
Lebanon launches new campaign to combat violence against refugee women and children

Henriette Johansen

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The number of refugees in Lebanon has now reached 25 per cent of the total population. 78 per cent of the ever-increasing number of Syrian refugees, who currently number around 824,000, are women and children. 79,000 refugees coming from Syria are still awaiting registration at the borders. According to a recent report from Human Rights Watch (HRW), the most vulnerable are “disproportionately affected by Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV)”. A growing attitude amongst female refugees to return to the war-torn country they only just fled has been detected, as rape and sexual harassment has made life in Lebanon unbearable. (Beirut, 4rd Dec, 2013)

Last Monday, the international campaign “16 Days to End Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV)” was launched in Lebanon with great hope and aspiration by gender and human rights NGOs in an unusual partnership with Lebanon’s Internal Security Forces. SGBV is widespread in Lebanon, embedded within a social system that mercilessly stigmatises women and cemented by patriarchal legal formations that perpetuate a laissez-faire attitude by the state vis-à-vis such “private/religious” matters.

SGBV is already rife in Lebanese society and is usually perpetrated by partners or family members. HRW told MEMO how refugees, in particular, are in severely vulnerable positions politically, economically and geographically, especially in urban areas, making them de facto potential victims susceptible to exploitation.

There have been several reports of SGBV along the borders with Syria, as refugees flee. Women are verbally abused, forced to pay extra to cross the border and for each child they bring. Another phenomenon around the border areas is that foreign men looking for a bride “shop around”, sometimes taking girls as young as 14 years of age. Families agree to wed the girls to protect them against what awaits them in the camps once they cross the

borders.

HRW also told MEMO that in Lebanon, sexual violence against refugees is particularly rife at checkpoints and against detainees. Additionally, sexual abuse is committed with impunity, making the responsibility for protecting the victims of abuse unreliable and the monitoring of reported incidents almost non-existent.

Once settled in Lebanon, inadequate shelters or urban settlements provide very limited protection to already vulnerable refugees. It has been documented that SGBV has been committed against Syrian refugees by their employers, landlords, community members and even by faith-based aid distributors in Beirut, the Bekaa, and in the north and south of Lebanon. Within the camps, women are being pressured to have sex, with attackers threatening to take away their jobs, money or even family members, if they refuse.

HRW also explained that since the focus on SGBV was established, the ministry has handled only one case of sexual exploitation and harassment. Despite the newly approved law by joint parliamentary committees called the “Bill for the Protection of Women and Family Members against Domestic Violence”, the ministry merely referred the one case to the region’s mufti. Although he was fired, there was neither an investigation nor any intent to submit the case to the Internal Security Forces or to pursue legal action.

Responsibility of Protection

Women’s Rights Director at HRW Liesl Gerntholtz demands that the Lebanese government and aid agencies “open their eyes to the sexual harassment and exploitation of these vulnerable refugees and do everything in their power to stop it.”

The lack of proper documentation and residency permits further increases the frailty of refugees’ right to claim their human rights. UNHCR told MEMO: “We think that in Lebanon the lack of legal residency for many women is also a factor preventing refugees from reporting to police.” If a victim wants to report an incident to local authorities, it is often very complex due to the risk of revealing expired residency permits that are considerably expensive to

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renew.

UNHCR, along with the Lebanese government, have a great responsibility to make sure that reporting any incidents of SGBV and harassment are taken seriously and will not jeopardize the right of refugees to remain. As Lebanon declined to sign the [UN's 1951 Refugee Convention](#), they have no clear legal document to define who is a refugee, what his or her rights are and the legal obligations of the state. The Lebanese government has to include the status of refugees in national law, and to remove any renewal fee for their residency permits. "Lebanese authorities should exercise prosecutorial discretion by not detaining or arresting improperly documented refugees when they report crimes," HRW said.

In a comment to MEMO, UNHCR confirmed that they had recorded 500 cases of SGBV being reported, and that this is only "the tip of the iceberg, due to the social stigma and personal security risks faced by women in a situation that is exacerbated by conflict, displacement, poor living conditions and other factors."

It is in this regard that the Lebanese organisation KAFA (enough) Violence & Exploitation, along with the Lebanese Internal Security Forces, launched the 16 Day Campaign to End Violence against Women, which started on the International Day to End Violence against Women, 25th November, and will end on 10th December, the International Day for Human Rights.

Last Monday, the crowd at the Internal Security Forces headquarters was comprised of high-ranking officers in uniforms and human rights activists wearing pins with white ribbons, all eager to hear about how these more or less gendered professions are now forging a novel partnership. Speakers included the director of KAFA, Ms Zoya Rouhana; Mr Robert Watkins from the UN Population Fund; and Ibrahim Basbous, the acting General of the Internal Security Forces. They unanimously emphasized the social embeddedness of this issue, as well as how it is kept alive through silencing, undermining and even blaming the victim.

Preventing domestic violence is the main focus of the project, as this has a destabilizing effect on the household as "the pillar

The 500 cases of SGBV reported to the UNHCR is just "the tip of the iceberg"

of society”, which also affects Lebanon's development more generally, according to Mr Watkins. As SGBV is both “a regional and cultural issue”, combating the abuse should cross the borders of ethnicity or nationality.

Maya Amman from KAFA explained how this cooperation took a long-winded and thorny route, during which the Lebanese government demanded several re-drafts of the proposed legislation against SGBV, which is at the heart of the project. KAFA told MEMO about the importance of the police force winning over women's trust to help encourage women to speak out about SGBV. [Click here to see their new campaign video.](#)

While KAFA confirmed that all people within Lebanon are included in the project, services would be significantly more difficult for some to access than others, due to the political and infrastructural barriers within and around refugee camps.

Earning Women's Trust in Protection

Lebanese and refugee women alike do not trust, let alone have faith, that they will be protected in Lebanon, as many have experienced harassment in the past from the Internal Security Forces itself. HRW and other international organisations have expressed a similar attitude, based on previous collaborations, but nevertheless welcome the new partnership as a necessary development to tackling SGBV.

Recently, the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) showed that 65 per cent of Lebanese believe the police in Lebanon are corrupt/extremely corrupt. MEMO spoke to Transparency International's Manuel Pirino regarding the complex interplay of corruption among the Internal Security Forces, the police forces and the existence of SGBV. “In order to address SGBV we also need a stronger judicial system,” Manuel Pirino explained. He elaborated that: “Stronger means more agile, so that an Internal Security Forces case does not get lost in a torrent of bureaucracy; it means cleaner, so that an Internal Security Forces employee cannot buy him/herself off to avoid a trial; it means better equipped to receive complaints (KAFA is a good start) by providing better access to information on how to seek redress and better protection for those who denounce the practice.”

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Women do not know where to turn for help, and “while the case is being investigated (if this happens at all), the protection mechanisms are not always solid enough to guarantee that a victim of SGBV will not be exposed to threats and retaliation. It is worth noting that levels of gender sensitivity of Internal Security Forces personnel can vary considerably,” Pirino told MEMO.

Currently, SGBV in Lebanon is considered a private/family matter that, if reported, should be taken to the local religious authority, resulting, only in the most severe cases, in a divorce. No investigation or reference is ever made of the perpetrator.

The “Bill for the Protection of Women and Family Members against Domestic Violence,” drafted in 2005, re-drafted in 2008 and re-drafted yet again in 2010, due to several amendments demanded by the government, is a necessary step to address this issue. The final draft was approved by joint parliamentary committees in July of this year, and is now awaiting signature by the Lebanese parliament.

UNHCR and Government Budget Shortfalls

Another significant issue is the lack of resources provided to address SGBV. In a comment to MEMO, Lama Fakhri from HRW emphasized this issue within the UN as well as in Lebanon. Recently UNHCR had to reduce their effort to service only 70-80 per cent of refugees, due to severe budget shortfalls.

This has resulted in: significant gaps in vital monitoring mechanisms of human rights violations within the camps, even more limited medical assistance, and the weakening of the systems in place to address and mind rape victims, which are still at a nascent stage.

Unanimously, the Lebanese government along with international and local NGOs are all calling upon foreign donors to provide assistance to manage the humanitarian crisis, as the refugee population in Lebanon now makes up around one quarter of the country’s total population.

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