

# Lebanon



## Gender, Justice and Security Hub

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub (GJS Hub) brings together researchers, practitioners, and activists through a collection of projects to advance gender justice and inclusive peace in conflict-affected societies. We work in seven focus countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda with projects in 17 additional countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

Spanning from gendered migration, masculinities and sexualities to land rights and transformative justice, each project amplifies the voices of women and marginalised groups. The Hub's work aims to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

## Country Context

### Unrest in the Shadow of Civil War

The 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War, which involved a multitude of sectarian militias and foreign actors, left Lebanese society fractured and the state in disarray. Though it ended almost 35 years ago, the legacy of the civil war, along with conflicts in neighbouring countries, particularly in Syria and in Israel and Palestine, and severe economic issues have perpetuated a state of unrest and insecurity in Lebanon. The protracted economic and banking crisis, which has been exacerbated by political impasse and a massive explosion at the Beirut port in August 2020, poses a significant threat to the country's stability and security. It has led to widespread protests against the ruling class, which is seen by many as corrupt and incapable of governing effectively. It has also made life extremely difficult for many Lebanese people, with basic services and commodities becoming unaffordable or unavailable.

### Peace and Progress?

In the post-war period, there have been attempts at recovery, rebuilding, and reform in Lebanon. The Taif Agreement in 1989 laid the groundwork for ending the civil war and returning to political stability, but it has been limited in its impact by periods of political paralysis, economic crisis, and social discord.

Progress in areas such as infrastructure, governance, and public services has been uneven, and it has been hindered by corruption and the deep-seated sectarian divisions that remain. Efforts to address past atrocities have also been very limited, and while there have been some moves towards social liberalization, political representation remains skewed by sectarian affiliations.

### Ongoing Security Challenges

The security situation in Lebanon is volatile, and Hezbollah remains as a powerful military and political entity within the state. Tensions along the border with Israel, and the spill over from the Syrian war, including a massive influx of refugees have added to the security challenges. The Israeli assault on Gaza since October 7, 2023, and Hezbollah's response along the border, has caused displacement of thousands of people in Lebanon, and while the Lebanese Armed Forces work alongside UN peacekeeping operations to maintain a fragile stability, periodic escalations of violence are a constant threat to peace.

## The GJS Hub in Lebanon

Gender issues in Lebanon are complex; while there have been notable periods of advancement in women's education and participation in the workforce, political representation remains low, and personal status laws differ significantly across religious groups, affecting rights related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The 2019 protests showed that there is a widespread demand for change, with women playing a significant role, yet entrenched societal and political structures pose challenges to gender equality.

The political and economic crises have threatened the limited social progress made in previous years. Women and marginalized communities, including refugees and the LGBTQI+ community, are particularly vulnerable in the current climate. Although Lebanon is known for being more liberal than some of its neighbours in terms of women's and LGBTQI+ rights, the economic collapse has had a detrimental impact on these advances. Moreover, the entrenched sectarian power-sharing system often impedes comprehensive and progressive social reforms.

Hub research in Lebanon explores the dynamics of conflict, displacement, gender, and labour migration, including the influences of the Syrian Civil War, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, and significant socio-political events like the Beirut port explosion. Hub projects investigated the impacts of these crises on individuals of diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC), and the experiences of migrant women in a broad spectrum of labour sectors.

Research methods used included interviews and focus group discussions with SOGIESC individuals in Lebanon, and interviews with women and NGO workers across multiple cities. The research offers insights into the direct and indirect effects of conflict, displacement, economic challenges, and migration on women and people of SOGIESC in Lebanon. It focuses on the lived experiences of these communities and individuals, their rights, agency, and interactions with urban spaces, against the backdrop of gender backlash and socio-cultural drivers influencing migration within these volatile contexts.

## The Challenge in Lebanon

### Women Migrant Workers and South-South Migration

Though there are many women migrant workers in Lebanon, there is a lack of gender-sensitive understanding of the interaction between economic and socio-cultural drivers of labour migration, including experiences of gender discrimination, and the living and working condition of migrant workers. There is also the need to shift away from a victimisation narrative that sees migrant women as only victims of the process of migration.

### Critical Gap in Research and Policymaking

There is little research available that analyses the cumulative, direct, and indirect impacts on SOGIESC individuals in these contexts. Their experiences, needs, access to resources, and the ways in which different aspects of their intersectional identities

impact their lives during times of conflict and crisis is therefore poorly understood, which is reflected in policy.

### Educational Achievements and Employment Challenges

Despite often holding high educational qualifications, migrant women in Lebanon face challenges in finding jobs that match their skills. This discrepancy highlights the undervaluing of migrant women's education and the barriers they encounter in the local job market.

### Lebanon's Triple Crises

The pandemic hit Lebanon in a moment of profound political instability and economic collapse, which was further exacerbated by the August 2020 port explosion. Little is known about the impact of this triple crisis on the employment and life of women migrant workers in the country.

### SOGIESC Visibility and State Harassment

In Lebanon, visible SOGIESC individuals, particularly trans women, face intense social discrimination and marginalisation. Increased visibility often results in harassment by state authorities, including targeted attacks on LGBTQI+ organisations. Available research suggest that the Syrian Civil War has increased the prevalence of different forms violence, exploitation, abuse, and discrimination faced by persons of SOGIESC in Lebanon.

## Key Findings

- **Lebanon's Labour Law Offers No Protection to Migrant Workers:** Migrant domestic workers, from Ethiopia and other African and Asian countries, are not protected by Lebanese labour law and under the private employment sponsorship system (kafala) their rights are easily violated.
- **Migrant Domestic Workers Have Agency:** Migrant women exhibit agency in their choice to leave their country of origin as well as within the unfair kafala system in Lebanon. However, they are trapped in circular migration patterns, which hamper their socio-cultural integration in the country. The number of people exiting the private employment sponsorship systems and settling in the country is growing.
- **Undocumented Migrants are at Increased Risk of Human Trafficking:** Undocumented migrants from Syria, fleeing gender-based discrimination and violence and the armed conflict, often fall into the informal labour market, such as the sex industry. This unregulated and stigmatised sector makes migrants vulnerable to abuse and violation of their sexual and reproductive health rights. Third sector assistance remains insufficient.
- **Gender Discrimination Against LGBTQI+ Persons, Especially Undocumented Syrian Refugees:** The conditions that they find in Lebanon are perceived as far better than those they fled from in Syria. However, Lebanon is not the country of freedom and tolerance in relation to LGBTQI+ rights that they were looking for, meaning it is a stop along their migration journey and they must keep moving.

- **Importance of Personal Networks:** Migrant women rely heavily on personal networks, based on nationality, for support and information in Lebanon. These networks serve as crucial resources for navigating life and work, illustrating the significance of community ties among migrant populations.
- **The Role of Professional Migrant Women in Lebanon Requires Further Investigation:** South-South skilled migrant circuits which involve generational mobility between Levantine countries and Gulf countries, notably the UAE, are understudied. Their contribution to the host country deserves further investigation.
- **Impact of Lebanon's Triple Crisis on Migrants:** The economic downturn, Beirut port explosion, and COVID-19 pandemic have disproportionately affected migrant women, exacerbating their vulnerabilities. These crises have led to increased unemployment, isolation, and incidents of gender-based violence, significantly altering the migrant experience in Lebanon.
- **Lebanon's Triple Crises Compounds Discrimination Against Persons of Diverse SOGIESC:** The triple crisis has compounded the ostracization, harassment and discrimination of persons of diverse SOGIESC, who have experienced misogynistic, lesbophobic, homophobic, transphobic, or xenophobic behaviour. The economic crisis has pushed many persons of diverse SOGIESC further into the margins of the economy, and Covid-19 prevention measures have hit hard, especially people dependent on sex work for survival. The increasing socio-economic strain has in part increased anti-refugee and anti-diverse SOGIESC sentiments.
- **Transience and Social Connectedness:** The transient nature of their stay in Lebanon influences migrant women's integration and social engagement. This perception of temporariness affects their investment in local connections and utilisation of public spaces, underscoring the challenges of circular migration patterns.
- **A Shift Away from the Exploitative Kafala System:** There are a growing number of migrant domestic workers outside of the exploitative kafala system in what might be the start of a bottom-up, freelancer-based alternative that could be a fairer system.
- **Psychosocial Support Gaps:** The scarcity of psychosocial support for SOGIESC individuals in Lebanon is alarming, with mental health crises and suicide rates increasing among these communities. There is an urgent need for accessible, comprehensive mental health services tailored to their experiences and challenges.

## Recommendations

### Government of Lebanon:

- **Enhance Legal Protections:** Strengthening legal protections against gender-based violence is imperative. The Lebanese government should enact and enforce laws that safeguard migrant women in both public and private spheres, offering them security and justice. This includes

improving migrant women's access to legal recourse and strengthening support services that are essential for their empowerment and safety.

- **Abolish Discriminatory Laws and Strengthen Legal Protections:** Article 534 in the Penal Code criminalises homosexual acts. This, and all other laws that criminalise sex workers, should be abolished. Implementing legal reforms to protect the rights of SOGIESC individuals is imperative for creating a more inclusive and safer environment where all citizens can live freely without fear of discrimination or persecution.

### Cross-Sector Collaboration:

- **Reform the Kafala System:** The Lebanese government, with support from international bodies (including the League of Arab States, Gulf Cooperation Council and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation) must urgently overhaul the kafala system. Such work is critical to protecting domestic workers' rights, ensuring their inclusion under Lebanon's labour laws, and eliminating the exploitation and abuse prevalent under the current framework. The UN Human Rights Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa (ROMENA) should also support multi-stakeholder negotiations in these efforts.
- **Advance Migrant Rights and Safety:** A coordinated approach involving the Lebanese government, NGOs, and international organisations is necessary to protect and enhance the rights of migrant women. By working together, these entities can create a more inclusive, safe, and supportive environment for female migrants, addressing the systemic barriers they face in Lebanon.
- **Support Migrant-Centred Programmes:** The Lebanese government should collaborate with NGOs on programs that offer job training, legal assistance, and social support to migrant communities. Prioritising economic empowerment and integration efforts can significantly improve the lives of migrant women in Lebanon.

### Governments of Migrant Workers' Country of Origin:

- **Bilateral Migration Agreements:** The governments of migrant domestic workers' country of origin are called to take actions and negotiate bilateral agreements with the Lebanese government to grant fairer conditions for their migrant citizens. Multilateral action is now even more urgent considering the impact of the Lebanese triple crisis on migrant domestic workers.

### Policy Makers and Lebanese NGOs:

- **Adopt an Intersectional Approach:** Lebanese policy makers and NGOs should embrace an intersectional lens to understand the complexities of SOGIESC identities. Recognising the diversity within these communities is crucial for developing policies and support services that cater to their specific needs, particularly in addressing the intersections of gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, and legal status.

- **Support Transnational Activism:** Encourage and facilitate transnational activism and collaboration among SOGIESC organisations across the region. Sharing strategies, resources, and support can strengthen the resilience and effectiveness of the SOGIESC movement in Lebanon and beyond, promoting a united front for rights and recognition.
- **Increase Sustainable Funding:** Lebanon urgently needs to increase sustainable funding for SOGIESC-focused services, especially in mental health and psychosocial support. This funding should aim to build the capacity of local organisations to provide comprehensive care and support, ensuring that SOGIESC individuals can access the resources they need to navigate their challenges.

This country brief draws on findings and recommendations from the following projects: [Changing SOGIE in Conflict, Peace and Displacement in the MENA](#), and [Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration](#).