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Introduction

There is no question that in Lebanon we are facing multiple crises. The Beirut Blast exacerbated the already deleterious effects of these crises. Killing more than 200 people, injuring thousands, and severely damaging the homes and businesses of approximately 250,000, the blast put “additional pressures” on the livelihoods of both Lebanese and non-Lebanese affected by the blast (ReliefWeb, 2021). Infrastructural damages to the area “including transport, energy, water supply and sanitation, and municipal services” total between U.S. $390-475 million, with the World Bank estimating that “material damage” amounted to $3.8-4.6 billion (HRW, 2021). According to the World Food Program (WFP), the effects of the Beirut Blast have “plunged millions into poverty,” with the WFP supporting “1 in 6 families” in Lebanon (Schlein, 2021). The Blast also contributed to rising mental health concerns in the country, as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Lebanon noted: “[callers] are showing distress, trauma, and anxiety disorders…recalling the moments when the blast happened and all the negative emotions they felt and lived at this moment. Many needed specialized mental health services to recover” (O’Grady, 2020; Rayes, 2021).

As in most crises, communities who experience additional vulnerabilities as a result of citizenship status (or lack thereof), gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity, and disability experienced the Blast in more acute ways. For example, the explosion wiped out several districts that played a vital role in the lives of marginalized communities. For example, Mar Mikhail, which was a vital space open to gender minorities; Karantina, a working-class neighborhood home to Syrian and Palestinian refugees and non-Arab migrant workers; and Burj Hammoud, another working-class neighborhood home to various non-Lebanese communities as well as a large Lebanese Armenian population (Barkawi, 2020). As a representative from the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) succinctly put it: “After the blast, these refugees go back to being refugees with all the vulnerabilities that come with that. They will be the first ones to find themselves in the street. The same goes for migrant workers as well" (Trew, 2020).

We argue that a gender lens is necessary for making sense of the Blast. In particular, we argue that only by engaging with feminist analyses and critiques of the situation in Lebanon both before and after the Blast will we be able to understand how and why such a needless atrocity occurred, and the struggle for survival in its aftermath. A gender lens is also necessary for thinking about the disproportionate burdens that marginalized groups, including women and girls, LGBTQ+ persons, non-citizens, and people with disability bear during such times of crisis. This paper begins by outlining what such a gender analytical framework might look like. It then turns toward the gender-disaggregated data that exists pertaining to the Beirut Blast. The paper concludes with a discussion about the feminist mobilizations that occurred in response to the needs of those affected by the Blast.

Breaking Down Concurrent Crises: A Feminist Political Economy of Lebanon

According to the World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor (LEM) Lebanon is undergoing a "*deliberate* depression…orchestrated by the country's elite that has long captured the state and lived off its economic rents" (World Bank, 2022). Since 2019, the country has experienced the largest recorded GDP contraction, approximately 58.1%, and inflation has surged to nearly 145% (as of 2021), putting the country third in the world behind Venezuela and Sudan (World Bank, 2022). The collapse in buying power has left families without adequate resources to meet their daily needs, including food, paying rent and electricity bills, and medications (Qiblawi, 2021). Further, little responsibility has been taken by the political elite for the situation Lebanon now finds itself in. Instead, rampant xenophobia targeting non-Lebanese, particularly Syrian refugees, remains a popular form of scapegoating.

Correctly, many international financial institutions, in particular the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, have argued that the "current" crises are not really current at all but are symptomatic of a decades-long economic program defined by the "parasitic relationship between the financial sector and the state" that led to "irresponsible policies" that ultimately caused this financial crisis (Ghreichi, 2022). The complexity of the current economic situation cannot be understated; however, several key factors have contributed to the country's massive debt, beginning with Rafic Hariri's neoliberal restructuring policies and reforms in the aftermath of the civil war.

In an attempt to encourage international spending and investment in Lebanon, Hariri successfully moved to peg the Lebanese Lira to the U.S. Dollar; unevenly focused reconstruction funds and efforts in the downtown area of Beirut rather than around Lebanon; and implemented tax reforms favoring the wealthy (Abdo et al., 2020). Importantly, while Hariri focused on opening Lebanon up to foreign investment, he allowed former militia leaders, now turned politicians, access to various service ministries, which they ultimately used to shore up patronage (Bauman, 2016). By the early 2000s, Lebanon was already experiencing high levels of debt and sought support in the form of financial loans from international donors through the Paris I, II, and III conferences. Following the IMF's predetermined model favoring austerity policies as a key tenant for ensuring financial growth, all three Paris donor conferences included provisions for lower social spending, the privatization of public services such as water filtration and electricity, and increases in direct taxes such as VAT, all of which contributed to rising rates of inequality and a weakened state capacity to support social welfare (Abdo et al., 2020).

From a feminist lens, the lack of financial support and political concern for the work of social reproduction—the physical and emotional labor required to take care of human beings on a day-to-day basis (Bakker & Silvey, 2008)—is a common thread throughout Lebanon's pre- and post-civil war history that has led to the concurrent socioeconomic crises we are facing today. Inadequate social spending on public infrastructure and welfare has left the population completely vulnerable to economic shocks (Abdo et al., 2020). More critically, the lack of a public-funded welfare system has in practice resulted in families and communities taking on the brunt of social reproduction work (Joseph, 2005). Within this arrangement, women and girls have traditionally been responsible for providing the unpaid work of social reproduction, including caring for children and elderly family members, cooking and cleaning, and other domestic tasks (Abou Habib, 2020).

In addition to the material tasks of care in the household, social reproduction also refers to the processes through which society is reproduced (Laslett & Brenner, 1989). This broader definition of social reproduction brings into view Lebanon's historical and continuing dependence on poor Lebanese and non-Lebanese migrants and refugees to perform the brunt of the undervalued, cheapened, and precarious work of social reproduction. As the Lebanese elite turned their attention toward the money-making activities of the tertiary (service) sector and facilitating foreign investments, while simultaneously withdrawing funding from public infrastructure, foreign labor, today composed of primarily Syrians (Chalcraft, 2008) and non-Arab migrants, including migrant domestic workers (Amnesty International, 2019), has moved into Lebanon to take up this work alongside poor Lebanese. Without access to the full extent of the social security system (NSSF) that exists, and often without the protection of the labor law (e.g. agricultural and domestic workers of all nationalities are excluded from the Lebanese Labor Law), these workers are more easily exploited and thereby rendered "cheap" for Lebanese employers. Meanwhile, receiving states such as Lebanon have long preferred such labor because, as they argue, there is no need to provide these workers with any access to social welfare, as their social welfare supposedly only takes place in their home countries (Arat-Koç, 2006).

Finally, the lack of concern for social reproduction in Lebanon reinforced by the irresponsible fiscal policies implemented over the last several decades has organized a system that values capitalist gains over life itself. Within this system, concerns for the welfare of the population—including access to affordable healthcare, rigorous and affordable education for citizens and non-citizens, and access to a strong social welfare system for workers and non-workers alike—take a literal backseat to the concerns about the welfare of the economy. Corruption has run rampant while concerns about the poorest and most marginalized remain invisible. Instead of considering long-term, sustainable development plans for a comprehensive social protection system, the state has continued to opt for temporary protection programs, such as the National Poverty Targeting Program, that do not provide adequate support nor do they give recipients the aid needed to eventually transition out of poverty (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). And instead of funding an inclusive and equitable healthcare system, the state has relegated control and provision of healthcare to networks of sectarian providers and civil society organizations, leaving many households and communities dependent on personal connections (*wasta*) to secure healthcare (Cammett, 2014).

It is within this context that the explosion at the Port of Beirut claimed the lives of more than 200 people, injured nearly 70,000 people, some of whom have sustained lifelong disabilities as a result, and damaged billions of dollars' worth of infrastructure. Worse, the country's historical devaluation of social reproduction will mean that the work of care—for each other and for our communities—will remain the sole responsibility of the people, as several articles in this issue highlight. For that reason, collecting testimonies and documenting the experiences and realities of the most vulnerable in the aftermath of the Blast are key to any recovery process that hopes to put life, rather than the economy, first. Towards that end, various organizations across the country have taken the initiative to document the increasing burdens on marginalized groups, in particular women and girls, LGBTQ+ persons, refugees, migrants, and people with disabilities, in the aftermath of the Blast, which worsened many of the crises already occurring in the country. While it is impossible to cover all of these studies in this paper, the next section offers a brief overview of what is known about the status of marginalized groups as they struggle to survive in the aftermath of the Beirut Blast.

What We Know So Far: The Gendered Consequences of the Current Crises

Gender-Based Violence

Vulnerable groups in Lebanon were at a heightened risk of violence, especially due to the COVID-19 lockdowns. Indeed, gender-based violence incidents have increased amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused women and girls to feel less safe in their households (Panagoulia, 2020). The number of calls to KAFA's (2020) hotline reportedly doubled within a month since the start of the COVID-19 lockdown measures. Members of the LGBTQ+ community also reported concern and fear of harassment and violence due to the increased security patrols and checkpoints enforcing lockdowns (NCLW et al., 2021).

The economic crisis, compounded with the COVID-19 pandemic, has also played a major part in increasing a particular form of gender-based violence: child, early, and forced marriage. In 2020, child marriage was reportedly the second most common form of gender-based violence in Lebanon (IRC, 2020). Recent findings suggest that the deteriorating economic conditions may have driven parents to marry off their daughters as a negative coping mechanism (UNICEF, 2021), especially in the Bekaa region where there was the highest percentage of reported child marriage cases (GBVIMS, 2021).

After the Beirut Blast, the rates of sexual and gender-based violence were exacerbated due to different factors, including multiple families living in crowded settings, lack of public streetlights, household stress, and increased military and police presence (NCLW et al., 2021). Non-binary persons were at an increased risk of violence because they had to move back in with abusive and homophobic or transphobic family members after they had lost their homes in the Beirut Blast (Barkawi, 2020), which was already an issue due to the already deteriorating economic conditions.

Increasing Labor Insecurity

The compounded crises have affected women's ability to participate in the labor force and their access to economic opportunities. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, demands for additional care work have aggravated the gender division of labor, as traditional gender norms continue to dictate that women and girls are primarily responsible for care and reproductive work (Abou Habib, 2020). In the COVID-19 era, women across the region have reported an increase in the demands of care work, with the International Labour Organization (ILO) documenting an 81% increase in domestic work among its survey participants (Kebede et al., 2020). In Lebanon, women also reported feeling increased burdens of care work, especially as government-enforced lockdowns meant that schooling was also added to the already long list of domestic tasks that women were responsible for before the pandemic (Panagoulia, 2020). Further, studies reveal that the increasing need for care work in the household has resulted in women feeling pressured to leave the workforce in order to meet these additional care needs (UN Women, 2020).

Broadly, women have experienced more relative job loss and job insecurity than men over the course of the concurrent crises of the pandemic, the economic collapse, and the Beirut Blast. This is due to several critical factors, first, women are highly concentrated in informal employment relations and part-time work, all of which, without adequate government oversight or labor protections, has made it easier for employers to fire these workers before turning toward their full-time labor force (Salti & Mezher, 2020). Approximately one-third of all working women are working in high-risk sectors, and also make up the majority of education and healthcare workers, putting them at the frontlines of the COVID-19 (AiW, 2021b) and the Beirut Blast response (UN Women, 2021). Additionally, the concentration of women in certain sectors, particularly the public sector, banking, healthcare, and education, puts them at a higher risk of taking major cuts to their salaries, losing social benefits, or losing their jobs due to government austerity measures (ILO & UNICEF, 2022). Overall, women have lost their jobs more than men following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in Lebanon, 40.54 and 28.85% respectively (Panagoulia, 2020).

While gender-disaggregated data about women's economic status in Lebanon following the Beirut Blast is limited, several Rapid Gender Assessments conducted by various local and international organizations have highlighted the severe economic costs to women. In one study conducted two weeks after the Blast, it was reported that women-headed households were "10% less likely than male-headed households to report at least one member had generated income" since the Blast, while half of all women-led businesses would be unable to reopen after the Blast without financial assistance (UN Women, CARE, et al., 2020).

Refugees and Migrants' Access to Economic Opportunities.

Marginalized women such as refugees and migrants, non-heterosexual women, and women living with disabilities also face severely limited options for dignified and sustainable livelihoods in the aftermath of the Blast (UN Women, CARE, et al., 2020). Among Syrian refugees, women continue to have less access to economic opportunities than Syrian refugee men (UNHCR et al., 2021). Syrian women frequently reported being left out of support initiatives run by local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGO), including those distributing food and other necessary items in the aftermath of the Blast, with many reporting that they were unable to receive aid "due to physical access, affordability, discrimination, and documentation barriers" (UN Women, CARE, et al., 2020).

Migrant domestic workers (MDW) have also been experiencing grave injustice in the face of these concurrent crises. Since the onset of the pandemic, MDW have been forced to continue working often without access to appropriate personal protective equipment, including masks and gloves, while being denied proper healthcare by their employers, including access to PCR testing and COVID-19 treatment (Mezher et al., 2020). This is compounded by the collapse of the Lebanese Lira, which employers are frequently using as an excuse to deny MDW their salaries. In some of the worst cases, employers unwilling to pay MDW have dropped them off on the streets in front of their respective embassies without reimbursing them their salaries or the necessary repatriation fees for workers to return safely to their home countries (Qiblawi, 2020). Worse, for those workers who do have the funds to leave Lebanon, they are often without their necessary personal documentation, such as their passports, as these are often illegally held by employers under the guise of the restrictive sponsorship system known as the *kafala* system (Ramadan, 2021).

While many NGOs have stepped in to try and support MDW, many workers remain trapped by these concurrent crises. Under the *kafala* system, which keeps live-in domestic workers particularly vulnerable, workers whose employers were affected by the Blast often lost their jobs as a result. In other instances, racist treatment at the hands of their employers resulted in some workers being left injured in the household after the Blast, even as their employers went to seek medical help. Others were unable to leave their households after the explosion, as employers had locked them in after leaving, a common practice allowed under the *kafala* system (Anti-Racism Movement, 2021).

LGBTQ+ Persons and the Economy

Queer communities are also facing increased economic pressures due to COVID-19, the economic crisis, and the Beirut Blast, which have all made it more difficult to maintain access to a secure income without fear of discrimination, sexual harassment, blackmail, and underpayment. Further, while many people, specifically youth, are returning to their families during extended stay-at-home orders or in the cases where they have lost a primary source of income, many LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming persons do not have this option, as they face violence and discrimination from their own families (El Masri, 2020). As Human Rights Watch notes, these stay-at-home orders and other restrictions on mobility have dire consequences on LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming communities: “Due to social stigma and violence by security forces, many transgender people prefer to go out at night and rely for what they need mostly on delivery services, which have dwindled due to the lockdown” (Younes, 2020). Thus, without access to safe housing and a stable source of income, many LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming persons have been forced to rely on the often inconsistent donations from civil society and international humanitarian groups, which are already dwindling as a result of the global financial crisis resulting from COVID-19. In other instances, LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming communities have been pushed into the informal economy to survive, which leaves these workers unprotected and liable to extreme exploitation and violence (Salem & Shaaban, 2020).

Lack of Access to Healthcare

Women and girls have reported a lack of access to health services, particularly sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) (ACAPS, 2020). One study revealed that around 42% of women reported that they had no access to family planning solutions and SRHR services since the COVID-19 outbreak (Panagoulia, 2020). This is perhaps due to the soaring prices of contraception, including condoms and contraceptive pills, which may result in increased rates of unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and possibly unsafe abortions (Ramadan, 2022). However, studies on access to SRHR during pandemics have pointed to the fact that hospital and clinic closures, and the inaccessibility of routine health services, are what put women, girls, and marginalized groups at risk during pandemics (Medecins San Frontieres, 2020). In Lebanon, women also face hegemonic discourse within the healthcare sector and beyond that does not see SRHR, and women's healthcare more broadly, as essential healthcare. Thus, SRHR needs are often the first to be cut from medical programming or shut down during government-enforced lockdowns (UN Women Arab States, 2020).

The economic crisis in Lebanon has also led to rising period poverty, which is the lack of access to safe, hygienic menstrual products, and/or the inability to manage a period with dignity (ActionAid, 2022). Sanitary products have seen a sharp 500% increase in price amid the economic crisis in Lebanon (Abueish, 2021). As one recent study revealed, 76% of those interviewed who menstruate in Lebanon are unable to buy sanitary products, of which more than two-thirds identified as Syrian refugees (Plan International, 2021).

Other vulnerable groups equally suffered from a lack of access to full first aid care. Migrant workers, persons with disabilities, Syrian refugees, and LGBTQ+ persons reported limited access to first aid due to physical access, affordability, discrimination, and documentation barriers (UN Women, CARE, et al., 2020). Access to sexual and reproductive health services was also affected by the Beirut Blast because it reduced health centers' capacities (UN Women, NCLW, et al., 2020). Among the most affected populations were pregnant and lactating women, who were in urgent need of access to maternal and child healthcare (OCHA et al., 2020).

Access to mental wellbeing and healthcare services also took a severe hit after the Beirut Blast (AiW, 2021a). In Lebanon, this infrastructure was already weakened and for many communities nonexistent prior to these crises; however, the onset of COVID-19 completely overloaded the few resources available to those in Lebanon (UN Women, NCLW, et al., 2020). As UN Women reported toward the beginning of the pandemic in May, 2020, more than 50% of all callers to a national mental health hotline operated by Embrace were women. Meanwhile, 94% of migrants seeking support from Medecin Sans Frontieres in the country sought mental health services (UN Women, NCLW, et al., 2020).

A Gender-Blind Response, A Gender-Focused Reaction

These statistics notwithstanding, the Lebanese government with the support of international donors including the EU and the World Bank embarked on a recovery plan that did not take gender, race, disability, among several other marginalized identities, into consideration (Zabaneh, this issue). This lack of consideration eventually led actors on the ground to mobilize in response, which culminated in the formation of the Feminist Charter of Demands by Feminist Activists and Women's Rights Organisations in Lebanon, which made five summary demands of international and local donors and the Lebanese Government in response to their gender-blind response to the Beirut Blast. These demands included: (1) Conducting a gender assessment of needs and priorities, (2) ensuring women's representation, leadership, and inclusion in the response, (3) providing food security, shelter, and sustainable livelihoods to those affected by the Blast, (4) preventing and responding to violence against women and girls, and finally, (5) ensuring access to health services and sexual and reproductive health rights. In response to the Feminist Charter, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) announced its first funding stream with the aim to support gender equality and feminist proposals and projects on the ground in Lebanon (Abbani and Schmitz, this issue).

Ensuring that funding is put directly in the hands of those on the ground working toward gender equality and feminist goals is a key component of gender-equitable recovery. In Lebanon, locally organized funds like the Queer Relief Fund (The Beirut Blast and the Queer Community, this issue) have been a cornerstone in ensuring that any post-Beirut Blast recovery initiatives put the needs of marginalized communities at the core. There have also been several key initiatives organized by the Lebanese diaspora using various social media platforms, including Instagram, to raise awareness about GoFundMe campaigns to bring money directly to those conducting relief work on the ground in Lebanon. Collectively, these practices draw from and loosely resemble what might be thought of as a larger network of mutual aid practices, which are grounded in the survival strategies of marginalized communities.

Here in Lebanon, as the interlocutors of The Beirut Blast and the Queer Community article discuss, these practices stem from those located in embedded positions within their communities, which references the years of hard work done by folks in these communities to know each other and to remain grounded in these networks over time. Using whatever social privileges they might have—for example, class privileges (those who had access to financial resources) or family privileges (those whose families accepted them without question)—these members of the queer community in Lebanon were able to mobilize and raise funds for what is now known as the Queer Relief Fund, which works to support those in need, including those outside of the queer community, in Lebanon after the Beirut Blast.

Arguably, these practices of mutual aid sit in direct contradistinction to the ways that international humanitarian and relief funding is mobilized and administered and, therefore, serves as an important lesson for international and local organizations seeking to center gender equitable, and socially just practices in their humanitarian relief work. First, these networks start at the level of the community, not only in terms of statistics and data but in terms of relationships and trust. While data on marginalized groups are critical, so, too, is grounded knowledge from within the very groups that humanitarian aid hopes to serve. For that reason, qualitative documentation, including personal testimonies, is just as important to collect as quantitative data. Equally important is allowing these communities to participate in decision-making processes and to set the terms for funding and projects within their own communities.

While feminists have been calling for such inclusion for ages, in practice, inclusion is limited and often hierarchical.

Additionally, mutual aid networks are important because of how they organize and distribute resources. Rather than "siloing" funding or dividing resources into categories such as "housing" or "healthcare," these networks address the needs of their beneficiaries in totality, linking the intersectional lived realities of their beneficiaries instead of addressing their needs only as gender "plus" another marginalized category. More importantly, this type of holistic mutual aid allows communities to access sustainable support, rather than short-term support that ends with the conclusion of funding or the "end of the crisis." This gives individuals and households the chance to shore up resources and to secure themselves ahead of the inevitable "next" crisis under capitalism, and simultaneously strengthens communities to protect themselves in the face of an often-hostile government and other external actors.

Conclusion

The detrimental effects of the Beirut Blast, the third most powerful non-nuclear explosion in the world, persist with no accountability in sight (Majzoub & Jeannerod, 2022). The incongruities between the pledges promoted in the Lebanese Constitution, the country's commitments under all international conventions and instruments including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), and the realities on the ground are appalling. Rather than acknowledging and responding to its commitments to the safety and wellbeing of its population as articulated in these documents, the Lebanese state has avoided all responsibility related to the Beirut Blast, the economic crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the face of the state's obstinance, feminist mobilizations on the ground have been a key component of protection and reconstruction in the aftermath of the Beirut Blast. As many of the articles and personal testimonies in this issue of *Al-Raida* demonstrate, community-based work has emerged as a powerful antithesis to the state's continued inaction. In other words, community-based feminist practices have foregrounded the importance of life. In their emphasis on emotional and physical care; financial support to the most vulnerable; accessible healthcare; and access to everyday resources, including food items and personal hygiene materials, these feminist responses choose to center social reproduction and life-making practices. Embedded in this (re)orientation to life-making is a radical political potential to disrupt normative practices and systems that continue to value capital gains over human life.

Documenting and learning from these successful feminist practices in the aftermath of the Blast can therefore serve as an important blueprint for feminist work in the future, as we continue to struggle against a system that devalues life. Our hope is that this issue of *Al-Raida* can give readers insights into not only the experiences of marginalized groups during and after the Blast, but that readers can learn from the grassroots feminist mobilizations that took place in Lebanon in response to the horrific devastation of the Blast as they move forward in their own feminist practices, whether here in Lebanon, in the region, or internationally.

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