurdles their team is currently navigating.

A SHIFT IN FOCUS

"We are operating completely beyond our usual scope," Jason explained. "In normal times, we would focus on wildlife relocation, advocating for animal welfare, and collaborating with the government. Now, all our efforts are directed toward providing relief and rescuing animals."

Before the economic collapse, Animals Lebanon was primarily funded by the Lebanese community, with over 85% of its financial support coming from local sources. Today, most funding is sourced from abroad, highlighting the first major challenge they face: financial instability. *"Since 2019, it has become increasingly difficult to draw attention to animal issues," Jason noted. "Every time we try to regain our footing—whether it is after COVID-19, the Beirut Port explosion, mounting economic crisis, or the war—new challenges emerge."*

RIISING DEMAND FOR SUPPORT

Since the war began, the demand for their services has surged. The team is rescuing pets left behind in bombed areas and finding foster homes for displaced animals. The challenges are overwhelming.

"Safety is a significant concern," Jason remarked. "Our teams often enter relatively unsafe areas to rescue pets. Some locations are simply too dangerous, and we cannot risk the safety of our staff, especially since they are not trained for such situations."

With people fleeing new areas daily, many are forced to leave their pets behind, often unintentionally. *"There are countless scenarios, such as pet owners being stuck abroad. We cannot judge; we just find ourselves shouldering a responsibility that far exceeds our capacity."* So far, Animals Lebanon has managed to rescue around 420 pets and provided 3,800kg of pet food. Furthermore, they are rehoming pets whose families have been displaced.

REDIRECTING RESOURCES

On top of pet rescue efforts, Animals Lebanon is continuing its efforts to relocate a range of endangered animals to sanctuaries in the UK, the US, and South Africa in the coming weeks. The total wildlife relocation effort includes five lions, two bears, one tiger, one jaguar, and six monkeys.

"There are numerous gaps to fill," Jason explained. "We need to continue our work in addressing issues like the illegal wildlife trade, but other pressing issues take priority."

One particularly heartbreaking issue is the fate of livestock, especially in the Southern part of the country. *"We cannot intervene with farm animals, but the numbers are staggering. Many livestock have perished due to the war, and this can impact food safety."*

SUPPORTING LOCAL SHELTERS

Animals Lebanon is actively working to support local animal shelters by providing food and funding to help them sustain operations – so far, they have received more than 820 requests for help, ranging from pet rescue, housing, and fostering, or even requests for pet food and supplies.

"Because we have been established for 16 years, we have a media presence, which aids our efforts, allowing people to reach us easily. Nevertheless, we have set up two hotlines to become more accessible, where people can report animals in need of assistance."

Tala Nassif

A GRASSROOTS RESPONSE: DEAF COMMUNITY RISES ABOVE CHALLENGES AND BUILDS HOPE

Amid the ongoing Israeli attacks on Lebanon, a unique initiative, Deaf Aid, is emerging to support one of the country's most marginalized groups—the Deaf community. This grassroots effort, spearheaded by Deaf individuals and their allies, is offering vital aid to families who have been overlooked by traditional humanitarian efforts.

In an interview with Na'ila Al Hares, a sign language interpreter, educator, and manager of “Deaf Aid,” she narrates the struggles and challenges Deaf families were and are still facing amid these atrocities. *“Deaf persons were left to navigate the situation on their own without any support. They cannot hear the bombings, and they do not know which areas are safe to go to.”*

When the Israeli bombardment intensified on September 23, 2024, hundreds of families in South Lebanon and the Southern suburbs of Beirut were forced to flee their homes. However, for Deaf individuals, the dangers were multiplied. Social media posts and warnings, key sources of information for fleeing families, were inaccessible to many in the Deaf community. Without effective means of communication or a unified national database of people with disabilities, many found themselves struggling to access information on aid or safe shelters.

THE CHALLENGES FACING LEBANON'S DEAF COMMUNITY

Lebanon's Deaf community, already marginalized due to limited access to education, technology, and jobs, faces significant structural barriers in times of crisis. The country has no effective system to communicate, register, and aid people with disabilities, and many Deaf individuals do not even possess the disability ID from the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs. This invisibility exacerbates their vulnerabilities, making it difficult for them to access even basic services.

As Na'ila emphasizes, *“There is no national umbrella for the community.”* Institutions that cater to Deaf people are fragmented and often specific to certain regions, meaning displaced families do not know where to turn

when fleeing. *“They are more marginalized, barely able to access information on the shelters for displaced families,”* she adds.

THE BIRTH OF A LIFELINE: A GRASSROOTS INITIATIVE

This vacuum in support led to the birth of a grassroots initiative, “Deaf Aid,” that has become a lifeline for many Deaf families. The initiative was sparked by Deaf individuals reaching out to their friends and acquaintances, desperate for help. *“It started with Deaf people who were displaced themselves, responding to the needs of their Deaf friends, quoting, ‘We beg you; we need food, I have starving people with me.’ That’s how it started,”* Na'ila recalls.

The founding members of the initiative include prominent figures in Lebanon's Deaf community, like Hicham Salman, a globally recognized vlogger and sign language (SL) translator, Malak Arnaout, an SL translator, Abdallah Hakim, Hussein Dbouk, Caroline Haykal, and several others who have taken on different roles, from managing contacts with NGOs to distributing aid on the ground. Despite facing displacement themselves, these volunteers are using their limited resources – sometimes their own – to support their community.

The “Deaf Aid” initiative seeks to provide immediate and ongoing support for 200+ displaced Deaf families across Beirut, Bourj Hammoud, Aramoun, Bchamoun, Bekaa, Zahle, Baalbek, Hermel, Akkar, Zgharta, and Tripoli and Mount Lebanon.

A COMMUNITY'S STRENGTH IN CRISIS

What sets this initiative apart is that it is driven by the Deaf community itself. This autonomy is crucial, as it breaks from the long-standing pattern where Deaf people are often relegated to the sidelines, dependent on hearing people for decisions. *“For the first time, I saw that this is a group of Deaf people who are going to do it even if we do not step in for help,”* says Na'ila. This initiative is a testament to the strength and resilience of Lebanon's Deaf community.

While international donations are slowly trickling in, much of the support has come from local efforts. Volunteers are delivering hot meals, blankets, mattresses, food parcels, and hygiene kits to Deaf families across Lebanon. However, communication remains a major

hurdle. Many Deaf people rely on video calls and photos to exchange information, as technological literacy is low. Na'ila explains, *"The team doesn't have the skills or the teaching equipment to track data and update it. This makes it very difficult for them to organize and plan."*

The hearing community, including Na'ila's sign language students, had also stepped in to support where needed, offering technological guidance and logistical help. However, the emphasis remains on empowering Deaf individuals to lead the way. *"We are not overstepping; they are the stars of the show and take credit for what they are doing,"* Na'ila affirms.

INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITIES IN TIMES OF WAR

This initiative also sheds light on the intersectional vulnerabilities that arise during crises. Deaf women and girls, for instance, face additional stigmas around menstruation and sanitary needs. *"For a Deaf woman to ask via video call from a man for sanitary pads, it is double and triple the difficulty,"* Na'ila points out. The war has not only exposed these gaps but also created an opportunity to address them.

As Na'ila reflects, this moment offers a glimmer of hope despite the bleak circumstances. *"We might witness the birth of a cross-sectarian, cross-cultural network of Deaf people that is completely grassroots."* For the first time, Lebanon's Deaf community is finding its own voice amid the chaos, challenging long-standing inequalities, and leading the way toward a more inclusive future.

This initiative underscores the importance of addressing the specific needs of marginalized groups during crises. As Na'ila poignantly notes, *"It is not that they cannot, it is we who did not allow them. The whole system is not made to cater to the needs of Deaf people."* This community-led effort is a step toward rectifying that systemic failure, proving that with the right support, marginalized voices can and will rise to meet the challenges of even the direst situations.

Sarah Al Bouery

HOW MARSA CONTINUES ESSENTIAL HEALTH SERVICES AMID ISRAELI WAR'S ESCALATION IN BEIRUT

In early October 2024, Israel's escalating strikes in Beirut forced many health and community service centers to make significant changes in their modus operandi to ensure both employee safety and continued support for the community. In a time when accessible healthcare is a challenge, [Marsa Sexual Health Center](#), a pioneer organization advocating for inclusive and equitable access to sexual and reproductive health in Lebanon, was among those affected. I spoke with Sara Abu Zaki, Executive Director of Marsa, to understand how the escalation has impacted the center's operations, which are crucial for marginalized groups in Lebanon.

INITIAL RESPONSE TO DANGER

Located in proximity to the Beirut southern suburbs, Marsa initially closed its offices at the start of the escalation. The proximity to affected areas and the uncertainty surrounding the air strikes led many staff members to be displaced outside of Beirut. This reality necessitated an immediate response from Marsa to address operational challenges while prioritizing the safety of staff and the community it serves, particularly vulnerable groups.

"Marsa could not simply close down," says Abu Zaki, explaining the difficult decision the center faced. Marsa is one of the few NGO's that provide a wide range of services at subsidized rates, notably voluntary counseling and testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, as well as medical consultations and treatments for STI-related symptoms.

The center also offers pap smears for cervical cancer detection and psychological services for individuals exploring sexuality, people living with HIV, and diverse couples. Additionally, Marsa organizes educational sessions on topics like sexually transmitted infection prevention, consent, and best practices for healthcare

providers, alongside dietetic counseling for people living with HIV.

These services are especially vital for marginalized groups who may feel unsafe seeking these exams in traditional hospitals or other labs. Therefore, the team collectively decided to reopen during the week of October 7th, on a half-day schedule while closely monitoring the situation. This modified schedule allows the center to continue serving the community with reduced risk to both staff and service users. Staff presence remains voluntary, and Marsa has provided transportation assistance and internet bundles for those working remotely.

Despite these challenges, Marsa is committed to meeting the high demand for core services like voluntary testing, which requires in-person attendance for accurate and secure results. Meanwhile, essential consultations and psychosocial counseling are conducted online, shares Abu Zaki.

EXPANDING COMMUNITY OUTREACH

In addition to providing healthcare services, the center leads several community projects. Since the escalation, Marsa has been constantly meeting with donors to reallocate funds, allowing for adjustments in ongoing initiatives. They have engaged with local partners and allies to assess needs on the ground, particularly hygiene and menstrual products. With the heightened risks associated with crowding and insecurity, Marsa is expanding its educational and awareness sessions that cover essential topics such as hygiene, prevention of sexual violence, and information on prevention and treatment of reproductive health disorders and oral infections.

While these initiatives are crucial, Abu Zaki is aware of the overall poor readiness of Lebanon's national health system, which faces significant barriers in handling a potential public health crisis. She emphasizes that the essential role of non-profits and community organizations in bridging gaps in emergency response and healthcare accessibility is not enough and requires direct state intervention.

Charbel Chaaya

AUBMC'S FRONTLINE RESPONSE: COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR IDPS IN LEBANON

In this interview, [Dr. Mona Osman](#), Director of Primary Health Care Center at the [Department of Family Medicine](#) at AUBMC, discusses the interventions implemented by the AUB community to support internally displaced persons (IDPs) in collective shelters, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health.

As part of this initiative, activities have been conducted in partnership with multiple departments at AUBMC, including [Obstetrics and Gynecology](#), [Internal Medicine](#) (Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism), and Psychiatry.

Additionally, several faculties are contributing to these efforts, including the [Faculty of Medicine](#), [Faculty of Health Sciences](#), [Hariri School of Nursing](#), and [Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences](#). AUB-led initiatives such as the [Neighborhood Initiative](#), [Center for Civic Engagement and Community Services](#), [Office of Student Affairs](#), [Resident Staff Organization](#), and volunteer groups and [student societies](#) (AUBMcares, Medical Student Society, Nursing Student Society, Premedical Student Society, FHS Student Society, Food and Agriculture Student Society, and AUB Diabetes) are also actively involved.

ADDRESSING VARIED MEDICAL NEEDS IN SHELTERS

Dr. Osman shares, *"From the very first week, we mobilized ourselves to examine individuals in shelters, provide them with adequate management and necessary medications."* The Family Medicine Department is striving to address both basic and advanced medical needs across seven shelters in Ras Beirut.

To date, over 1,000 individuals have benefited from these services, which include offering medical care to individuals suffering from acute and chronic conditions, providing them with the required medications, and referring those who need further evaluation to the primary health care center in the Department of Family Medicine.

The Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism, alongside AUB Diabetes, has also conducted specialized visits to some shelters to offer management and education for those living with diabetes mellitus."

"Our work extends beyond simple interventions; we also provide options for advanced care at the hospital," explains Dr. Osman. For example, for women requiring further evaluation in a more private setting or tests, the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology is redirecting patients to AUBMC for free consultations on Saturdays.

Another significant initiative led by the department is the immunization program for displaced children, many of whom left their homes without their vaccination cards. This will be done as part of the National Immunization Campaign of the Ministry of Public Health. In collaboration with the Hariri School of Nursing, we started collecting data on vaccination from the different shelters. Upcoming activities will focus on assessing malnutrition in children, conducting environmental assessments, and providing health education for persons in temporary shelters.

COMMON HEALTH ISSUES OBSERVED

The most prevalent health conditions reported by the AUBMC medical staff on the field include acute respiratory infections, otitis, tonsillitis, bronchitis, gastroenteritis, and musculoskeletal problems (such as joint, back, and neck pain). Febrile illnesses, allergies, reproductive health infections, urinary tract infections, and skin problems (like dermatitis) are also prevalent.

The crowdedness and challenges facing proper hygiene practices in shelters might increase the risk of infections, especially with the beginning of the cold season. Exacerbations of chronic conditions such as asthma, COPD, uncontrolled diabetes, and hypertension are also a major concern, especially given that patients with chronic diseases require continuous access to their medications, follow-up testing, and adequate nutrition.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

Given the occurrence of psychological distress amongst children and adults in the community, the Department of Psychiatry has begun offering psychological first aid in some shelters, with plans to extend these services further.

‘Continuous psychological assessments are particularly crucial for children,’

explains Dr. Osman.

In the initial days of the conflict, many in the community experienced significant stress, which affected their nutrition and sleep patterns. An impact assessment on the mental health of children and adults is essential in order to prepare for the post-war recovery phase.

LEARNING FROM PAST EXPERIENCES

Dr. Osman emphasizes the learnings achieved from past experiences and crises to improve interventions during this war. She reflects on the 2006 war, as well as the lessons learned from mobile clinics established for Syrian refugees in 2014-2016, during which the AUB community implemented similar initiatives in shelters.

“We have experience with the necessary documentation, interventions, and assessments in displacement/mobile clinics,” she notes. However, she stresses the need for improved coordination and reporting among different stakeholders to avoid duplication of services and streamline the delivery of efficient healthcare to IDPs.

The digitization of health records and a unique ID system on a national level would be immensely beneficial for the efficient, effective, and safe delivery of healthcare services. This is very important in normal conditions and more so during displacement and emergencies. The [Sejjeli program at the AUB Global Health Institute](#) provides an example of digital health that was launched during previous refugee influxes. *“Having clear files for each patient would provide comprehensive information about their health condition, the medications they are taking, if any, and would therefore result in better care,”* concludes Dr. Osman.

The efforts of the medical community in this war cannot go unnoticed – AUBMC medical staff and healthcare workers are continuously on the front lines of the crisis in Lebanon. They have learned to be flexible, agile, and efficient in the most difficult of situations, acting as a backbone to the Lebanese people. As we continue to be faced with one crisis after the other, the urgent need for relief and coordination on a nationally organised effort is felt more than ever.

Tala Nassif

THE IMPACT OF WAR ON EXPECTANT MOTHERS: STORIES OF RESILIENCE

In this article, [Dr. Ghina Ghazeeri](#), Professor, Obstetrician/Gynecologist, and Head of the REI – IVF division at the American University of Beirut Medical Center, explores how the current situation has affected expectant mothers and couples trying to conceive. Dr. Ghazeeri also shares a poignant story of a patient's experience over the past few weeks.

"The war has taken an immense psychological toll on everyone," Dr. Ghazeeri explains. Over 80% of patients consulted in the past month have reported symptoms of psychological distress. This burden extends to healthcare workers and hospital staff, who, despite the challenges, continue their mission while bearing this heavy psychological weight.

"The psychological state of patients can significantly affect their health, especially for expectant mothers. In just one day, I witnessed five sudden miscarriages," Dr. Ghazeeri shares. There has also been a halt in all fertilization treatments. Couples trying to conceive have completely put their plans on hold, losing precious time and money. *"Everyone is in survival mode, couples are no longer able to plan for their future, which is very alarming..."*

THE TOUCHING STORY OF LAMIS*

In a recent [Instagram video](#), Dr. Ghazeeri shared a personal experience involving a patient she has been following up with for the past month. The expectant mother, Lamis, was nine months pregnant when Israeli airstrikes hit her home, leaving her, her husband, and their future child homeless and displaced.

"We lost all the baby's clothes..." the soon-to-be father kept repeating. Dr. Ghazeeri comforted them, explaining that as long as mother and baby were safe, everything else was secondary.

A few nights later, Dr. Ghazeeri received an emergency call—Lamis was heavily bleeding, and both mother and baby were at risk. Seven minutes later, Dr. Ghazeeri arrived at the hospital, performed an emergency C-section, and safely delivered the baby. In the video, she narrates the emotional rollercoaster that both she and the expectant family experienced during such difficult times, reinforcing her commitment to her medical mission.

POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT IN MATERNAL CARE

"When I posted that video, I did not expect such a reaction from people online. I received dozens of comments and calls from individuals wanting to donate clothes for the baby and support the family in any way possible," Dr. Ghazeeri elaborates.

Unfortunately, Lamis' case is just one of possibly hundreds that remain undocumented amidst this war. The experience of life and birth is already challenging, and it is now compounded with military violence and constant shelling. *"There are more people than we think going through the exact same thing, and we need to find more solutions to support them,"* reflects Dr. Ghazeeri.

As a way forward, she is contemplating creating a network of expectant mothers to provide mental and physical support during pregnancy in times of war. This type of support would be helpful to expectant couples, leveraging their common experiences to navigate the unknown path of parenthood and pregnancy in times of war.

"We all want to help each other—we cannot let what we are going through divide us," asserts Dr. Ghazeeri. *"Regardless of our beliefs, faith, region, or cultural background, we will stand united and continue our mission—saving lives one step at a time, often starting with just a little bit of mental and emotional support."*

As gruesome days persist, new challenges are continually unveiled, affecting those most vulnerable in our communities. Personal initiatives continue to bear the weight and consequences of this war, contributing to and supporting the most vulnerable of our community. How much longer can civil society efforts bridge the gap? As I imagine what the post-war social landscape could look like, I begin to wonder about the potential of civil society in not only responding, but also rebuilding Lebanon.

Tala Nassif

MAPPING RESILIENCE: BEIRUT URBAN LAB'S ROLE IN DOCUMENTING WAR IMPACT

The [Beirut Urban Lab](#), a collaborative and interdisciplinary research space based at the American University of Beirut, actively documents urbanization in Lebanon and the broader region, studying transformations of natural and built environments, especially from the perspective of the Global South. With a mission to contribute to academic and public knowledge and dialogues on urbanization, the Lab envisions a future where research and critical inquiry empower communities aspiring for just, viable, and inclusive cities.

I had the chance to speak with Dr. Mona Fawaz, Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at the American University of Beirut and co-founder of the Beirut Urban Lab, to understand the Lab's response to the ongoing Israeli war in Gaza and Lebanon and its ramifications on urban landscapes.

MAPPING THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR: THE CORE OF BEIRUT URBAN LAB'S MEDIA ACTIVISM

Dr. Fawaz explains that the Beirut Urban Lab has been mapping the impacts of war crimes since October 7, 2023, covering areas along the Lebanon-Israel border, Gaza, and the West Bank. "*As researchers, our main tool is mapping,*" she says, emphasizing that the Lab's strategy was to deploy its mapping knowledge towards media activism, denouncing the extent of the Israeli violence and the consequent demolitions. In Gaza, the mapping also seeks to preserve the history of a Palestinian community that faces erasure and destruction.

Therefore, and since there was no reliable map of Gaza's current landscape, the Lab's team has created an accurate base map of Gaza, including damaged mosques, UNESCO-protected sites, housing, schools, and hospitals. By georeferencing satellite images and mapping each site of destruction, the Lab provides a historical record that could eventually support post-war recovery and reconstruction. This is what her colleague, Professor Howayda al-Harithy, describes as

an effort to build an archive from the materials of the city and its practices.

EXPANDING DOCUMENTATION TO LEBANON'S IMPACTED CITIES

Following the recent escalation in Lebanon in early October²³, The Lab expanded its documentation efforts to include Greater Beirut, Tyre, Baalbak, and Nabatieh in Lebanon. This includes producing base maps, recording damage, and supporting media activism by collaborating with scholars, PhD students interested in studying how bombings are currently affecting schools, hospitals, and communities in general. Although reconstruction is ultimately the responsibility of public authorities, the Lab's work is providing an essential framework for future rebuilding efforts.

MAPPING RELIEF EFFORTS: ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Another essential aspect of the Beirut Urban Lab's work involves supporting the documentation of relief distribution. While the Lab does not distribute aid directly, its team is collaborating with Lebanon's Ministerial Crisis Group to georeference shelter locations, such as schools, and to map how aid is distributed at the municipal level. Dr. Fawaz explains that this mapping tool is crucial for creating transparency, ensuring that resources reach those in need, and encouraging continued support.

ADDRESSING BEIRUT'S HOUSING CRISIS: MOBILIZING VACANT UNITS FOR DISPLACED PERSONS

In addition to documenting damage and relief efforts, the Lab has conducted surveys identifying vacant housing units across Beirut. Dr. Fawaz reveals that there are 44,000 empty residential units, more than enough to shelter the displaced population currently housed in schools. Of these, 7,000 units are located in buildings

²³ Beirut Urban Lab. (2024). [Beirut Urban Lab - Israel's assault on Lebanon, Sept. 2024](#).

that have been fully vacant for years. By mobilizing these units as temporary homes, neighborhoods could be revitalized, and schools now used as collective shelters can be reopened for all children, including those displaced.

Beirut Urban Lab argues that policies enabling access to these vacant units are urgently needed, whether through existing legal channels or under an emergency state that would temporarily limit certain rights to respond to the crisis. However, she notes that for a long-term solution, Parliament should pass laws imposing taxes on owners of vacant properties. The high rates of vacancy reflect a speculative tendency that is encouraged by current regulations; it undermines the right to housing, exacerbates social inequalities, pushes neighborhoods into downward spirals, and reduces tax revenues²⁴.

SHAPING POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Reflecting on the recent clashes in Hamra, Beirut, between displaced individuals and security forces, Dr. Fawaz stresses that the government's response should prioritize policies that allow for dignified housing solutions. For the long term, she sees the need to approach post-war reconstruction as an opportunity to unify rather than segregate communities.

Dr. Fawaz concludes by cautioning that displaced individuals often find refuge in areas controlled by traditional political factions, a reality that may risk entrenching existing social divisions post-war. Instead, she envisions post-war reconstruction as a chance to encourage solidarity and social cohesion, building a more inclusive urban future for Lebanon.

REFLECTIONS

The Beirut Urban Lab's mission is critical, especially in a time when post-war discussions are often neglected. Lebanon has faced multiple wars, and too often, the imposed wartime realities persist in peacetime, bypassing any opportunity to address political and social issues within reconstruction processes. If the documentation work led by the Lab isn't accompanied by political commitment, valuable collective memories could be irreparably lost.

Documentation is important, but it is insufficient if not followed by a willingness to address the structural challenges at hand. Addressing Lebanon's housing crisis and facilitating access to vacant properties requires both immediate solutions and long-term legislative reform. This work is also a call to reimagine public spaces, not only as places of consumption but as important spaces for dialogue and reconciliation.

Public transportation infrastructure also deserves attention, as its current limitations fuel segregation. If some Lebanese remain today disconnected from the reality of war, it is because of Lebanon's fragmented social fabric and the state's minimal role in implementing socio-economic rights.

While the current political rhetoric often calls for the state to reclaim its role as protector against external threats, genuine reclamation should also address Lebanon's immediate and worsening socio-economic reality. With the end of the war, conditions will only worsen, as millions are displaced today and thousands have lost their homes—homes they may never return to, even after a ceasefire.

Charbel Chaaya

²⁴ Fawaz, Mona, & Zaatari, A. (2020, July 1). [Property tax: No more vacancy exemptions](#). Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

THE POWER OF FEMINIST NETWORKS: FIFTYFIFTY'S IMPACT DURING CRISIS

In this interview, [Fiftyfifty](#), an organization focused on women's empowerment in Lebanese politics, outlines the scope of their work since the escalation of the war last September, reflecting on the power of feminist networks to drive positive change. Since 2012, they have built a network of women from across the country, equipping them with political knowledge and leadership skills to enhance their presence in the political landscape. Their goal is to prepare women to assume leadership roles in Lebanese politics and society.

MOBILIZING THROUGH COMMUNITY NETWORKS

"The strength fueling our response has undoubtedly been this beautiful network of women we have fostered over the years," says [Joelle Abou Farhat](#), President of Fiftyfifty. *"This response network is centered on care and relief work. Whenever there is an excess of resources or a need for support, it is voiced, and the community always responds."*

In the first five days of the escalation of the Israeli attacks on Lebanon, Fiftyfifty catered to 12,000 people; just one week later, that number grew to 30,000, all through this collective organization led by women.

"Our mobilization first started through our existing WhatsApp group chats," reflects the team. *"Through our network of women across Lebanon, we were able to organize and respond to the needs of the community."*

The WhatsApp group "مجموعة دعم وطوارئ" quickly expanded to address transportation, medical, food, and shelter needs, ultimately reaching hundreds of people. Fiftyfifty operates with focal points – women representatives from each area of the country. Today, their emergency relief network comprises over 100 women, each caring for around 5,000 refugees all over the country.

The connections built over the years have proven vital in alleviating the war's impact on many. *"We never imagined this level of closeness with the women on the ground,"* Abou Farhat explains. *"This proves our network is not just for political support; it is social, emotional, and, above all, humanitarian."*

ADAPTING TO CRISIS AND NEW CHALLENGES

During the first two weeks of the escalation, Fiftyfifty's regular operations were paused. From preparing for the 2026 parliamentary elections to continued leadership training, all their efforts were redirected toward relief.

Importantly, this network serves as a mechanism for trust and transparency. Reports of rape, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence are being reported through this channel, alongside the need for education and hygiene protocols in shelters.

"There is a huge need for sexual education in shelters," Abou Farhat explains. *"We have received several reports of increased occurrences of gender-based violence and even rape cases in shelters without segregated bathrooms."*

The current situation highlights the crucial role women play in times of crisis – by mobilizing and protecting entire communities, schools, and shelters, the skills that women in their network have developed over the years are now in the spotlight.

Furthermore, a majority of these women leading the cause were presenting themselves as candidates to the upcoming municipal or parliamentary elections. Their unwavering dedication and success in helping their communities during this crisis, with no hesitation, showcase their credibility and ability to lead the country.

CONCLUSION: THE COMPASSIONATE POWER OF WOMEN AND THEIR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

Engaging with this group of compassionate and powerful women highlights their true leadership skills. They possess the ability to support entire communities, which is further manifested in times of crisis. Following all we have seen in this escalation, it is essential to reflect back on the role that women and feminists have played in mobilizing relief efforts, collecting, and organizing them in shelters. By joining forces to conduct women-centred relief in times of crisis, these women are showcasing the essence of women's leadership.

Tala Nassif

GHARSAH ASSOCIATION: SYRIAN REFUGEES EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AMID MARGINALIZATION

Gharsah Association was founded and established in the Beqaa district of Lebanon in 2014 by a group of Syrian activists and multidisciplinary professionals wishing to contribute to alleviating the multiple hardships of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The organization focused on educational, psychosocial, and civic empowerment for children, adolescents, and women. It began as an initiative in a tent within a camp in Beqaa and has since expanded into a center located in Marj, in the Western Beqaa area.

In addition to offering alternative education for children and empowerment programs for Syrian women, Gharsah provides knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, rights, and leadership skills. In later stages, Gharsah helps women build skills to improve their job prospects. Over the past few years, it has worked with approximately 240 children and around 500 women and young girls.

Identifying as a civic initiative led by women, it operates with limited resources rather than as a formal institution. It has a team of 15 people, with different administrative and executive roles, 80% of whom are women. The work is highly participative, with team members collectively discussing and forming stances on various issues.

BUILDING COMMUNITY COLLABORATION TO COUNTER POLITICAL HATE SPEECH AGAINST SYRIAN REFUGEES

In the past two years, Gharsah adopted a strategy of working alongside local communities that welcome Syrian refugees in Beqaa's villages. *"What we do is, with Syrians and locals from the villages, we look at the needs of the villages and help fill the void,"* explains Ola AlJoundi, one of Gharsah's first founders, whom I had the opportunity to speak with.

For example, Gharsah supports local clinics in the villages where its members reside, assists in raising funds to address health needs, and helps meet various needs

within the local communities. AlJoundi emphasizes that *"we think more of locals than governmental bodies,"* as the initiative cooperates directly with local people rather than through government entities, helping create a grassroots solidarity movement between Syrians and local communities.

When asked why Gharsah decided to build a collaborative strategy with local communities, AlJoundi explains that racism often originates from media narratives and political elite rhetoric rather than from grassroots society itself. While racism exists everywhere, she argues it is the exception rather than the norm. For her, racism is often fueled by the media and sectarian political parties. With their work, Gharsah aims to highlight the solidarity that can exist between locals and refugees, rejecting divisive political hate speech that encourages insecurity.

AlJoundi stresses the importance of fighting this rhetoric *"through common work."* The recent economic crisis has affected both Syrians and Lebanese alike, making it essential to join forces. *"We are part of society; we see its problems, and we respond to this collectively,"* she adds. *"We take a feminist approach that integrates social and political perspectives,"* says AlJoundi, describing the initiative's focus on women's empowerment in local communities.

ADAPTING GHARSAH'S MISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE ONGOING WAR AND DISPLACEMENT

Since the recent escalation of war in Lebanon, Gharsah's team in Beqaa has adapted its work to address emerging needs. *"Since the beginning of the escalation, and even beforehand, we have been encouraging local communities to prepare by storing food, medications, and other essentials, as we sensed that the war might spread across Lebanon,"* says AlJoundi.

Initially, Gharsah believed displaced Syrian refugees from southern Lebanon would face the same conditions as displaced Lebanese. However, they soon discovered that official shelters were not welcoming Syrian refugees. In response, Gharsah created a small emergency fund to support those affected by displacement.

To address the crisis, Gharsah employed various strategies: it rented homes specifically for displaced Syrians from the south and briefly opened its center in Beqaa to displaced families. While the government eventually designated specific locations as official shelters, Gharsah was not included, which required its closure.

Gharsah subsequently redirected its efforts toward relief, providing food and other essentials to people in official shelters. The association also adapted its existing programs to address the displacement crisis, providing psychosocial support to Syrians in Beqaa affected by trauma, as well as to team members impacted by the ongoing war. Psychologists and social workers now provide mental health support to impacted individuals.

NAVIGATING FAMILY FRAGMENTATION AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES IN SYRIA

Since the escalation, around 300,000 Syrians have returned to Syria²⁵, escaping the war in Lebanon with strikes killing at least 207 Syrians as of late September 2024, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR)²⁶.

As shelters prioritize displaced Lebanese nationals, and xenophobia rises, Syrians are left with few options, often feeling compelled to go back to Syria. Since the beginning of the escalation, 23 Syrian refugees²⁷ have been arrested upon their return to Syria²⁸. Families have been fragmented by the situation, with some men remaining in Lebanon while their wives and children go back to Syria. In some cases, women are afraid to return due to fears of enforced disappearance and sexual violence.

Although Gharsah does not actively monitor this issue, they are aware of the devastating impact the war has had on Syrian families. In every war, the impact on families—particularly on women—is often neglected, affecting mental health, family unity, and socio-economic stability. This occurs amid calls from some European and Lebanese leaders who argue that Syria is now safe for returns, pushing for forced return.

In response, several human rights organizations continue to call on the UNHCR to maintain its position that Syria remains unsafe for returns and continue monitoring the harsh conditions facing Syrians compelled to flee back²⁹.

Charbel Chaaya

²⁵ Al Jazeera Net. (2024, October 7). [400 ألف نازح عبروا من لبنان إلى سوريا](#). [400,000 displaced people crossed from Lebanon to Syria].

²⁶ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2024, October 21). [\[During one month of Israeli escalation—207 Syrian refugees were martyred, including 34 women and 52 children\]](#).

²⁷ Al Ibrahim, A., Bassiki, M., & Goldberg, J. (2024, October 16). [The risk of return: As Israel bombs Lebanon, Syrian deportees face detention, conscription, or worse](#). The New Humanitarian.

²⁸ Enab Baladi. (2024, October 2). [Regime arrests nine Syrians returning from Lebanon](#).

²⁹ Human Rights Watch. (2024e, October 30). [Syrians fleeing Lebanon risk repression upon return](#).

HOW SOUK EL TAYEB IS SUPPORTING LEBANESE FARMERS THROUGH CRISIS

‘Souk El Tayeb’, a social enterprise founded in 2004, has long been a champion for Lebanon’s local communities. Known for organizing farmers’ markets and employing women in rural areas, the organization has now expanded its role, especially as the country faces ongoing turmoil. In this interview, co-founder [Christine Codsí](#) reflects on how Souk El Tayeb is continuing to support Lebanon’s most vulnerable during the recent escalation of violence, which started in September 2024.

THE BEIRUT BLAST EXPERIENCE VERSUS THE CURRENT WAR

Christine recalls the devastating aftermath of the August 4 explosion in Beirut. *“When the blast happened, we had to close our kitchen,”* she explains. *“Our building was damaged, and we felt hopeless.”* But instead of staying idle, Souk El Tayeb quickly shifted focus. *“We were contacted by the World Central Kitchen, who asked if we could help by cooking meals for the victims. With secured funding, we redirected all our resources to this initiative.”*

Today, with all its restaurants closed, Souk El Tayeb is only running this initiative, called “Matbakh El Kell” in Mar Mikhael, Beirut. *“We prepare 4,500 warm meals a day,”* Christine shares. *“We work with shelters to determine the number of meals needed, and our NGO partners handle the distribution.”*

Despite receiving some external funding from The World Central Kitchen, Souk El Tayeb continues to cover some direct additional costs such as rent and logistics. Additionally, Codsí points out that volunteer participation has dropped as life gradually returns to normal. *“People are going back to school and work, which affects the number of meals we can provide,”* she says.

SUPPORTING FARMERS AFFECTED BY THE WAR

In addition to aiding the displaced, Souk El Tayeb is also helping Lebanon’s farmers, many of whom have been devastated by the ongoing conflict. Around 10%

of the farming community has seen land and production disrupted, particularly those involved in olive oil and soap production.

To assist, Souk El Tayeb launched a new initiative aimed at raising funds to help these farmers rebuild. *“This initiative is focused on directly supporting farmers to relocate, and/or recover, whether through rebuilding their farms or replacing damaged equipment,”* Christine explains.

Supporting local farmers is a critical part of Souk El Tayeb’s mission to create a more sustainable agricultural economy in Lebanon, especially as the country grapples with growing economic instability.

EXPANDING SOUK EL TAYEB’S MODEL

Prior to the escalation in September, Souk El Tayeb was already working to replicate its community kitchen model in the northern parts of Lebanon, namely in Ardeh – Zgharta.

They were training a local association in that region to open another community kitchen to serve the northern part of the country, facing high levels of poverty.

Christine believes that creating farmers’ markets and promoting a circular economy could be key to Lebanon’s economic recovery. *“The northern region holds a lot of potential,”* she says. *“By empowering local farmers, we can help build a more resilient economy and make sure the initiative is truly national.”*

THE CHALLENGE OF PLANNING AMID UNCERTAINTY

Despite these ambitious goals, Codsí admits that planning has become increasingly difficult in times of such instability. *“We’re lucky if we can plan a week in advance. The situation changes so rapidly,”* she says. As the country faces ongoing challenges, continuity remains a significant concern for Souk El Tayeb. *“We do not know what tomorrow will bring, and that makes it hard to plan for the future.”*

Still, despite the uncertainty, Souk El Tayeb is determined to continue its work. Christine remains hopeful about the organization’s role in supporting Lebanon’s communities. *“We have always been a team that adapts to the challenges we face,”* she says. *“Through solidarity and collaboration, we will keep pushing forward.”*

Tala Nassif

BEYTI ASSOCIATION: SUPPORTING INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE IN KFARDEBIAN

In the wake of the recent escalation of violence in Lebanon, [Dr. Josephine Zgheib](#), Founder of **'Beyti Association'** and **'Auberge Beyti'**, has been at the forefront of providing critical support to those affected by the conflict. In this interview, Dr. Zgheib shares her experience managing the ongoing crisis and the challenges her organization faces.

OPENING THEIR DOORS TO THOSE IN NEED

"Initially, 'Auberge Beyti' operated a youth hostel in Kfardebian, where we usually hosted student groups and other visitors," explains Dr. Zgheib. "But when we saw the large numbers of people fleeing the south, we made the decision to open our doors to the public."

The mass displacement of hundreds of thousands of people in a matter of hours during the second week of September was overwhelming and left members of civil society wondering how they could support. *"It was beyond what anyone could have imagined," she says. "The only action we could take at that time was to open our doors – and that's exactly what we did."*

PROVIDING IMMEDIATE RELIEF AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Today, 'Beyti' is housing 90 people in their hostel, and providing food parcels and essential supplies to six other shelters in the area.

At the onset of the crisis, logistical challenges were the main concern. *"We had to source mattresses, pillows, blankets, and other basic supplies to accommodate the people around us,"* Dr. Zgheib recounts.

As the days passed and these challenges were slowly surpassed, the team began to notice the psychological toll on the displaced individuals. *"The trauma is real, and it's affecting everyone in the shelter – from the youngest to the oldest individual. There is fear, anxiety, and uncertainty in the air,"* Dr. Zgheib reflects.

"We started to see how the stress was affecting people's mental health – many had lost their homes, were worried about the safety of their loved ones, and had no clarity about their future," she elaborates. "It's as though they are living a double life; everything they knew before is at risk, and they are now left trying to adapt to a new, uncertain reality."

In response, 'Beyti' partnered with [MindMend](#), a mental health organization, to provide emotional support to those affected by the conflict. They also organized various activities within the hostel, including an apple-picking initiative to produce jam, which was then distributed to neighboring shelters.

CREATING A ROUTINE AND FOSTERING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A key part of Beyti's relief efforts has been establishing a routine for those in the shelters. *"We have set up daily one-hour language classes in English and Arabic for the kids, to instill a sense of routine and learning."* With the hope of public schools reopening soon, children in the shelter are set to join local schools, ensuring they can continue their education.

This structure has helped foster a sense of community among the displaced families. *"People have begun to rely on each other, helping with cooking, organizing activities, and supporting one another,"* says Dr. Zgheib.

One of the most significant outcomes has been the empowerment of women. *"Women have been key in this crisis,"* she says. *"They've stepped up, helping with shelter management, organizing activities, and even teaching children. Most of them have tried to engage in collective work, thus creating a sense of solidarity within the hostel."*

CHALLENGES AND THE ROAD AHEAD

Despite the incredible community spirit, the organization is feeling the strain. *“So far, we have been able to sustain the shelter through our own donations and cash reserves,”* Dr. Zgheib explains. *“But the war is taking a heavy toll on everyone, and resources are running low”*

As winter approaches, the situation is set to become even more difficult. *“The cold weather in Kfardebian will add significant challenges – freezing temperatures and increased shelter costs will make everything harder,”* she warns.

A COMMITMENT TO THE PEOPLE OF LEBANON

Despite these challenges, Beyti remains resolute. *“We will not close the shelter, even if there’s only one family left,”* Dr. Zgheib says. *“This is our duty as citizens of Lebanon – we have to support our people.”*

In the absence of an operational government, initiatives such as ‘Beyti’ have been bearing the responsibility of their peers, running on their own reserves to support their community.

Tala Nassif

WINGWOMAN LEBANON: TACKLING PERIOD POVERTY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Launched in 2020, [WingWoman Lebanon](#) is a grassroots initiative that produces reusable period pads (and reusable diapers) and distributes them to communities in need across Lebanon. The organization addresses the issue of period poverty, especially in times of crisis, by providing sustainable menstrual health solutions to women in refugee camps and impoverished areas.

In this interview, **Amina Moussa** and **Meelie Pemberton**, two key figures behind WingWoman Lebanon, discuss their experiences and the challenges of addressing period poverty during the ongoing instability in the region and the massive internal displacement in Lebanon.

A COMMUNITY-POWERED SOLUTION: WOMEN EMPOWERING WOMEN

WingWoman Lebanon began as an organic project, where women in the Shatila refugee camps, facing financial hardships, realized that the cost of getting to work was higher than the income they were earning. In response, a network of women came together to produce reusable period pads from home. These Palestinian and Syrian women are part of a growing task force, currently made up of 8 women aged between 23 to 55 years old, who sew and distribute the pads to those in need.

Amina Moussa, one of the seamstresses, shares that the organization's production capacity has surged in recent weeks: *"The demand for reusable menstrual pads has increased dramatically. We are now producing between 500 to 1,000 pads a week."*

The growing need for menstrual products is tied to the mass displacement in Lebanon, particularly since September 2024. The ongoing war has forced many people into vulnerable situations where basic health and hygiene products are scarce – a challenge that particularly touches women in displacement.

Amina, who produces the pads from her home in the Shatila refugee camp, explains, *"So far, the war has not stopped our operations. Although a few of our team members have been affected, we continue to work—*

though we are, of course, fearful of bombings in the camp." Despite these challenges, WingWoman Lebanon remains resilient and committed to its mission.

Amina also plays a key role in the distribution of pads, providing education and awareness to women on menstrual health and alternative period products.

THE JOURNEY: FROM RESISTANCE TO ACCEPTANCE

Meelie Pemberton, the co-founder of WingWoman Lebanon, reflects on the early days of their mobilisation. *"It all started organically, with a discussion around what we could produce with our newfound sewing skills,"* she recalls. *"This project has enabled us to provide some financial support to women facing challenging circumstances."*

However, the idea of reusable pads was met with resistance at first, primarily due to cultural and mindset barriers. *"Many people were initially skeptical,"* says Meelie. *"But over time, the benefits of reusable pads became clearer. Our data shows that the pads have a significant and varied impact, including reducing health complications related to periods, saving money, and being eco-friendly."*

With the support of donors and partner organizations, WingWoman Lebanon has distributed over 200,000 pads since its launch. The organization continues to meet the urgent needs of displaced women and those living in extreme poverty.

"This year has been incredibly tough for many organizations, and ours was no exception," Meelie explains.

"Contingency plans were often designed for immediate disasters and did not account for long-term menstrual product needs. However, in light of the recent escalation, the demand for our pads has really grown."

The increasing demand reflects a broader recognition that reusable pads are a cost-effective and sustainable solution to menstrual health, particularly in times of crisis.

A DOUBLE-EDGED MISSION: EMPOWERING WOMEN AND ADDRESSING MENSTRUAL HEALTH

At the heart of WingWoman Lebanon's mission is a dual focus: empowering women through meaningful economic opportunities and providing essential menstrual products to those in need.

"Our mission is two-fold," Meelie explains. "First, we ensure that the women in our network have decent work using their sewing skills in a way that benefits them and their families. Secondly, distributing the pads to shelters and those in need is a key part of what we do."

The work of WingWoman Lebanon is a powerful example of how communities can come together to tackle period poverty and provide sustainable solutions in the face of crisis.

Through the dedication of women like Amina and Meelie, WingWoman Lebanon is helping to break the cycle of poverty and stigma surrounding menstruation, one pad at a time.

Tala Nassif

DREAMING BEYOND CONFLICT: THE STORY OF A WAR-TIME CLASSROOM

When the Israeli war on Lebanon broke out in late September, families from the South and the Beqaa were forced to leave their homes, seeking refuge in public schools and other shelters. Amidst the chaos, one individual decided to act. Pascale Féghali, an anthropologist, a filmmaker, and a teacher at Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth, took the initiative and reached out to Mona El Hallak from the [AUB Neighborhood Initiative](#) to see how she could help by creating an educational project, hoping to bring a bit of normalcy back to the children's lives. Hallak told Féghali about a school in Ras Beirut that she was supporting with other NGOs. Around 120 children and their families were staying there.

With the help of a friend of hers, Féghali envisioned creating a safe and nurturing environment for the children, one where they could experience continuity during the war through education.

"The idea came to me spontaneously," Pascale explains. "Many NGOs were already mobilized to provide food and basic necessities, but I felt the need to create a small zone of comfort for the children, something to give them a sense of normalcy. That's when the idea of education struck me."

GATHERING RESOURCES AND LAYING THE FOUNDATION OF THE INITIATIVE

The first step was to collect educational materials. Pascale reached out to local bookstores [Librairie Antoine](#) and [Librairie Stephan](#), whose generous donations of books became the foundation of the initiative. These resources were kept at the Ras Beirut school as a gesture of gratitude to the school for hosting the families.

With the help of two teenagers who were themselves displaced but had homes in Beirut, Féghali sorted and organized the books. These teenagers not only volunteered their time but also helped define the program, contributing their perspectives to ensure it met the children's needs. *"I asked them, 'If you wanted to learn something, how would you like it to be taught?'"*

Féghali recalls. *"Their input helped us break away from rigid structures and create something more engaging."*

CREATING AN EDUCATIONAL SAFE SPACE FOR GROWTH

Together with a friend, Pascale transformed a corner of the school's basement into a cozy learning space, complete with carpets and cushions. Initially overwhelmed by the number of children, Pascale and her team divided them into smaller groups of 10 to 15, tailoring activities to their ages and skill levels. The sessions were conducted in both Arabic and English, focusing on helping the children relax and adapt to their new environment.

"The biggest challenge was getting the children to focus amidst the chaos," Pascale explains. "We started with gymnastics and breathing exercises to help them release stress, followed by simple activities like listening to short stories and sharing their thoughts. Over time, they began to relax, and we were able to introduce more complex activities like writing, math exercises, and creative storytelling."

The program was dynamic and flexible, evolving based on the children's needs and feedback. For some, this meant addressing challenges like dyslexia. For others, it was about building on their strengths. *"We tried to value their strengths first," Pascale says. "From there, we introduced elements to address their weaknesses and help them improve."*

As the children grew more comfortable, the sessions began to focus on culture and storytelling. They explored themes from their own regions, like the South and the Bekaa, and were encouraged to imagine futures for themselves. *"We wanted them to dream," Pascale explains. "Gradually, they started creating their own stories, acting them out, and even filming them. It was incredible to see their creativity and resilience shine through despite the difficult circumstances."*

The initiative provided the children with a routine and a sense of purpose. *"They started asking when the next session would be," Pascale recalls. "Some would wonder if they would return home before the next class."*

Eventually, as online schooling began, the initiative transitioned. Teachers sent assignments and resources to parents via WhatsApp, and Pascale's team helped the children adapt to this new mode of learning. However, as the demands of online schooling grew, it became clear that the children were overwhelmed. Recognizing

this, Pascale decided to wrap up the program, marking its conclusion with a special session where each child received books to continue their learning journey.

ON REIMAGINING EDUCATION POST- CEASEFIRE

Reflecting on the experience, Pascale emphasizes the need for flexible, long-term solutions for children in precarious situations. *“Even when families return to their homes, their lives remain unstable,”* she says. *“We need to think about initiatives that can bridge the gap between these children and formal education, perhaps by reaching them where they are.”*

Féghali’s initiative demonstrates the power of grassroots efforts to make a difference. She created a program that not only provided education but also gave children hope and a sense of stability.

Charbel Chaaya

ESDU: SUPPORTING PRODUCERS AND BUILDING RESILIENCE AMID CRISIS

In response to Lebanon's dire situation, since the start of the Israeli aggression on Lebanon, AUB's [Environment and Sustainable Development Unit \(ESDU\)](#) has initiated both immediate relief efforts and sustainable long-term initiatives.

Additionally, ESDU has joined AUB's Environmental and Urban Impact Task Force to collaborate on a post-war rebuilding strategy focused on agricultural sectors. This strategy prioritizes food security, rural livelihood restoration, and sustainable rebuilding practices, reflecting ESDU's commitment to fostering strength in Lebanon's rural landscape.

In this interview, we outline the role of ESDU in providing relief during the war, while also highlighting the unit's key actions and recommendations for the future.

"KEEPERS OF THE LAND": CAMPAIGN TO SUPPORT VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

ESDU swiftly mobilized under the "Keepers of the Land" campaign, urgently calling for donations to respond to the massive wave of internal displacement.

Keepers of the Land is an ESDU initiative aimed at protecting vulnerable communities, building capacities, and improving livelihoods. Additionally, it supports the education of students majoring in agricultural and food sciences by providing awards to undergraduate students and fellowships to graduate students.

By means of the generous support of the AREC 78 class and contributions from abroad, the unit was able to secure essential hygiene kits. These kits provided critical relief to the [AREC](#) community, many of whom are now being hosted at the AREC campus due to the devastation in their nearby hometowns.

"FOOD HERITAGE FOUNDATION" – THE ROAD TO COMMUNAL COOKING

Furthermore, ESDU staff quickly mobilized to support its sister NGO, the [Food Heritage Foundation \(FHF\)](#). Established by the ESDU in 2013, the Food Heritage Foundation is a non-profit organization that seeks to empower the livelihoods of Lebanese producers through several initiatives.

"The mission of FHF is to preserve traditional Lebanese culinary knowledge while empowering the livelihoods of small local producers by promoting home-cooked meals and local ingredients," says [Maha El Solh](#), Marketing and Partnership Coordinator at ESDU.

The team volunteered to ensure the daily distribution of hot meals to displaced individuals through FHF's ["Akletna Community Kitchen"](#). Over 8,000 meals have been distributed, with the support of partners such as "Souk El Balad".

LAUNCHING OF A TWO-PHASE FOOD SECURITY STRATEGY

The ESDU is currently developing a two-phase food security strategy to advise on the best course of action post-crisis. The first phase involves GIS (Geographical Information System) mapping to identify available resources in the country. Furthermore, it aims to assess the quality of soil and water, particularly by studying the impact of phosphorus bombings in the South.

The second phase of the strategy includes a desk review of published research, as well as consultations with local farmers to understand how agricultural practices are evolving in response to the war. *"This data will help create a detailed picture of the current food security situation and guide future recommendations,"* explains [Christelle Bou Harb](#), ESDU's Executive Officer and Renewable Energy Engineer.

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS FOR RECOVERY

Drawing on its expertise in food systems, the ESDU aims to develop recommendations for long-term recovery. Key strategies include identifying crops that have the potential to thrive despite soil pollution, as well as investing in agricultural solutions that mitigate the negative effects of land degradation.

“While the land has been severely impacted, there is still hope for recovery,” states [Diana Marroush](#), ESDU’s Liaison Officer. “We are working on ways to revive damaged agricultural systems. While the timeline remains uncertain, our main goal is to research ways to restore local food production.”

COLLABORATION AND INCLUSIVE APPROACH

Collaboration plays an important role in their strategy and rebuilding efforts, as the ESDU works closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environment. They also engage with local municipalities to ensure the community’s perspectives are incorporated into recovery plans. *“This is to ensure that relief efforts are inclusive and aligned with the national strategy, as well as local needs,”* explains Christelle.

This collaborative structure fosters learning and ensures that the organization’s approach remains effective and responsive to local needs.

Tala Nassif

NO2TA: CHAMPIONING WOMEN'S RIGHTS AMIDST WAR AND DISPLACEMENT IN LEBANON

In this interview, [Aliaa Awada](#), Managing Director of “No2ta – The Feminist Lab”, shares the organization’s response to the crisis in Lebanon as well as its impact on women and girls.

ACTIVISM IN TIMES OF CRISIS

“Our crisis intervention began during the October 7 war in Gaza,” says Awada. “With the displacement of thousands, our work focused on amplifying the voices of women and girls, both in Gaza and South Lebanon, where the effects of the war were deeply felt.”

From the beginning, “No2ta” centered its advocacy efforts around supporting women’s roles and struggles in conflict zones. The group’s primary mission is to create a platform for women to express themselves freely and without censorship—an essential aspect of their feminist agenda.

However, when the violence escalated in South Lebanon in September 2024, Awada acknowledged that their usual advocacy was no longer enough. *“We shifted to a more practical and hands-on approach,”* she says. Despite not specializing in emergency intervention, “No2ta” quickly mobilized, distributing 1,000 hygiene kits across three key regions in Lebanon.

One key feature of these hygiene kits was the inclusion of menstrual products, which are often overlooked in traditional aid packages. *“Menstrual health and needs are frequently neglected in first-response aid,”* Awada points out. *“We wanted to ensure that these essential items were available to women and girls, who are often forgotten in emergency efforts. The goal was to keep a feminist approach in our relief work.”*

A GROWING CRISIS

The recent war in Lebanon has led to the largest mass displacement in the country’s history, putting tremendous pressure on internally displaced persons. *“Many families, especially women, have found themselves suddenly uprooted, leaving everything behind,”* Awada explains. *“The situation is fragile, and it goes beyond the daily danger of living in areas under bombardment.”*

The crisis is especially hard on women, as many displaced families now find themselves with a woman at the head of the household. This shift, combined with the lack of proper facilities in displacement centers, has made life even more difficult for women. *“The spaces provided are often overcrowded, lacking privacy, and not equipped to meet women’s basic needs,”* Awada notes.

Additionally, Awada emphasizes that women are usually at a heightened risk of violence in terms of conflict. With displaced families struggling to find safety, the risk of violence against women and girls grows, leaving them even more vulnerable, making the organization’s advocacy efforts essential for awareness.

THE FUTURE: A VISION FOR CHANGE

Despite the increasingly challenging circumstances, “No2ta” remains committed to creating a safer, more inclusive future for women in the region. *“Our work goes beyond addressing immediate needs; we are also gathering data, conducting research, and analyzing the long-term impact of this crisis on women,”* says Awada. *“Our goal is to empower women to speak out, lead, and shape their own future in this region.”*

At a time of uncertainty, “No2ta” is proving that feminist activism is not only about advocacy and relief—it’s about providing tangible support and creating a platform for women to lead the way forward.

Tala Nassif

UNION FOR PROGRESSIVE WOMEN: LEADING FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN AMID CRISIS

The Union of Progressive Women has been at the forefront of advocating for women's rights in Lebanon for over four decades. With more than 2,000 volunteers spread across several Lebanese regions such as Baalbek, Bekaa, and Tyre, the organization has built a strong foundation for addressing gender-based issues.

Manal Said, the head of the Union of Progressive Women, outlines how the volunteers have worked tirelessly since the beginning of the September 2024 war to address issues like gender-based violence and psychosocial support for women and children in shelters.

RAPID RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS: FOCUSING ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

When violence escalated in Lebanon, the Union of Progressive Women immediately activated its emergency response plan. Said and her team recognized the urgency of addressing the needs of women and children, particularly the most vulnerable groups, including pregnant women and girls. *"The first thing we did was hold a meeting with our task force, and we quickly identified that our priority should be women and children, especially girls,"* Said explains.

Being a feminist organization, their response was rooted in a women-centered approach. The first priority was to address period poverty and provide essential hygiene products and clothing. The team also focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights, ensuring that women received the care and support they needed in several shelters.

SUPPORTING WOMEN THROUGH THE BIRTH PROCESS: A FOCUS ON DIGNITY AND PRIVACY

Many of the women seeking help were nearing childbirth, and the Union of Progressive Women made sure to provide them with the necessary support. Volunteers were also instrumental in accompanying women to medical appointments and supporting them during the birth and delivery process.

Beyond the basics, the organization's volunteers brought deep compassion to the work, helping mothers decorate their shelter rooms for the arrival of their babies and providing critical post-delivery care, including breastfeeding support and C-section recovery. The smallest details, such as offering a comforting environment for new mothers, made a significant difference for them.

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT: HEALING BEYOND THE PHYSICAL

In addition to meeting material needs, the Union of Progressive Women placed a strong emphasis on mental health. Recognizing the trauma many women and children were experiencing, the organization provided psychosocial support through art therapy and individual therapy sessions. These initiatives were critical in helping individuals process the emotional impact of displacement and violence.

Volunteers also received training on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, sexual harassment, and legal advocacy. This training ensured that the team was equipped to offer support and raise awareness about GBV in both displaced and host communities. *"We were worried about the acceptance of the host community on GBV topics, but we noticed how rooted the problem is, despite cultural barriers,"* Said reflects.

THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS: LOCAL WOMEN LEADING THE WAY

One of the most striking aspects of the Union of Progressive Women's work is the involvement of local volunteers. Many of the women in the organization are from the communities they serve, providing a deeply rooted and community-driven response to the crisis. Volunteers cooked meals for up to 500 people daily, coordinated essential deliveries, and ensured that women's needs were met in ways that went beyond basic material aid.

"These volunteers are also juggling their family lives, work, and other responsibilities. Their commitment to this cause is extraordinary," Said says. The local, grassroots approach of the organization has not only provided immediate relief but has also fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual care within the communities they serve.

A MINDFUL APPROACH: CENTERING WOMEN IN CONFLICT

Despite the challenging political and financial situation, the Union of Progressive Women continues to support women and children in Lebanon with unwavering dedication. The organization's efforts in providing both material support and psychological care are rooted in an unwavering commitment to the principles of feminism and humanitarianism. *"We are doing this with our own resources, and while we've received donations for material needs, human presence and psychological support are key,"* says Said.

Said concludes,

"These are our compatriots, these are women needing us. There is no afterthought of religion or politics; we are here to serve, and we will continue to do so."

Tala Nassif

OFFRE JOIE: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

“Offre Joie” is a volunteer-driven organization that has been working relentlessly to rebuild the physical environment and the social fabric of Lebanon. Founded in 1985 during the civil war, ‘Offre Joie’ was born out of a mission to bridge the gap between communities torn apart by conflict.

THE POWER OF VOLUNTEERS: A UNIQUE APPROACH TO RELIEF

One of the key aspects that sets ‘Offre Joie’ apart from other organizations is its focus on voluntary service. Following the Beirut explosion, it mobilized 6,000 individuals from 17 countries to rebuild the city, transforming what was once a place of destruction into a symbol of hope, solidarity, and resilience.

“We have the privilege of seeing firsthand how the power of youth and collective action can turn a disaster into a space to rebuild,” says Marc Torbey, the president of the organization. *“Our volunteers are more than just aid workers—they’re catalysts for change.”*

One of the most remarkable projects that ‘Offre Joie’ has undertaken since the beginning of the Israeli attacks on Lebanon in September 2024 is ‘Operation Flora’. This operation included the transformation of a vacant government-owned land in Karantina into a space to house the displaced community. Within just 8 days, volunteers managed to clear 600 truckloads of debris, preparing the space for the installation of a guesthouse that would offer shelter to those displaced by the disaster.

“A large portion of displaced people who were in the Manara and Ramlit el Bayda areas were relocated to this lot,” says Marc. *“It is this sense of human connection at the core of our mission.”*

Additionally, the organization has been able to carry out massive projects, such as the rehabilitation of four shelters housing displaced communities, the restoration of damaged buildings, and providing material support to over 1,000 people.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN CONNECTION IN CRISIS RECOVERY

While material aid is essential, Torbey believes that human presence and engagement are what truly make a difference in the recovery process. *“Some people may have a roof over their heads now, but what they need most is human contact,”* he emphasizes. *“These people have gone through the unthinkable. They need someone to hear their stories, to hold their hand. That human connection is just as important as any material help we can offer.”*

“Offre Joie” is dedicated to continuing to offer emotional support, especially for those who are struggling with trauma, and to being an active pillar of the rebuilding efforts. *“Hopefully, people will return to their villages, but they will still need help rebuilding their lives. This is where we come in—we will be there to help them get back on their feet.”*

INCLUSION: BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS FOR PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Marc’s personal journey has also influenced Offre Joie’s approach to inclusion. Eight years ago, Marc was involved in a diving accident that left him tetraplegic. Despite the physical challenges he faces, he has found peace in the work he does and believes that people with disabilities can make a huge impact on their communities.

“I have learned from my personal experience that people with special needs are incredibly resilient and capable,” Marc says.

“They have unique talents and gifts. They can be a huge asset to society, and that is something we should never forget.”

He encourages people with disabilities to volunteer and take an active role in rebuilding Lebanon, noting that sometimes the smallest gestures—a smile, a helping hand—can make a world of difference.

“It is about creating a society where everyone, regardless of their abilities, can contribute without fear.”

He adds by noting that the attitude that some people might have towards the disabled community can often be hurtful or awkward, with people not knowing what to say. *‘It is simple, just smile.’*

JOIN THE MOVEMENT: BE A PART OF THE CHANGE

For Marc and his team, their mission is more than just a job—it is a moral obligation. *“Every small action counts,”* Marc says. *“If we all come together, we can rebuild Lebanon and create a brighter future for its people.”*

The work of “Offre Joie” is far from over. Volunteers are still needed, and the organization welcomes anyone who wants to make a tangible difference.

Tala Nassif

MMKN: TRANSFORMING EDUCATION AND INSPIRING HOPE

Established in 2010, “[MMKN](#)” was founded with a vision to transform education and inspire responsible citizenship through inclusive and innovative educational practices.

Over the years, MMKN has successfully built a model that not only addresses education gaps but also fosters a sense of social responsibility and community support. By focusing on public school students, the organization has created a ripple effect of positive change across Lebanon’s education sector. In this interview, [Ghada Feghali](#), Chairperson of MMKN, outlines the main actions they have taken during the 2024 war in Lebanon.

ABOUT MMKN

With customized teaching materials and free-of-charge educational programs, MMKN bridges the gap between public and private schools, giving underserved students opportunities for success.

“We primarily target students in grades 8 and 9—critical years in the public education system where dropout rates are alarmingly high,”

explains Feghali.

To address this issue, the organization enlists volunteer university students to support younger learners by teaching them subjects like math, physics, chemistry, and Biology, through online and in-person learning.

ADAPTING TO CRISIS

When the COVID-19 pandemic brought education systems to a halt, MMKN quickly adapted to ensure learning continued uninterrupted. Utilizing WhatsApp, the team delivered reinforcement classes in many subjects, allowing students to keep up with their education despite the limitations of remote learning.

The organization’s ability to innovate and remain agile has been a cornerstone of its success. This was particularly evident in their response to the 2024 Israeli escalation, when MMKN became a beacon of hope for displaced students and their families.

“When we saw the number of displaced students out of schools, we simply had to act,” outlines Feghali. Therefore, in addition to their usual support for grades 8 and 9, MMKN launched an in-person educational initiative at Dhour Choueir School, focusing on educating displaced children in grades 1–6.

Twelve volunteers, who were themselves displaced, were trained in collaboration with Lebanon Resist in classroom management, lesson planning, and ice-breaking techniques to lead the program. For three days a week, from 3 PM to 6 PM, these volunteers taught subjects like Math, English, and Arabic, ensuring that children in shelters regained a sense of normalcy.

MMKN’s approach went beyond academics, as the team organized workshops and activities designed to uplift children’s spirits and address psychosocial needs in collaboration with AUB and LAU volunteering students. Displaced children participated in interactive sessions such as drawing and coloring, planting and gardening, and chocolate-making, which brought joy during difficult times. By providing stationery, backpacks, and other school supplies, MMKN ensured that children had all the tools they needed to engage fully in their learning.

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

MMKN's impact extended beyond the classroom, as they partnered with organizations such as the LAU psychology department to offer psychosocial support to displaced students and families alike. The organization introduced sessions on managing anxiety to equip displaced children with practical tools to manage their stress. MMKN also emphasized community-building activities, such as wool-knitting for the elderly, street cleaning, and creative sessions aimed at fostering connection and resilience.

As families began to stabilize following the war, MMKN resumed its core programs. *"By November 4, we had restarted our grade 8–9 initiatives, prioritizing students enrolled in public schools who had been unable to follow up on their studies due to closures,"* affirms Feghali.

A LEGACY OF SUCCESS

Since its inception, MMKN has reached over 21,000 students, engaged 3,100 volunteers, and achieved a remarkable 96% success rate on student examinations. MMKN's ability to integrate displaced volunteers, provide psychosocial support, and deliver effective educational programs sets it apart as a leader in crisis response and education reform. With strong partnerships, creativity, and a deep understanding of community needs, MMKN has transformed challenges into opportunities for growth and learning.

As MMKN continues its journey, its mission remains clear: to transform education, bridge gaps, and empower communities. By inspiring students, training volunteers, and fostering hope during the most challenging times, MMKN is not just shaping individual lives but also building a brighter and more inclusive future for generations to come.

Tala Nassif

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