

# **Effects of economic crisis on gender-based violence- Case of Lebanon**

by

Rony Youssef

201802164

Asfari Institute

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One might think that the main reasons women experience domestic violence are that their partners might have been exposed to child abuse, low education, and violence against their mothers. However, have you ever thought that a correlation can exist between the economic state in a house and the increase in gender-based violence? What if this economic crisis is taking all over a country and hitting it very hard? Hence, one can imagine the rapid increase of domestic violence. The economic crisis Lebanon is facing has turned people's lives upside down. In 2019, the economy plunged into a financial crisis that became today the major cause of increase in poverty and unemployment. Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic uncontrollably spread in Lebanon in the context of a collapsed economy as well as the explosion that happened in Beirut worsened the situation and exhausted the mental health of citizens (Ngcuka, 2020). In this paper, I will dwell deeper into how the economic crisis aggravated by a social and a pandemic crisis has affected men's mental well-being and has exacerbated the violence exerted against Lebanese women. Violence, discrimination, and inequality confronted by women are not limited only to Lebanese women but also include foreign domestic workers. For that, I will also shed the light on this issue as well and provide recommendations that can help overcome these problems.

The recent financial crisis Lebanon is facing and the drastic decrease in the currency's purchasing power is linked to neo-liberal politics such as the reliance on remittances, loans, and aid from outside (Majed, 2021). These economic politics have led to this crisis since Lebanon's economy relies heavily on imported goods rather than its fragile local production. Today, Lebanon is facing dangerous symptoms of the "Dutch disease" since its capital inflow has been relying on aid to grow and this has led to the collapse of other economic sectors with time (Majed, 2021).

The economic situation in Lebanon aggravated different types of violence experienced by women. It is acclaimed that the confinement at home due to COVID-19 and the absence of income fostered the tension at home created by worries of access to resources, security, and increased direct violence. I strongly believe that domestic violence can highly be encountered at homes where the husband is the only income receiver. Enforcing men to stay at home because of the virus and not receiving enough resources and money help from the government because of the financial crisis, will push violent partners to get it out on their wives and involve themselves in violent behaviors. According to the data shared by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, reports of domestic violence increased and more specifically doubled

compared to previous years: with 1468 cases received in the past 12 months compared to 748 cases last year (Houssari, 2021). Hayat Mirshad, the co-founder at FE-MALE, a civil feminist collective group, stated that the increase in domestic violence in Lebanon is primarily due to the economic and financial crisis exacerbated by the pandemic and the explosion that tore through Beirut. Women had to suffer the consequences of this economic crisis manifested by the violence they experience from their male relatives. Moreover, Lebanese women have also been experiencing indirect violence from the government. The inflation rate reached its peak in 2021 at 145.85% (Trading Economics, 2021). Hyperinflation is a rare phenomenon in the world, but it is now the daily bread of the Lebanese people. This crisis allowed the increase in women's menstrual product prices by 500% (Fe-Male, 2020). Men in houses are stating that these sanitary essentials became a luxury to women. In my opinion, this is one of the most dangerous types of indirect violence experienced by women. The role of the government in these trying times was to stand with women and help them face period poverty. Instead, the government's response to this crisis was not gendered and did not take into consideration women's period products while setting the agenda for subsidizing basic commodities.

The economic crisis in Lebanon disproportionately affected foreign domestic workers. Amidst the collapse of the economy and the explosion that happened, many workers experienced increased violence from their employers. As already mentioned, Lebanese citizens did not adapt to this situation and hence did not pay their workers and provide them with resources. As a result, many foreign domestic workers were thrown on the streets and were not able to get back to their countries because they lost their belongings and passports in the blast (Randhawa, 2020). On top of all of that, none of the abusers was held accountable and the corresponding embassies were not supportive (Randhawa, 2020). In my opinion, all these reasons are not justifiable to exert violence against workers. Because of high airfare costs, and affirmations of physical violence by employers, domestic workers were subject to hunger, physical illness, and even exploitation to survive. While other workers are not thrown on the streets, they are withstanding domestic violence and are not able to leave because of the economic situation compounded by the COVID-19 virus. Capernaum, Nadine Labaki's movie, shows the racial violence that female domestic workers experience in Lebanon. They are under the contract of the Kafala system which is an abusive legal system in which the migrant exists legally as an extension of her employer family (Connett, 2019). Hence, the domestic worker's status imposed as a stranger under the Kafala system is itself an exploitation

type of violence that breaks her lineage. She is expected only to care for others while denying her rights. This violence exerted by the Kafala system was exacerbated during times of financial collapse and rendered women stranded, subject to violence, not being able to defend themselves.

To combat this gender-based violence problem during the economic crisis, it is very crucial to build a vibrant civil society sector. It articulates and expresses the needs of women and makes their voices heard by holding abusers accountable for their actions. A vibrant civil society is also very essential in providing services that include financial support to buy sanitary products or covering the fees of dispute raised against their male partners. Moreover, it is crucial to revise and reform laws that have been trivializing women's violence at the hand of their male relatives. That is why a law that specializes in criminalizing perpetrators can be a good start to end violence against Lebanese and foreign women. Angelina Jolie stated that women who survived sexual violence are still victims of impunity and they will never feel safe in their country unless all perpetrators are put behind bars to hold them accountable (Aoláin et al, 2018). Besides, fighting the inequality that foreign domestic workers face in Lebanon requires an urgent need to abolish the kafala system. A vibrant civil society for women's rights can work hand in hand with domestic workers to submit to the Labor Ministry in Lebanon a detailed rights-respecting plan and abolish the kafala system. In this case, workers are no more tied to their employers and have their rights preserved in case they were abandoned because of the strained situation. Furthermore, the government can develop a domestic dispute-resolution mechanism through which workers can address their concerns and return to their nations in case these concerns were being handled (Ismail, 2020). This will guarantee that workers are treated as dignified humans and not as commodities.

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