

The Beirut Blast: Two Years On

Arab Institute for Women & The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship

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The Beirut Blast: Two Years On

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Writing these lines knowing that two years have passed since the Beirut port explosion, a blast that marked us for life, is surreal. After 24 months, there is no redress or punishment or accountability. For most of us it was as if time stopped. The two years that followed the blast have been tough to say the least. We struggled with loss, death, mental breakdown, the pandemic, a debilitating economic crisis, to mention a few.

Prior to the deadly blast and the generation-defining COVID-19 pandemic, we were at the height of our activism partaking in the October 17 revolution. We marched the streets calling for an end to the status quo, which is rife with corruption and discrimination. The October 17 revolution was a feminist revolution par excellence, where gender rights were at the forefront and intersectionality took center stage. The feminist demands were not only numerous but were age-old demands that had been left unfulfilled year after year. They included calls to replace the personal status codes with civil codes, giving women the right to pass on their citizenship to their children and husband, countering gender-based violence, imposing a quota system in politics, prioritizing sexual and reproductive health and rights, abolishing the *kafala* system for migrant workers, and prioritizing marginalized groups.

Women, girls, and other marginalized groups were the hardest hit by the explosion, have suffered disproportionately due to the ongoing economic crisis, and struggle in specific ways under the pressures of COVID-19. Data from reports and rapid assessments continue to prove this: The more vulnerable and marginalized one is, the more one feels the intensity of discrimination and, consequently, the more one struggles to survive during moments of crisis. All victims and survivors of the blast, of course, were gravely affected and experienced their own trauma. However, vulnerable groups fared worse simply because in many instances, they were already facing limited access to money, food, shelter, sustainable livelihoods, and adequate medical care, which only increased their risk of food insecurity, poverty, homelessness, violence due to displacement, over-

crowded shelters, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and racism in the aftermath of the Beirut blast.

The lack of proper medical care, experiences of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) and other mental health issues, as well as the stigma associated with disabilities in Lebanon have made it even more difficult for survivors of the Beirut blast who are now experiencing life with a disability. One such example is Liliane Cheaito, whose case exemplifies the intersections of patriarchal control vis-à-vis the personal status codes, the stigmatization and alienation experienced by people with disabilities in Lebanon, and the lack of adequate healthcare support for those who are experiencing longer-term effects as a result of the explosion. On the day of the explosion, Liliane Cheaito was shopping for a birthday present for her husband. The blast changed her life forever. She sustained very serious injuries to the head and has been hospitalized ever since. Using her paralysis, Cheaito's husband argued that her disability made her an "unfit" parent, which allowed him, in the eyes of the law, to legally sever all ties between Cheaito and her child. Instead of receiving social and emotional support for her recovery journey, Cheaito was forcibly rendered helpless by the personal status laws and a patriarchal society that prioritizes men and their interests. Apparently, "in sickness and in health" does not apply to Cheaito's husband or his parents, who helped him to take custody of the child.

Liliane Cheaito is a living example of how the deeply engrained patriarchal structures allow spouses full control over women's lives. The story of Liliane exposes the stark reality we are living in: We need to be healthy, beautiful, and fit to be wives and mothers. Once we do not fit the criteria, we become unfit wives and mothers and are punished for it. Cheaito's story also highlights the horrific realities of those seeking medical care in Lebanon at the height of the economic collapse. Cheaito is unable to receive the specialized care she needs not only because the Lebanese healthcare system is unequipped to provide such care, but also because her parents have been unable to access their savings to pay for this care. With their life savings stuck in the bank, the experiences of Cheaito's parents a common scenario for most Lebanese, as the banks continue to prevent them from taking money out of their accounts.

In this issue of *Al-Raida*, in collaboration with the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut (AUB), we try to examine the blast through the eyes of feminists and marginalized groups. We try to showcase how the crisis is magnified through the prism of vulnerability, and how personal testimonies and stories need to be documented so as not to forget. Of course, we were only able to uncover some of the stories. There are many, many more left untold. However, we hope that this issue of *Al-Raida* can serve as a starting block for future efforts to collect even more personal testimonies, stories, and reflections about the Beirut blast and the ways that people continue to live with the ongoing trauma of the explosion.