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TNH – The New Humanitarian (formerly IRIN News)

Lebanon's economic collapse prompts rise in gender-based violence

More women are seeking help, just as it becomes harder to get.

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All through the first eight years of her marriage, Gouri's husband abused her. But as Lebanon's massive financial crisis plunged the household into economic distress, the violence got worse.

Gouri, 23, who asked that her name be changed for fear of retribution, told The New Humanitarian that at the beginning of the marriage the abuse was mostly emotional – her husband constantly insulted her – but gradually he began to physically hurt Gouri and her son, too.

"During the economic crisis, I had my second baby, a baby girl. [Then] his violence increased; he beat me almost every day," recalled the mother of two from Lebanon's Chouf region, south of Beirut. "He tried to hurt my children... especially when I asked for milk or diapers... I always defended them, so he hurt me."

When her husband tried to shoot and kill her six-year-old son in May of this year, Gouri decided enough was enough. She told trusted family members what had been going on, sought help from a local NGO that helped find safe shelter for herself and her children, and obtained a court order of protection against her husband.

Women's rights advocates say Gouri's story is just one example of how Lebanon's economic collapse has led to greater stress in homes, equating to more gender-based violence against women and girls.

Since late 2019, Lebanon's currency has lost around 90 percent of its value, and [80 percent of the population](#) are in poverty, according to the UN. [Unemployment](#) is up, and the prices for basic goods are rising too, sometimes by the day.

Calls to resources that provide help are up too and, according to Mohammad Mansour, deputy director of the Resource Center for Gender Equality ([ABAAD](#)), an NGO that advocates for gender equality in the Middle East and North Africa, so are murders: Mansour told The New Humanitarian that the first seven months of 2022 saw 14 women killed by their partners in Lebanon, compared to 18 in the whole of 2021.

Gouri's husband has been out of work for the last 11 months, which she believes was one trigger for his rage. "He was not able to cover our children's needs and provide for them... that really blew things up," she said.

Mansour, whose NGO was Gouri's first point of call and put The New Humanitarian in touch with her, said the severity and frequency of violence against women in Lebanon is rising due to the increased level of stress from the economic crisis coupled with "cultural norms that oppress, degrade, and accept violence against women".

"We all know the most vulnerable are children and women in general society, and in every crisis they will be most affected," Mansour said. "It's like a snowball. It's getting worse and worse. I don't know when this situation will reach its end."

Calls for help

The numbers of people who received help from the Lebanese NGO [Kafa](#) – which aims to eliminate all forms of gender-based violence and exploitation – show a general upward trend over the past five years: 1,082 in 2017, 1,107 in 2018, 907 in 2019, 1,583 in 2020 (when many parts of the world saw a rise in [gender-based violence during COVID-19 lockdowns](#)), and 1,396 in 2021.

"The problems that exist in Lebanon are exacerbating the problem of [domestic violence]. With this economic and financial crisis, the social crisis, things are getting worse in Lebanon," Kafa's director, Zoya Rouhana, told The New Humanitarian.

ABAAD said 1,090 women sought its services during the first half of this year, compared to 832 in the first six months of last year.

At the same time, as more women need help, it has become harder for them to get it: The last remaining government subsidies on fuel were [recently lifted](#), promising even further price hikes on transport, internet, and phone calls.

It has become more expensive to make a phone call since July, as government-owned telecoms companies set higher rates to deal with the cost of fuel to run their generators.

This makes reaching out to a helpline even more difficult, Mansour said. "Due to the economic situation, people are letting go of their phones. So now, for the whole household there is just one phone, usually [owned] by the husband, or the man, the father, [making] it hard for women... to contact us."

In July, the [NGO Mercy Corps](#) said the hikes in telecoms prices were preventing people in need from calling aid hotlines.

Judges' strike

Further exacerbating the situation is the fact that judges across Lebanon have been on strike since August, demanding better pay and working conditions. Most courts are completely closed.

Rouhana from Kafa said they had seen an increase over the last 12 months or so in women going to the courts to ask for protection orders from abusive partners, but the strike has put those orders out of reach.

While women can still press charges at a police station, authorities can take no real action while, according to Mansour, hundreds of protection orders are waiting for a judge's approval.

Many women are loath to press charges or seek an order of protection anyway, and – [as is the case worldwide](#) – gender-based violence continues to go underreported. Kafa's Rouhana said many women fear retaliation from their husbands or families if they go to the authorities about their abuse.

"The issue of violence against women is not like it was before: It's not a taboo. But some women still don't dare to take the steps to speak out, especially if their family is not supportive of them," she said.

Immediately after her husband tried to shoot her son, Gouri told her family about the violence she had been experiencing. In her case, they backed her up and advised her to reach out to ABAAD.

She said she was nervous about telling strangers what she was going through, but she eventually came to trust the organisation's staff and was able to get legal consultations and psychotherapy.

"Before I came to ABAAD, I didn't know I had rights or that I could get counselling, and that there are people who can defend and support me," Gouri said. She stayed in a shelter while she filed for an order of protection, which she received at the end of July.

She has since gone back to live with her husband — she said he is in counselling and on medication — but her protection order remains in place.

Incomplete laws

Women's rights campaigners say that even if the courts were functioning and could approve protection orders, they alone are not enough to keep women safe.

Even though [parliament passed a law](#) that protects women from family violence [in 2014](#), and then [amended it in 2020](#) to pave the way for today's protection orders, there are still many ways abusers can get away with violence.

There are 18 officially recognised religious sects in the country, and 15 of them have their own laws and courts. Rouhana said that, in some cases, “the religious laws discriminate against women and put them into subordinate positions, asking the women to obey their husbands.”

Religious courts cannot interfere with civil courts and protection orders, but they are in charge of issues like marriage, divorce, and custody. Rouhana and her colleagues are campaigning for a unified personal status law across all religions. Without it, she said, it's not really possible to protect women from all kinds of violence.

For his part, Mansour thinks the main problem is how the current law is used; he said there are currently too many loopholes for it to work properly.

For example, while ABAAD successfully campaigned in 2017 to abolish an article that stated a rapist could marry their victim to avoid prosecution, incest rape is not a crime in Lebanese law.

“If the rapist is a family member, he would be treated as any normal rapist, meaning he might get out in three or five years depending on the judge and the lawyers,” Mansour explained. If the rapist is the victim's parent, they could very well emerge from prison and remain their legal guardian, he added.

Normalisation of inequality and violence

Gouri now believes that she was subjected to life-long societal conditioning that normalised her abuse.

“Women are not respected in Lebanon, because of traditions and rules in society... [like] ‘You cannot be divorced, it's shameful to be divorced’,” she said. “I was also conditioned to believe this, until... I said, ‘No, I'm not going to stay this way’.”

But Rachel Dore-Weeks, Lebanon country manager at UN Women, the UN's agency for gender equality and women's empowerment, told The New Humanitarian it's common across the globe for gender-based violence to spike during times of economic crisis.

“Men get frustrated, particularly if they've lost their jobs and they're unable to provide for their children, families, or parents, which... due to power differences between men and women... it translates into greater tension in the households,” Dore-Weeks said.

Decades of cyclical violence and insecurity in Lebanon plus hypermasculinity as an ideal makes for a toxic combination, Dore-Weeks added.

“Lebanon has seen, for generations, the normalisation of violence... and no accountability for anything, whether it's political assassinations... [or] violence in the home,” she said.

For her part, Gouri said she is determined to raise awareness about the rights and resources women do have in Lebanon, after seeing for herself that there are options and help available.

“Women are always called weak and [told] that they are in need of men to live and be protected or safe,” she said. “That isn't what I think. I think women are strong and they can do anything.”

If you are in Lebanon and need help with gender-based violence, contact the ABAAD safe line at +961 81 78 81 78 or the Kafa helpline at +961 3 018 019.

Edited by Annie Slemrod.

ecoi.net summary:

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