SOLIDARITY AS RESISTANCE.

Multidimensional Fears, Vulnerabilities and Coping Mechanisms Among Women Leading Households in Lebanon.

unicef for every child

The Centre For Social Sciences Research & Action

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INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at the trajectories and lived experiences of women leading households in Lebanon. It focuses on their challenges and coping mechanisms throughout the economic crisis that unfolded as of the end of 2019.

Women-led households is a rather vague term often used for different contexts and situations of women[1]. Women leading a household can live alone, live alone with children, or live with a husband who is not the main breadwinner in the house. They can be responsible for themselves, for their children, for their husband or for other relatives/persons living in the household. In this paper, the term refers to the self-designation of the women themselves: They identify themselves as being the main person responsible for taking care of housework and the household, paying bills, and most importantly as being the main breadwinner and primarily responsible for decision making within the household. These decisions go beyond those that are gendered and generally "expected" from women within households, for example those related to homework and house chores, or nutrition, and mostly refer to responsibilities on the household budget and spending, living situation, and household rules.

The life trajectories of the women this research has followed are diverse: women who are separated from their partner, or whose partner has passed away, women that live alone, single women with children, and women that "lead" the household although a man or men is/are present but do/es not contribute to household-related responsibilities and decision making.

In the last few years, a lot of research has focused on women-led households. This is largely due to the fact that, globally, the number of women-led households is on the rise (Lebni *et al.* 2020: 2). Very often, research emphasizes the multiple challenges and precarious circumstances of women-led households, highlighting socio-economic vulnerabilities, precarious living and working conditions, poor health (mental and physical), and social isolation (Buvinic and Rao Gupta 1997; Chant 1997, 2008; Rezaei, Mohammadinia and Samiezadeh 2013). Other studies focus more on the resilience and efficiency of women in running and leading a household (Benussi 2006; Thomas, and Ryan 2008). Both approaches remain however generalizing: as this research

1 In their study on female-headed households across 103 middle and low-income countries, Saad *et al.* (2022: 4) differentiated between 16 different types of possible female-led households.

shows, the living conditions and situations of women leading households are very much dependent on different contexts, such as socio-economic status, family status, legal status, support and protection mechanisms (friends, family, social security provided by the state) and the socio-political context the women live in. Also, various biographical or conjunctural factors lead to women bearing these responsibilities: in many contexts, the advancement of women's rights, increase in socio-economic rights, and the erosion of family values lead to the choice or the acceptance of many women to head a household alone (Chant 1997; Moghadam 2005; Saad *et al.* 2022; Jensen and Thornton 2003; Mensch, Singh and Casterline 2005). In other contexts, economic or forced migration, violence, or poverty often push women into living alone or being the sole responsible for a household. Female headship is also not a static feature of a woman's life. In many cases it is a transitory condition within a temporary context women live in.

In Lebanon, there has been no comprehensive study on women-led households so far. To our knowledge, only two studies have been conducted on this population from the 1990s onwards. A short article was published in 1997 in the journal "*al-Raida*" based on seven interviews with women leading households. While the article is mostly descriptive, it concludes with the statement that it is not possible to generalize about the situation of women-led households in Lebanon and that their "status (…) depends on many factors" (Ismail 1997, 25). The study of Ismail is not only insufficient regarding its analytical insights, it is also outdated, given that the ongoing socio-economic crisis since 2019 has largely impacted the overall population in the country, notably women.

A recently published statistical report "The Life of Women and Men in Lebanon" (Saso and Daher 2021) provides more updated and useful data that still, however, refer to the pre-crisis situation. The report focuses, among others, on the cases of single adult women and one-parent households with children under 15 years. It shows that between 2004 and 2019, the percentage of single adult women living alone[2] has increased by 2.5%. Although the share of one-parent households is very low in Lebanon (less than 1%), more than 75% of these households with children under 15 were headed by women (Saso and Dagher 2021, 25).

2 Single adult women living alone refers to women living without child(ren) and without any other adult(s) in their households. Saso and Dagher 2021, 25.

In a nutshell, research on the situation of women leading households remains embryonic, and no studies have tackled their lived experiences through the ongoing crisis.

Far from making claims of exhaustiveness, this paper seeks to contribute to fill the above mentioned gaps by giving some analytical insights on the current situation of women-headed households in Lebanon. To do so, the paper provides an in-depth investigation of the trajectories of eleven women leading households. It draws from a qualitative methodology mostly based on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with these women. The analysis covers different aspects of their lives such as socio-economic conditions, work and education, social networks, perceptions of fear and insecurity, and focuses on their coping mechanisms, as well as on their dreams, hopes, and perspectives. Thus, the paper seeks to provide insights on the living conditions of these women from the perspective of their own experiences and views.

The multifold political and economic crisis that Lebanon is going through since the end of 2019 were a recurrent topic in the conducted interviews, and has affected the lives of all interviewed women significantly. Women's testimonies highlight how the crisis has functioned as an additional element of differentiation in their individual trajectories, bringing new challenges and pushing them to readjust their coping strategies.

The interviews provide a picture of the heterogeneous situations of women-led households as well as their different coping strategies. Yet, they highlight common features. Despite differences of age, education level, family and living situation, as well as socio-economic status, most interviewed women share the awareness of being a female-led household and of the diverse challenges that accompany it. This awareness shifts between a feeling of pride of being self-reliant and managing multiple tasks on the one hand, and, on the other, feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and lonely. Interestingly, a recurring and common challenge voiced by this heterogeneous group, is the lack of security, in terms of social protection mechanisms provided by the state, or safety nets that would protect them against patriarchal structures and subsequent exploitative, violent, and sexism they experience in their everyday lives. These challenges have increased in the last three years since the beginning of the crisis in Lebanon, and many of our interlocutors have voiced hopes of a life change or expressed the wish to leave the country in the near future.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews in-depth with eleven women in Lebanon. Five of these women are of migrant/refugee background, six are Lebanese citizens. The eleven women are also from different socio-economic and educational/professional backgrounds. Interviewed women are in an age range between 25 and 75 years old. Eight of them have children living with them, two live alone, and one takes care of her old mother. Topics addressed in the interviews are socio-economic status, work/professional life and education, friends and family network, living conditions, biography since childhood, raising children, experiences of violence, humiliation, and exploitation, experiences of support, friendship, happiness, as well as hopes, wishes and perspectives for the future. All interview partners were interviewed by women and all were assured that their personal information remains confidential. All names used in the paper were anonymized.

Challenges of caregiving as non-waged labor

> My husband left two years ago, one month before my last child was born. He just disappeared. He had some money issues, and people used to come and demand the money and threaten him. At some point he just disappeared. Since then, I have no idea where he is and what he is doing. I asked around everywhere, I tried to find him, but after two years, I have no idea. I have six children, the eldest is 9 years old. I cannot work because I have to take care of them and there is no one else to do this. One year ago, I worked in one of the potato fields and left five of my children with my neighbor, the little one I took with me. The neighbor complained all the time so after one month, I decided I will no longer continue this. But everyday I am afraid of not being able to feed my kids.[3]

Mariam is a young Syrian woman who lives with her six children in a camp in Saadnayel. Her testimony shows the dilemma that many of our interviewed women face: as the main breadwinners, they are forced to work to make ends meet while, at the same time, the responsibility for children or other people in need in the household does not allow them to work full time, to advance in their career, or to work at all. While Mariam belongs to the latter group and is dependent on support from her neighbors, friends, or NGOs providing the camp with aid on an irregular basis, many other women interviewed manage to work but describe the responsibility to care for their household and household members, as an additional burden that is difficult to manage.

In Lebanon, there is hardly any social security or assistance for parents, children or elderly/sick people. The scattered and insufficient social protection system is linked to formal employment and leaves the majority of the population residing in the country without any support (Scala 2022: 4). In 2021, only one in two Lebanese and one in three non-Lebanese residing in Lebanon were covered by any form of social protection (ILO 2021: 5 and 9).

Some social security providers such as the NSSF[4] give a child allowance per child per month to its enrollees and grant health coverage to the children and the parents of the registered

3 Interview with Mariam, 27 years old, a Syrian living in a camp in Saadnayel, mother of six children, unemployed.

4 The National Social Security Fund is the social security fund for workers in the private sector.

worker, but this support was hardly sufficient already prior to the crisis (Scala 2022: 16; Abdo 2019: 7). Today, the NSSF grants and reimburses at the official USD rate of 1507.5 LBP, which makes the little support they grant practically nonexistent. Due to the lack of a proper pension system in the country, most older people are left without any income and therefore dependent on informal support systems such as relatives (Abi Chahine 2022).

Asked about coping mechanisms, most of our interlocutors outsource the care work for children or sick relatives, either by relying on family or friends, or by hiring paid care. They all refer to these coping mechanisms as inevitable in the light of non-existing care structures from the state as nurseries, after school care, elderly care, sufficient maternity leaves, or a child grant. The necessity to pay for care is not only an additional burden that many women cannot afford these days, but most of our interlocutors also describe the outsourcing of care – paid or for free – as an emotional burden, rather than a relief. This is how Pamela, a recently divorced woman with two children whose ex-husband returned to Egypt, describes her life to us:

> In the morning, I bring the kids to school, then I go to work. My working hours as a graphic designer are from 9am to 5pm. I have a fixed system of child care: three days a week, a woman comes and picks the kids up from the school bus, she prepares lunch and takes care of them until I return from work. She also cleans the house and washes dishes/clothes etc. Two days a week, the school bus brings them directly to my mom's house and she takes care of them. I have a good salary so I can pay for the extra help and the bus, but I always feel bad. I feel guilty for not taking care of my children, I feel ashamed for being reliant on my mother, always guilty for never having the time for my kids. In the evenings, I am too tired, and on the weekends, I need to do some housework myself. I think my kids suffer from this lifestyle and at some point this will show…[5]

Despite these challenges, the interviewed women describe the task of taking care of their children or an older/sick relative as their inevitable responsibility that they fight for despite all circumstances. These feelings of guilt and responsibility are intertwined and directly linked to, often internalized, gender roles and expectations from women as the main, and in the cases of the women of our sample, the sole caregivers of other members of the household.

5 Interview with Pamela, a Lebanese divorced woman, 35 years old, two children, living in Beirut.

For many women, the commitment to this responsibility affects their professional life and career. Siham is a 50 year old Lebanese woman who got divorced when she was 35 with two little children at that time. Under the personal status law of the religious court she was married within (mainly due to her husband's sect), the children had to stay with her husband and she was only allowed to see them once a week.[6] These regulations forced her to give up on her dream to become a nurse. Instead she started working in a hotel to be able to rent a small place to welcome her children. She recounts:

> After my divorce I moved to my brother's house which was ok for me. But he had just married and had two little kids himself. So it was impossible for me to bring my own kids there as well. At that point, I had gotten the opportunity to study nursing. It was my dream, but I wanted to see my children so I worked for years in the laundry section of a hotel in order to rent a place and welcome my children there.[7]

Siham's story illustrates the lack or absence of state support on the one hand, and, on the other, discriminatory personal status laws. Combined, both factors directly feed into the double burden of caregiving and waged labor. It also illustrates the extent to which women's caregiving responsibilities affect their education and career options, as well as the working conditions they are forced to tolerate.

Structural and social insecurity: Women in waged labor

Many studies on women leading households in different countries have shown that these women often face extremely precarious working conditions and are forced to work in informal, low-paid, part-time, or underqualified positions (Chant 2003: 8; Saad *et al.*: 2). These work conditions are often the result of intersecting responsibilities. Lebanon records a high rate of informal employment, a high gender gap between men and women actively engaged in the labor market[8], as well as a gender gap in income

6 In the Sunni personal status law, a divorced mother only has custody of her children until they are 7 (boys) and 9 (girls) years old. After this age, the father has the right to custody.

7 Interview with Siham, a Lebanese divorced woman, 50 years old, four children.

8 According to Saso and Daher (2021: 54), in 2019 less than 30% women were actively engaged in the labor market, despite the fact that they make up 52.6 % of the working age resident population.

distribution[9]. The consequences of such structural labor market dynamics are tangible among our interlocutors who suffer from precarious work conditions in one form or another, a situation further exacerbated by the ongoing crisis in Lebanon. Within lower socio-economic classes, notably within the migrant and refugee communities, the women interviewed are faced with working conditions characterized by exploitation, low income, informality, and interruptions in their employment. But even those women interviewed that have a rather high income, encounter instability, insecurity, and legal blurriness in their employment conditions. Salma is a woman in her 30s whose husband cannot work due to sickness, she has a child who is two years old. For the last six years, Salma has been working with an international NGO as a program manager, until she was suddenly dismissed.

> From the beginning, we only had consultancy contracts that were renewed once a year, so officially there were no benefits. This is quite common in the NGO world in Lebanon. They made up for this with a rather high salary, private health insurance and a bonus every year. And it was convenient for me. Since the crisis, it is all about money, no one has it, and everyone needs it. I am supporting my own family, the family of my husband and I pay all the expenses at home. At some point, my manager told me that they will reduce their engagement in Lebanon so they would not renew my contract. They offered me some indemnity but I tried to claim that I am legally entitled to an open-ended contract. My claim was never even considered, and I couldn't resort to justice since there have been no court sessions for months due to the strikes of the judges. They even had the guts to tell me I should be happy that in an economic crisis I receive my indemnity in fresh USD. I had no choice than to accept my unfair dismissal and try to look for another job.[10]

Salma's story resonates with the experiences of many workers in the civil society sector that are often employed on an "informal" basis, on short-term or consultancy contracts and without any formal social protection mechanisms. Although in international non-governmental organizations, notably, salaries even for local staff are comparatively high, these organizations avoid registering local staff at the social security, keeping them in a vulnerable situation and – contrary to the missions of many of these organizations – contribute to reproducing power dynamics of dependence and insecurity (AbiYaghi and Yammine 2019).

9 When divided by nationality, it was discovered that Lebanese men earned on average 6.5 percent more than Lebanese women, due to a recurrent interruption in employment and despite the fact that women are more successful in their education. See Saso and Daher 2021: 76.

10 Interview with Salma, a Lebanese woman, 32 years old, one little child, currently unemployed.

Other interlocutors describe how being a woman in the first place, and being a woman solely responsible for breadwinning in the second place, defined their whole career path and very often did not leave them any choice. Sara, a migrant worker from Sri Lanka told us how she had to leave school at the age of 13 to help her mother. After her mother had died, Sara had to work to sustain the education of her brothers. She eventually left for Lebanon to work as an in-house domestic worker so that her brothers could pursue their higher education. Today, she has two children. Her biggest wish is that they will not end up working in "somebody else's house". She wishes for her daughter a working life that is based on "respect":

> I want Diana to grow up and go to school. At some point I want her to work, like in business, in an office, never in somebody else's house. I don't want her to have a life like me. I wouldn't want my biggest enemy to have a life like me.[11]

In the case of women domestic migrant workers, work conditions and trajectories in Lebanon are also very much tied to their legal and administrative situation, in addition to racist and patriarchal dynamics of socioeconomic downgrading.

Illegality and racism: the challenges of refugee and migrant women

For Sara, who has been working as a migrant worker in Lebanon for 29 years, the above described structural and social discriminations and limitations are aggravated, due to the fact that she works under the *kafala*[12] system. Therefore, her employment in Lebanon is regulated outside of the official regulations (namely, the Labor Code and the Social Security Code) and makes her subject to more structural exploitation, humiliations, and precarity. Through the

11 Interview with Sara, 51 years old, a migrant worker in Lebanon, two children.

12 *Kafala* (or sponsorship system) is a legal framework that ties the legal residency of a foreign worker to the presence of a work permit, both subject to the establishment of a relationship of sponsorship and dependence between a "Lebanese sponsor" (the *kafīl*) and the foreign worker (the *makfūl*, the sponsored person). The *Kafala* system enables employers to have complete control over their employees' employment and immigration status. Foreign workers under the *kafala* system have no protection by the labor law and are often subject to exploitation and violence.

kafala system, Sara's residency and working life in Lebanon is legally bound to an individual sponsor, her "*kafeel*", who can impose any working conditions on her and last but not least, decide if she is to stay in Lebanon or not. The *kafala* system mainly applies to migrant workers but since 2014, it also regulates the presence of Syrian refugees in the country (Lebanon Support 2016, 11)[13] and thus allows for the discrimination against approximately 200,000 foreign women in Lebanon. This system also reproduces patriarchal power dynamics by "outsourcing" domestic work to a female worker, in order to give women the opportunity to work, thus relieving her from the double burden of waged labor and housework (Lebanon Support 2016, 1).

For Sara, who has no choice than to stay in Lebanon with her children for now, this meant a lot of sacrifices in the last three decades. The legal provisions regulating her employment and residency status are the main challenges in her life in Lebanon, as she recounts:

> Maybe in Europe, America, another country, you can be a working woman, a woman living alone and be respected, but in Lebanon, no. They don't respect you. Even at work, they pretend to respect you sometimes but then outside they don't respect you. My boss knows that she has all the power. If I go to complain about her or anything, who am I, a foreign worker? They have all the power. So they treat us like children, sometimes they want to be good because they see you are working well so they want to be nice, sometimes they beat you, because you did not work well - in their opinion. They can do whatever they want. Because they know there is no place for us to complain.[14]

Violence, humiliation, and discrimination from the employer, state officials, landlords, or any person in power have been the daily experience of the interviewed migrant women. In their trajectories, racism intersects with labor and patriarchal structures of exploitation and discrimination. Therefore, and from this perspective, it is important to highlight that any kind of exclusion or inclusion into the labor market or social protection systems in Lebanon "cannot be understood through a labor perspective alone. Social identities such as - but not limited to - ethnic, gender, and class belongings need to be considered together to understand the exclusionary mechanisms to social protections." (Scala 2022: 15)

13 The ministry decision regarding Syrians nationals was implemented in February 2015.

14 Interview with Sara, 51 years old, a migrant worker in Lebanon, two children.

Zahra is a Syrian refugee that came to Lebanon eleven years ago, she lives with her three children in Saadnayel. Her husband returned to Syria five years ago because of a health condition. Two years ago, they became estranged and stopped all communication as he did not support her at all. Today, Zahra can no longer work due to chronic lung damage after a Corona-infection. Her two older children collect iron and plastic in the garbage and sell it. The family mainly lives on bread and yogurt, sometimes bulgur and rice. Zahra described to us the increase in racist remarks and verbal attacks over the course of the economic crisis:

> Bread used to cost 1000 LBP [approximately 75 cents according to the official currency rate], I used to buy four or five bags daily, and pay 5000 LBP. Today, one bag costs 14,000 LBP. I go to the bakery and I stand there all day and I get cursed all day. 'Get lost Syrians, go away. This is all your fault.' etc. I feel I get treated worse than an animal. And sometimes we get interrogated by the police because we do not have a residency or for whatever reason. But I don't care anymore. We all don't care. We became like crocodiles.[15]

"Becoming like crocodiles" – in Arabic "*tamsahna*" – is a local saying in the Lebanese-Syrian dialect that refers to the thick, and hard skin of a crocodile who can endure everything, including pain, cold, heat, or violence, without being affected. The majority of our interlocutors described to us that they have, at some point, stopped being affected by the hardships they face. In many ways, Zahra and the other women have learned to become resilient: they have the capacity to recover from and to be prepared for any kind of difficulties. However, being resilient does not mean that they are not vulnerable and that the challenges or potential harm they are exposed to does not impact their lives substantially. (Béné *et al.* 2012: 13; Olsson *et al.* 2015).

15 Interview with Zahra, 38 years old, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, three children.

Experiences of violence, discrimination, and fear in women-lead households

All interviewed migrant and foreign women recounted to us incidents of racism, verbal and physical attacks, and humiliation. The women attributed these experiences to being a woman alone, a woman from a disenfranchised social class, and a foreign woman. Mona, a Palestinian women in her 50s who was born and lived all her life in the Sabra Camp in Beirut, told us how it took her decades until she was no longer ashamed to speak in her Palestinian dialect:

> When my husband was in prison, I was negotiating with the guards, about visiting rights, about food or goods to bring him etc. They know from my first sentence that I am Palestinian and some of them were mean. 'You are Palestinian, don't dare to talk too big.' 'You Palestinians have always been criminals', were some of the sentences that I heard. But I don't care anymore. I am what I am, being born here and living here. I will not let this affect me. But it took me decades to become like this.[16]

The experience of Mona illustrates an additional form of discrimination and xenophobia towards certain "foreigners". Similar sentiments are often voiced towards Syrian refugees and migrant domestic workers from Asian or African countries (Carpi, Younes, and AbiYaghi 2016; Debes 2022).

Beyond these discriminatory experiences that affect foreign women specifically, all of our interviewees shared a perception of feeling unsafe, as a woman in Lebanon in general, and as a woman heading a household in particular. When probing for more details about this feeling, they recounted various experiences of recurrent direct and indirect violence, discrimination, and humiliation from relatives, neighbors, employers, colleagues, or state officials.

Sawsan is a Lebanese woman in her mid 50s who has been living alone since she finished university in her early 20s. She lives in Sanayeh in Beirut in her own apartment. She recounts her experiences as a woman living alone and leading a household in Lebanon:

16 Interview with Mona, 53 years old, a Palestinian woman living in Beirut, two grown up children.

> I have been living alone for 33 years. My mother died when I was 15 and my father moved to our hometown Tripoli after I finished university. I stayed in Beirut and have been working here as a school teacher in one of the very expensive private schools. As a woman living alone, there are a lot of challenges since this is a very male-dominated city. I don't walk in the dark, I always use the car and park next to the building. A couple of years ago the concierge came to my apartment a lot, always under some kind of excuse. He pretended that he cared about me and wanted to help me with practical stuff. At some point he started to make inappropriate comments about my look and me living alone. When he once touched my hair, I put a limit and told him to never do this again or he will lose his job. He seemed offended but never tried anything again. I am rather privileged, I can say no, and I can threaten him with consequences, but other women cannot do it.[17]

Other women describe to us their experiences of sexual harassment at work, or in the streets, of humiliation or belittlement by family members, colleagues, or even friends, and of insults or verbal attacks. Pamela concludes:

> In Lebanon as a woman alone you feel like fair game, everyone can tell you whatever they want and treat you however they want. Everyone can interfere in your life. It gets exhausting after a while, so sometimes you just think, everything would be easier if a man was next to me.[18]

Our interlocutors attributed the rising feelings of insecurity and fear after 2019 due to the collapse of basic infrastructures, general atmosphere of instability, increase in petty crime, and last but not least, the collapse of executive and judiciary institutions in the country and subsequent generalized anomy in the country.

17 Interview with Sawsan, 56 years old, a Lebanese woman living alone in Beirut, no children.

18 Interview with Pamela, a Lebanese divorced woman, 35 years old, two children, living in Beirut.

Solidarity, pride, and (co-)dependence. Coping mechanism of women leading households

Seven out of the eleven women interviewed mentioned their mental health challenges and issues (such as anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and/or insomnia) as a result of constant stress and the multiple problems in their lives. Nevertheless, all of the interviewed women seemed to take pride in their strength as head of a household. Zahra's testimony shows this perception:

> I would have never thought that my life would be like this. When I got married, I had this dream life in my head, then the war came, then we had to flee, then my husband became sick and left me. The last two years have been the worst ever, but I manage, I fight every day, I only cry at night. I want to show my children that we are stronger than this. And I thank God daily for giving me this strength.[19]

This positive attitude is also linked to a strong sense of solidarity among each other: although most of the women interviewed describe themselves as lonely, they still recount female solidarity and friendships as a source of strength. Sawsan and Pamela describe their female friends as their real family, Sara and Mona are both engaged in activism for women's and migrant's rights with other migrant women, and Zahra and Mariam recount the continuous support system among women in the camp.

Female friends, who are often in similar situations, seem like the chosen support network that many women build up in order to ease their lives. Solidarity ranges from sharing resources – such as food, clothes, and basic commodities – to logistical assistance and emotional support. As Sara puts it:

19 Interview with Zahra, 38 years old, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, three children.

> I hardly talk to anyone about my feelings, but since I got to know the other migrant woman and we became friends, I feel like I have someone to talk to. We all come from different countries but we share our feelings and we are there for each other.[20]

In the absence of state support, social protection systems and faced with structural gender inequality and discrimination, our interlocutors also rely on family support and charity organizations or religious institutions. They depend on informal networks of solidarity and mutual aid, often described to us as run by women themselves,[21] in order to fulfill basic needs in everyday life.

While all seem to agree that their families (mainly siblings or parents) and/or non-governmental institutions provide necessary assistance, their support is often associated with ambivalent feelings. As mentioned above, Pamela feels guilty for relying on her mother, while others tell us that their families' support comes at the price of their interference in their lives. NGOs and/or religious institutions are also often irregular and non-reliable in their service provision. Wadad, an Iraqi widow in her 60s that lives with her five children in a suburb of Beirut tells us about her experience with a religiously-affiliated NGO:

> At first, they told us that Iraqis are not eligible for help, then they heard we belong to the same religious sect as they do, so they changed their discourse again. But still for months only words, nothing happens. During Corona, they gave us food sometimes and medications. After one year, they disappeared again. It is frustrating.[22]

Although showing strength and managing to establish a rather strong support system, all the interviewed women seem to converge in perceiving their "fates" as involuntary and express the wish to change their life. They all however fear possible alternative imaginaries or futures.

20 Interview with Sara, 51 years old, a migrant worker in Lebanon, two children.

21 On structures of (female) mutual aid and solidarity in times of crisis or the absence of formal protection see f.e. Łapniewska 2022.

22 Interview with Wadad, 65 years, an Iraqi woman in Lebanon, five children.

> The daily worrying takes all my energy, I cannot do more. What do I want for me and the kids? I want to leave and go to a place where we are safe and we do not have to worry anymore.[23]

This is, for instance, how Mariam reveals to us her dream of the future. Yet, in the same breath she adds that this dream "is impossible to be fulfilled". In the absence of a sustainable and reliable support and protection system and in the light of the ongoing economic, financial, and political crisis in Lebanon, women appear to be hardly able to get by daily.

23 Interview with Mariam, 27 years old, a Syrian living in a camp in Saadnayel, mother of six children, unemployed.

CONCLUSION

The interviewed women in this paper undoubtedly face diverse common challenges and vulnerabilities in their lives. They all perceive their situation as difficult and feel overwhelmed by their multiple responsibilities, their feelings of fear and instability, and the lack of structural support. Moreover, they identify these challenges as "gendered" and a result of them being women in general, and women heading a household in particular.

On a structural and macro-level, the Lebanese legal system discriminates against women in their private and professional life, as can notably be seen in the religious status laws and the labor law. Likewise, the fragmented and exclusionary system of social protection in the country exacerbates insecurity and discrimination. These challenges on the macro-level translate into a gendered vulnerability in the public sphere, for example at work or on the streets or in state institutions, where the interviewed women face recurring violence, discrimination, and abuse. On an individual level, the interviewed women are shaped by prevailing social gender norms and social expectations of how women ought to live and behave. These represent another level of (often internalized) pressure on women leading households which are frequently reinforced by their families or friends.

On the other hand, there are differences and nuances of hardships in their everyday lives. These are often related to socio-economic status, nationality, education status, and living or working conditions. A clear differentiation can be drawn between women with a Lebanese nationality and migrant domestic workers or refugees. In addition to gender-based inequalities, non-Lebanese women are faced with intersectional and compounding forms of discrimination linked to the *kafala* system, their administrative status, and their full or partial exclusion from the social protection system.

These multi-leveled and intersecting structures and experiences of discrimination, violence, and marginalization seem to appear like a vicious circle, that interviewed women constantly navigate to survive but that they cannot break. Therefore, coping mechanisms seem at a first glance mainly to be reduced to emotional responses such as "being strong" or "being resilient" and "managing against all odds". Still, the interviewed women also cope by referring to informal women networks of solidarity and interpersonal relations. These can range from circles of friends, to female colleagues, or women in similar circumstances. The interviewed women describe these networks as their source of strength, relief, but also of potential strategizing and therefore resistance. By gathering and meeting, by exchanging and discussing their experiences, and by navigating common strategies, these women form "communities of coping" (Korcynski 2003: 55) - as it has been identified by Marek Korcynski in the context of workers in the service sector. While these communities mainly serve for sharing and discussing common experiences, they "may also spill over to inform acts of direct resistance" (Korcynski 2003: 59) to abuse or discrimination faced by workers or, as in the case of this paper, by women leading households.

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