



# Leveraging Intersectional Networks in Lebanon:

---

CSO Responses to a Layered Crises

May 2022

# Leveraging Intersectional Networks in Lebanon:

CSO Responses to a Layered Crises



Author:

**Stephanie McAndrew**



International Foundation  
for Electoral Systems

## **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to express deep appreciation to those who provided review and feedback of this publication, and for their assistance in conducting key informative interviews with Lebanese civil society organizations and experts: Jay Feghali, Nadine Saba, Rona Dbeissi, Elizabeth Reiter, Virginia Atkinson and Jannah Kalai.

In addition, the author also thanks Ghida Anani (ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality), Sylvana Lakkis (Lebanese Union for People with Disabilities), Brigitte Chelebian (Justice Without Frontiers), Nadia Badran (SIDC), Tarek Zeidan (Helem), Hayat Mirshad (Fe-Male), Zeina Mohanna (AMEL Association International) and Adham Hassanieh (LiHaqqi), for taking part in key informant interviews and offering their invaluable insights.

---



# About IFES

---

An informed and empowered citizenry is a crucial component of a healthy and resilient democracy. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) works to strengthen the participation, influence and representation of citizens in political processes and governance structures.

A key focus of IFES' work is inclusion of traditionally underrepresented groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, youth, indigenous groups, LGBTQ people, and ethnic and religious minorities. IFES uses an intersectional approach to its inclusion work, ensuring that individuals with multiple social identities have a voice in the way they are governed. IFES works to strengthen political inclusion by:

- Providing technical assistance to election management bodies on how to implement international standards such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- Empowering civil society organizations and traditionally underrepresented groups, such as women, persons with disabilities, youth, indigenous groups, LGBTQ people and ethnic and religious minorities to advocate for equal rights;
- Assisting citizen-led efforts to define best practices through the development of global tools as the Violence Against Women in Elections framework and tools, the manual Equal Access: How to Include Persons with Disabilities in Elections and Political Processes and the online resource [ElectionAccess.org](http://ElectionAccess.org).

Since 2004, IFES has provided Lebanese stakeholders with technical advice and support on a wide range of electoral and governance issues. IFES built civil society capacity in Lebanon to advocate for women's inclusion in the political process and disability rights and worked with relevant election authorities on electoral reform issues. IFES also developed a Lebanon-specific election violence risk assessment and database to track and analyze violence indicators.

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFE	Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality
CAS	Central Administration for Statistics
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DPO	Disabled People's Organization
EU	European Union
FDG	Focus Group Discussion
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IIR	Identify, Interpret and Respond: Raising Awareness of Intersectionality in Lebanon
LADE	Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
LUPD	Lebanese Union for Persons with Physical Disabilities
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOI	Ministry of the Interior
NCDA	National Council of Disability Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SCE	Supervisory Commission for Elections
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations

# Table of Contents



Executive Summary .....	6
The Revolution is: Intersectional .....	8
Navigating the Impact of a Compounding Crisis: COVID-19 Global Pandemic.....	12
Onset of COVID-19 Pandemic .....	12
Transitioning Efforts Online (COVID-19) .....	13
Continuing Political Advocacy .....	14
Deepening Economic and Humanitarian Crisis .....	15
Political and Economic Situation Amplifies: Blast in Beirut Port.....	17
Developing Intersectional Networks to Maximize Sustainability of CSOs .....	20
Continuing Intersectional Advocacy as a Pathway to Reform.....	21

## Executive Summary

Lebanese civil society has a long history of providing critical services to their communities. Civil society's willingness to replace and improve services typically provided by the government—which often lacks the capacity, budgets, skills or interest to do so—has made it an indispensable actor across all sectors in Lebanon. In times of crisis, it is civil society that reaches the underserved communities, especially those with compounded marginalization, and prioritizes their needs with the timeliness and sensitivity required. Since the October 17<sup>th</sup> revolution, their role evolved significantly as the following year presented Lebanon with a layered crisis, in which civil society was not exempt from the burdens of the deteriorating economic, political and public health situations. As in many crises in Lebanon's history, civil society persevered despite an increasingly difficult operating environment. While maintaining a high level of public trust and professionalism, civil society sought to improve living conditions and provided essential services to Lebanon's marginalized and vulnerable populations across the country. Civil society continued to engage as political rights activists and defenders of human rights, also while serving as frontline workers during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

This paper examines the challenges and responses of Lebanese civil society organizations (CSOs) during a year burdened by crises, in which CSOs made vital contributions to their communities. It also highlights how CSOs leveraged intersectional networks as a tool to help marginalized communities overcome barriers to information and resources in an environment that increased their vulnerabilities. The flexibility and eagerness that CSOs displayed in a rapidly changing context allowed vulnerable and marginalized populations to receive essential services and support and, in many cases, helped mitigate the impact of failing government policies. Some key findings and recommendations include:

- CSOs who leveraged intersectional tools and messages helped marginalized groups reclaim public space to address identity-based discrimination which previously happened only in the margins of society.
- Organizations who adapted their rights-based work to include humanitarian relief were better equipped to integrate relief efforts that were more inclusive of those outside their normally targeted communities.
- Intersectional advocacy on inclusive rebuilding following the Beirut blast can help strengthen the voices of marginalized groups and increase the likelihood that their inclusion is considered moving forward.
- Creating intersectional networks helps organizations maximize their time and energy, given that they are often operating with limited financial and human resources.
- Intersectional networks have improved coordination efforts amongst CSOs breaking down silos that formed due to limited funding and competition



Decades of political deadlock, corruption and economic mismanagement has plummeted economic growth, succumbing Lebanon to one of the world's highest debt-to-GDP ratio

# OCTOBER REVOLUTION IN CONTEXT

January 21, 2019



Moody's downgrades Lebanon's credit status; causing the Lebanese Pound to start falling

January 31, 2019



Lebanon announces formation of a government, ending nearly nine months of political stalemate

July 19, 2019



Parliament passes budget. Measures included tax increase and pension cuts for military members; resulting in demonstrations from military personnel

October 17, 2019



New taxes to support Lebanon's 2020 budget are introduced, including a tax on free WhatsApp calls, tobacco, and gasoline

October 15, 2019



Government's lack of response to mass wildfires across Mount Lebanon increase public anger

September 2, 2019



Lebanon's public debt reaches 150% of GDP; Government declares economic state of emergency



Lebanese across sectarian lines protested against the governments failing economic and public policies



## The Revolution is: Intersectional

Civil society organizations (CSOs) were the mobilizers of the revolution. LiHaqqi, a politically driven grassroots organization, was among the first groups calling protestors to the streets, successfully energizing thousands of people to organize across cities and regions of the country within a couple of hours. CSOs representing marginalized groups such as women, people with disabilities, youth, refugees and the LGBTQ community used the revolution's platform to amplify their advocacy priorities, which commonly intersected in the areas of human rights, inclusivity, violence prevention and improved standards of living. While these priority areas were not new calls to action for CSOs, societal stigma generally made it difficult for marginalized people to self-advocate on these issues publicly. The inclusive nature of the revolution created a safe and inviting space for high levels of engagement and the freedom to participate and advocate at the frontlines for their inclusion.



Unity on the streets gave common purpose to civil society organizations (CSOs) that would not otherwise have worked together

To increase visibility of CSO platforms, a significant number of organizations suspended traditional activities to encourage activism of their staff and leadership. Prominent LGBTQI+ rights group, Helem, saw the revolution as a key opportunity to encourage the political participation of the LGBTQI+ community. For weeks, Helem pitched tents, organized rallies and sit-ins, and maintained a presence that matched the visibility of more prominent groups such as women. Helem's front and center approach allowed them to elevate their movement and create public legitimacy through their engagement in the streets, on social media, and through creative mediums like graffiti art. The revolution also encouraged young LGBTQI+ members to self-advocate for the first time in a space that eliminated fear of retaliation for unapologetically expressing their identities. For transgender people, the revolution helped mitigate fear of violence from the military, an issue facing many transgender persons as they are often at risk of violence when passing through military and security checkpoints.<sup>1</sup> Demands of the LGBTQI+ and trans communities are united under a common struggle, along with other marginalized groups, when faced with discrimination in areas such as equal access



Suspending traditional activities gave many CSOs the space to focus on the revolution's goals

to healthcare or fair job opportunities. Amongst the most vulnerable are those with intersecting identities, such as refugees of the LGBTQI+ or trans communities who have escaped sexual and political violence in their home countries to seek refuge in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup>

Youth were among the most active groups in the revolution. Young people advocated on intersectional issues such as unemployment, gender equality and the promotion of the LGBTQI+ agenda. Student groups played a significant role in organizing protests on and off campus and set up tents in downtown Beirut to raise concerns over emigration as youth unemployment reached 30% by

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/lebanon0910\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon0910_pdf.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2020/05/07/if-not-now-when-queer-and-trans-people-reclaim-their-power>

October 2019.<sup>3</sup> Youth without collective memory of the civil war are less bound to sectarian ideologies, which has allowed them to more naturally denounce the corrupt political parties that their parents may still be bound to.<sup>4</sup> The revolution provided youth and student groups with the space for civic and political engagement, regardless of their inability to participate in formal political processes. As the voting age in Lebanon is 21, a significant number of young protestors will remain ineligible to vote in the May 2022 general elections. Given this, youth used advocacy as a means of raising awareness for the issues directly impacting their livelihoods and in favor of a system which promotes social justice and equality. This increased civic engagement reappeared in the November 2020 university elections.<sup>5</sup> Independent student groups claimed victory over sectarian groups in these high-profile elections. While the outcome of the general elections will be determined by a variety of factors, progress by non-sectarian student groups is an indication of dissatisfaction amongst Lebanese youth over the status quo and their growing concerns over their future.



Youth brought an energy and idealism to the revolution that helped to find common ground among different agendas

“The Revolution is Female” became the foundational slogan for women, women’s rights groups and allies who used the revolution to build upon a feminist movement incorporating women of all ages, sects, and economic status into their platform. The movement made significant gains in the revolution through its unique ability to effectively mitigate violence between the military and protestors, challenge the government’s patriarchal system and unite a diverse array of actors on the topics of government



Participation in the revolution highlighted the need to establish allies across different sectors, and also deepened societal understanding of diversity and the need to integrate it into the wider revolutionists agenda

accountability and transparency. For the first time, women of all sects and classes advocated together against the injustices women face in the country. Failing government policies have created additional burdens on economically disadvantaged women, women living in rural areas, domestic migrant workers and refugees

through limiting legal frameworks such as personal status laws, nationality rights of women citizens, and the Kafala system.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the revolution, women called on the government to pass a unified civil personal status law to ensure full equality between women and men and to secure full citizenship for women. As of now, women’s full political participation and their access to decision-making positions is limited due to the legally binding interference of religious clerics to oversee amendments to women’s issues in the law. In addition to these issues, women led the way in advocating for the advancement of the political and social rights of refugees, migrant workers and the LGBTQI+ community. They also touched on more taboo subjects such as sexual and reproductive rights and domestic violence which has since evolved as intersecting advocacy priorities for young women, the LGBTQI+ community, and people living with HIV.

The presence of people with disabilities and organizations advocating for their rights was not unusual given their frequent public advocacy and campaign efforts, especially since the 2015 protests against

<sup>3</sup> IMF Lebanon Country Report No. 19/312

<sup>4</sup> <https://home.crin.org/readlistenwatch/stories/2020/5/19/how-students-and-women-saved-the-revolution>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-elections-student-victory-independents-sweep-sectarian>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes\\_identity\\_and\\_politics\\_in\\_lebanon\\_october\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_identity_and_politics_in_lebanon_october_2020.pdf)

the government's inaction during Beirut's garbage crisis. Public advocacy against government corruption has been consistent since then, which allowed them to naturally engage in the October revolution on the same socio-economic and political demands as other groups. Issues close to the community, such as the implementation of Law 220,<sup>7</sup> was one of many advocacy priorities for people with disabilities, and their visibility helped others understand that disability rights are a social, economic and political issue that continue to lack prioritization by the Lebanese government. Prominent female leaders, such as Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities' president, Sylvana Lakkis, and activists from the community were at the front lines of the revolution. Lakkis organized community dialogue sessions to facilitate open conversations about obtaining "All Rights for All People". Community dialogue sessions such as these became an effective tool for CSOs to use their organizational capacity, communication skills and intimate knowledge of people's grievances to create a space for people to openly discuss politics, socio-economic policies, and human rights in the rapidly changing context. It also established new networks of information sharing and civic participation.



CSOs have the organizational capacity and professionalism to lead dialogue that address the issues communities face

While the early weeks of the revolution were peaceful, military and security forces gradually increased aggression against protestors in an effort to demobilize the growing movements across the country. Justice Without Frontiers, a CSO providing access to legal assistance and representation, reported a significant spike in requests for legal assistance during the revolution. They responded to reports of human rights violations and assisted in cases related to the arrest and torture of protestors. The number of victims of aggression by military personnel during the revolution is estimated at 546 protestors; including 13 youth and 50 women. While there are no clear statistics on the total number of arrests, the Beirut Bar Association estimates 906 protestors, including 49 minors and 17 women, were arrested between October 17 and December 31, 2019. Of this number, 194 detainees were subject to torture in prison. By June 2020, more than 1,175 people were arrested and reports of abuse and violations against protestors reached more than 1,240.<sup>8</sup> Clashes reached a peak in January, after an online call to action brought hundreds of protestors to demonstrate in front of the parliament. Over 500 people were injured after security forces attempted to disperse the crowd with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons. Political violence against protestors increased intersectional advocacy efforts amongst communities and sparked a large social media campaign "Our Revolution is Your Eyes" in support for protestors whose were subject to violence by security forces.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Law 220/2000 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was issued in May 2000. The Law is based on the UN Standard Rules for Equalization of Opportunities and on the World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons

<sup>8</sup> Key Informative Interview, Brigitte Chelebian, Founder/Director Justice Without Borders

<sup>9</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/1/21/lebanese-protesters-injure-eyes-due-to-rubber-bullets>



Intersectional advocacy in the revolution elevated the needs of those experiencing layers of discrimination on the accounts of their socio-economic status, gender, race and ability or disability.

CSOs effectively leveraged intersectional tools and messages in an environment that typically limits such coordination, and as a result helped marginalized groups reclaim public space to address identity-based discrimination which previously happened in the margins of society. New linkages and coordination efforts

developed amongst CSOs advocating together on intersecting issues, which in turn improved their leadership capacity, expanded their networks and resources, and helped organizations more effectively expose the depths of discrimination experienced under the current political system.

# Navigating the Impact of a Compounding Crisis: COVID-19 Global Pandemic

## Onset of COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 16, 2020, Lebanese authorities ordered a nation-wide lockdown, closing all non-essential businesses and restricting movement and gatherings. The shutdown also contributed to a spike in the already rising unemployment rates and caused vital services, like grocery stores and banks, to cease operations. The impact of COVID-19 became the most significant factor affecting daily life in Lebanon. This additional layer of complexity, however, did not erase the desires for change and many advocates continued to push for reform; especially as new urgencies for action surfaced when government restrictions further compounded everyday challenges. As the government-mandated stay at home orders continued over a series of months, domestic violence and reports of mental health issues increased dramatically across Lebanon.

In a May 2020 report, ABAAD – Resource Center for Gender Equality reported 1,198 calls for gender-based violence (GBV) to its 24/7 helpline compared to 1,193 in all of 2019.<sup>10</sup> In comparison to March 2020, reports of domestic abuse were up 280% in April, one month later. ABAAD attributes the rise in GBV to self-



Working together, CSOs coordinated to fill much-needed emergency shelter and crisis response to unprecedented rises in domestic and gender-based violence

isolation, misuse of power, heightened tensions, financial uncertainties, disruption of services and other pressures. In cases where services were shifted to a remote modality, women faced difficulties accessing them due to the lack of privacy at home. In addition, financial hardships affected the ability to request help online or connect via WhatsApp. To support those impacted by GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic, ABAAD developed an extensive response plan to ensure continuity of its life-saving services and resources.

Increases in online activity also generated new types of gender-based violence, including online discrimination, cybercrimes and cyberbullying. Fe-Male, a prominent feminist organization in Lebanon, used their large online network to launch a widespread cyber-security campaign, which aimed to raise awareness of online violence against women and girls. The campaign also increased knowledge of available resources and services for victims of cybercrimes and referred beneficiaries to other rights-based organizations with the appropriate resources and capabilities to best respond to each scenario.

Between March 10<sup>th</sup> and April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the percentage of legal advice for women and girls provided by Justice Without Frontiers increased by 120%. 42% of these cases were related to domestic violence, while other consultations provided legal advice for evictions during lockdown, violence against children, cyber bullying, exploitation of women to sign a waiver of their rights, and failure to provide living expenses for wives and children. Within the scope of the government's COVID-19

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1590737262.pdf>

emergency plan, Fe-Male advocated heavily for the need for judges to receive complaints through video calls, softening the requirement for victims to personally appear in court to obtain protection orders.

Reports of abuse by people who use drugs, those living with HIV or members of the LGBTQ community also increased during the lockdown period. In response, SIDC, a CSO providing services and information on sexual and reproductive health, expanded their safety and protection programming through online awareness raising sessions while also providing remote support and referrals. To gain a rapid assessment of the urgent needs of their beneficiaries, SIDC circulated questionnaires through mediums like LGBTQI+ dating apps. As part of their mental health management initiative, they engaged youth on the street to discuss stress and anxiety alongside specialists and ensured that their engagements included a sensitization and referral component.

Young LGBTQ persons in particular reported a significant increase in mental health issues. Economic hardship, exacerbated by the pandemic, forced them to move home to environments that, in many cases, were not accepting of them. Fear of retaliation and abuse increased emotional hardship and forced many to cut off their usual support networks or suppress their identities. In addition, their inability to escape family pressure or access resources increased the likelihood of forced marriage and corrective rape. Between March and May, Helem witnessed an increase in demands for psycho-social support (PSS) and a 30% increase in calls to their suicide hotline. Across all services provided, Helem witnessed a 200% increase for PSS, case management, cash assistance and healthcare. Connecting with their networks, as part of their operational model to connect with and build the power of communities, was challenging as reaching beneficiaries during an emotionally stressful time became more difficult.

## Transitioning Efforts Online (COVID-19)

Organizations structured around providing the majority of their services to the beneficiaries in person struggled with the transition of their work to online modalities. Beneficiaries living in poorer areas, in addition to those with certain disabilities that make remote care challenging, relied on CSOs to provide services that would help them maintain a certain standard of living. An exemption from the Ministry of Health, which gave flexibility to NGOs carrying out essential work, allowed grassroots organizations to safely meet with beneficiaries and distribute emergency services when needed. Organizations like AMEL, who offer services to those impacted by war and conflict, have beneficiaries who heavily rely on in-person health and emergency services in their centers across the country because of the sensitive nature of their work in the areas of health, education, psycho-social support, protection and livelihood training. Given that a significant portion of their programming targets refugees living in camps, communicating remotely proved difficult as many do not own computers or have access to the internet or necessary software like Zoom. For those living with disabilities, many platforms are not accessible, which makes online communication and workshops challenging. In addition, lack of internet and reliable electrical supply frequently interrupts meeting progress and delays progress on important initiatives. As COVID-19 cases continued to rise through 2020 and into 2021, organizations were challenged with developing sustainable programming in a more permanent remote-work scenario. More established CSOs, with extensive experience and capacity to continue working online,

experienced less complications than grassroots organizations that relied on delivering services on the ground. In some cases, CSOs with greater capacities were able to increase their outreach and advocacy initiatives with counterparts as online activities in Lebanon and other regions of the world allowed for an easy and accessible platform to exchange ideas and expand programming. Grassroots organizations, on the other hand, found the transition challenging, and their limited resources and online advocacy capabilities made implementation difficult.



Information and resource sharing help CSOs cope with the challenges of operating in a changing context

Under IFES' Identify, Interpret and Respond (IIR) project, grassroots organizations and more established organizations moved the project's Inclusive Dialogue Working Group platform online in order to maintain space for CSOs to raise and address the intersecting challenges marginalized groups face in Lebanon. Continuing this series was essential for the maintenance of the intersectional networks developed under this program since 2018. Given the rapidly changing context on the

**In the early pandemic period, CSOs raised concerns over newly rising challenges:**

- Inequitable distribution of resources
- Forced evictions due to inability to pay rent
- Discriminatory laws continue to be passed
- Limited information or assistance related to health and safety precautions reach refugee camps
- Rising cases of domestic abuse against women and LGBTQ persons under quarantine

ground, CSOs relied on information sharing and lessons learned to best respond to the growing needs of beneficiaries in the early stages of the pandemic. By presenting their issues amongst a group of other civil society organizations operating in similar conditions, the participants acted as "peer advisors" to one another, developing ideas and sharing experiences around how to best handle the urgent needs facing all organizations. Most importantly, this platform allowed grassroots organizations to continue to benefit from the established tools and resources shared by other organizations in order to better manage their work in a changing environment. It was in this context that the organizations, working together as the "Path Coalition: Power in Diversity and Inclusion" continued to practice intersectional advocacy by advancing initiatives,<sup>11</sup> establishing new advocacy priorities, and continuing to strategize on intersectional projects in the areas of education, employment,

government and political rights.

## Continuing Political Advocacy

Political advocacy moved to new mediums in the early pandemic period. While organizations realized the difficulties in empowering people to advocate for their rights at a time where many were not able to cover their basic needs, organizations continued to seek opportunities to continue advocacy campaigns that inspired progressive and forward-thinking initiatives for Lebanon's future. In addition to the pandemic, the humanitarian situation began impacting the momentum of advocacy initiatives

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ifes.org/news/lebanese-advocate-intersectional-rights>

as unemployment, food insecurity, and homelessness made it difficult for people to purchase internet or mobile data to access campaign messages or participate in online advocacy. In emergency situations, and with respect to social distancing and mask wearing, protestors continued to express the urgency of the government to enact responsible policies that met people's needs and upheld the rights of marginalized populations. In some cases, organizations felt that intra-organizational solidarity in the form of protests and advocacy was necessary to help communities overcome the impacts of the layered crises.

## Deepening Economic and Humanitarian Crisis

As the unstable political and economic situation magnified over the following months, early stages of a dire humanitarian situation appeared across the country as unemployment rates and poverty levels increased, and a lack of liquidity made it difficult for businesses to stay open or for employees to receive pay to support their families. Many also received dramatic pay cuts, either due to inflation or employers actively slashing paychecks. By May 2020, the World Bank reported more than 50% of the population had fallen below the poverty line.<sup>12</sup> By June, 25% of private sector business had closed, with forecasts that over 50% could close by the end of the year.<sup>13</sup> Weak electricity coverage and failing basic service sectors affected the flow of daily work and life. With growing COVID-19 cases, hospitals became unable to respond to non-emergency cases and the lack of reliable electricity hindered medical operations. To mitigate the impact of the situation on beneficiaries, other CSOs began integrating aid components into their ongoing operations. For organizations like Helem, this was particularly important because in many cases, those identifying as LGBTQI+ are denied essential services from charity and aid organizations. The economic situation made distribution of aid and outreach challenging as beneficiaries were increasingly unable to afford cell phones or transportation. To the extent possible, SIDC began distributing phone cards and transportation stipends to allow beneficiaries to collect medicine and supplies from their office. They also distributed information on their free sexual health services. SIDC's stabilized outreach efforts helped continue vital initiatives such as their Harm Reduction Program, which provides people who use drugs with clean needles in an effort to decrease their risk of contracting HIV, hepatitis, and other blood-borne diseases.



CSOs have minimized the impact of societal stigmas by expanding their capabilities to provide resources outside of their scopes

Organizations adapting their rights-based work to include humanitarian relief were better equipped to integrate relief efforts that were inclusive of those outside their normally targeted communities. Women's rights organizations in particular were successful at providing intersectional humanitarian relief to refugees and migrant workers, but also to people with disabilities, youth and older people. By utilizing their growing intersectional networks, organizations consulted with each other to build in the

<sup>12</sup>[https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00268\\_pb15\\_beirut-explosion-rising-poverty-en.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00268_pb15_beirut-explosion-rising-poverty-en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup>[https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/Half\\_of\\_Lebanese\\_businesses\\_could\\_close\\_in\\_2020\\_Head\\_of\\_the\\_Beirut\\_Traders\\_Association-SNG\\_177212706/](https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/Half_of_Lebanese_businesses_could_close_in_2020_Head_of_the_Beirut_Traders_Association-SNG_177212706/)



needs of those under-targeted by international relief organizations, such as refugees, migrant workers, and the LGBTQ community, to demonstrate a new way of response that does not discriminate based on identity or status. By doing so, CSOs have led the way in showcasing how response efforts can be inclusive and effectively advance the narrative of intersectionality as a pathway to inclusive reform and recovery.

## Political and Economic Situation Amplifies: Blast in Beirut Port

From aid distribution to relief efforts, CSOs helped offset public dissatisfaction with the government to adequately respond to the aftermath of the blast. The areas impacted by the blast were home to many marginalized groups, including refugees and migrant workers in the Karantina area and the LGBTQI+ community in Gemmayzeh and Mar Mikhael. Helem's office, located in Gemmayzeh, was destroyed in the blast, leaving the community even more vulnerable during the ongoing public health crisis. Helem not only had to operate with less resources in an emergency situation but also had to do so while continuing to administer the services their beneficiaries relied on, such as mental health



Civil society was at the frontline of the response immediately following the blast

services requested to cope with the destruction of community centers. The overall damage, which included an estimated 40,000 buildings destroyed, created accessibility challenges for people with disabilities and

those trying to administer aid. LUPD conducted an emergency needs assessment of people with disabilities who were trapped in their homes and could not access services. By deploying staff to the impacted areas to survey at-risk persons and confirm the statistics released by government and international organizations which reported on individuals with acquired disabilities as a result of the blast, LUPD developed an assessment that helped streamline their response and adequately provide services such as aid distribution, referrals and psycho-social support.

LGBTQI+ groups and people with disabilities were amongst those who led the way in showing the importance of intersectional networks as a tool to maximize impact in the aftermath of the blast. The loss of safe spaces and newly inaccessible areas made LGBTQI+ groups and people with disabilities among the most vulnerable communities following the explosion. As a result, addressing the needs of LGBTQI+ persons with disabilities became an advocacy priority for LUPD and the LGBTQI+ organization, AFE MENA. Under IFES' IIR project, these organizations initiated a rapid response assessment of the intersectional needs of LGBTQI+ individuals with disabilities. This initiative came at a critical time when CSOs were hoping to use the rebuilding period to identify gaps in policy and decision making and, in turn, use their networks and expertise to lobby for inclusive rebuilding which considers the needs of those most-at risk of exclusion.



CSOs have increased efforts to design programs that consider the needs of intersectional communities

An intersectional rapid response assessment conducted by ABAAD highlights the challenges marginalized groups faced when seeking assistance after the blast,<sup>14</sup> helping them to expand their services to a wider range of communities. Among the report's many findings, discrimination against women, older people, LGBTQI+ persons, people with disabilities, refugees and migrant workers was found to be common due to a significant amount of aid distributed informally by unofficial or untrained volunteers. ABAAD also found that marginalized groups were left with limited housing options due to

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1603898974.pdf>

racism, transphobia, homophobia, or lack of documentation. Additionally, fears around COVID-19 and gender discrimination created barriers for older people and trans women when seeking post-blast mental health resources because they were less likely to leave their homes. COVID-19 fears also limited the amount of women's shelters opened to newcomers, which hindered GBV survivors' ability to seek services and refuge from their perpetrators. To mitigate this challenge, ABAAD located three transitional spaces where women could quarantine for 14 days before being admitted to one of the three available safe shelters.



Intersectional initiatives allow community leaders to address the unique challenges of those who experience multiple layers of marginalization

An estimated 150,000 women and girls were displaced from their homes following the blast.<sup>15</sup> In response, Fe-Male heavily targeted this population in their distribution efforts by administering food and medical and hygiene kits among other resources. The intersecting identities of women, including those who are refugees, migrant workers, racial minorities, or women with disabilities, are vulnerable to the challenges of food and financial insecurity, emotional distress, and violence. The blast, which destroyed food and medical supplies stored in the port, increased the likelihood of these challenges negatively impacting vulnerable populations as resources became scarce and lack of access to adequate services and resources become more common. Fe-Male also considered the importance of safety for female first responders as a priority, an issue ABAAD also reports on in their assessment. Females working as frontline workers in the aftermath of the blast were more likely to experience harassment or physical violence and also reported feeling unsafe in areas affected by the explosion. Harassment of refugees was also common for refugees and migrant workers volunteering after the blast. The Anti-Racism Movement reported instances of Syrian volunteers getting stopped by Lebanese Internal Security Forces to ask for their IDs while they were cleaning rubble.<sup>16</sup> Conditions for refugees and migrant workers were made complicated as access to health facilities was limited when Karantina's hospital, known to welcome non-Lebanese, was amongst one of the facilities destroyed. The destruction pushed refugees and migrant workers further into crisis as other facilities were un-welcoming to non-Lebanese following the blast.<sup>17</sup> In response, AMEL deployed their health care teams in mobile medical vans to distribute supplies and care to those unable to receive it elsewhere. Since the blast, they have opened more than 20 resource centers, supplying social and medical services, which helped offset the burdens and challenges faced by underserved populations.<sup>18</sup>

On November 27, 2020 the parliament approved a draft law stipulating that victims of the blast should be considered as Lebanese military martyrs. This status would make them eligible for life-long state benefits including financial aid, a monthly salary, and medical aid for families. LUPD advocated heavily for the revision of the law because it does not address allocating benefits to the estimated 1,000 people who acquired short- or long-term disabilities in the blast. Following the announcement,

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/beirut-150000-women-and-girls-displaced-following-blast>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/notes/anti-racism-movement/beirut-blast-solidarity-tainted-with-racism/306349277115925/>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/crisis\\_prevention\\_and\\_recovery/leave-no-one-behind-for-an-inclusive-and-just-recovery-process-i.html](https://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/leave-no-one-behind-for-an-inclusive-and-just-recovery-process-i.html)

<sup>18</sup> <https://amel.org/amel-inaugurates-two-new-centers-in-beirut-a-medical-center-in-ain-el-remmaneh-and-a-social-medical-center-in-achrafieh/>

LUPD carried out a campaign denouncing the law and bringing attention to the marginalization of



CSOs can strengthen advocacy efforts by unifying against laws that discriminate against marginalized groups

people with disabilities during the drafting process. Activists called on the government to consider those who have acquired a disability be given the status of a military official with disabilities to obtain parallel benefits.

As Beirut rebuilds the devastated areas, input from civil society can provide the necessary sensitization for government stakeholders to address the needs of groups who are at greater risk of falling through the cracks in the rebuilding process. In addition, stakeholders will also have to ensure that the recovery plan removes physical barriers and barriers to inclusion that prevent communities from accessing necessary health and social services. In moving from emergency response to the rebuilding phase, the valuable insight of CSOs can help inform and shape public perception and ensure that private sector stakeholders are also sensitized to these needs in the reconstruction of offices or as landlords and employers. Intersectional advocacy on inclusive rebuilding can help strengthen the voices of marginalized groups and increase the likelihood that their inclusion is considered moving forward.

Momentum around intersectional advocacy in the rebuilding efforts has already taken shape. In the spirit of International Human Rights Day on December 10, 2020, LUPD led an intersectional march, in coordination with Committee of the Families of the Missing and Disappeared, highlighting the importance of rebuilding Beirut in an inclusive way.<sup>19</sup> The initiative included representation from across different civil society organizations and was an opportunity for CSOs to create new links across sectors who share the same priorities. By including a diverse set of civil society actors, LUPD was able to capitalize on an opportunity to create space for dialogue, increase public consciousness on intersectional issues, and cultivate support for intersectional initiatives.

---

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ifes.org/news/marching-together-lebanon-toward-recovering-stolen-rights>

## Developing Intersectional Networks to Maximize Sustainability of CSOs

In the midst of Lebanon's crises, CSOs reported that the needs of their beneficiaries evolved dramatically, as many now require basic services or specialization outside their area of expertise. For example, CSOs who reported an increase in requests from their beneficiaries who acquired a disability as a result of the blast also expressed that they lack the expertise needed to address these needs, especially for more sensitive groups like refugees with disabilities. Not only does this amplify the need for organizations to develop more inclusive programming, it also has signaled the utility of intersectional networking which would allow CSOs to urgently and appropriately direct requests as part of their emergency preparedness plans. As a starting point, the Path Coalition under IFES' IIR program developed an intersectional referral guide to disseminate resources and information amongst those with intersecting identities who did not previously have access to the necessary networks. In parallel, CSOs actively used the new partnerships and connections developed under the project to refer their beneficiaries to coalition partners, which encourages and promotes information sharing across CSO sectors.



Intersectional networks give organizations easy access to information and resources during times of crisis

Creating intersectional networks also helps organizations free up much needed capacity in order to maximize the application of their professional expertise, given that they are often operating with limited financial and human resources. Since the revolution, CSOs have responded to the growing humanitarian situation by providing emergency services outside their scope, which many reported as particularly taxing on staff and financially unsustainable for the organization. To address immediate needs, organizations have reallocated cost savings from cancelled events as a means of affording these services to the extent possible. In some ways, organizations have realigned their strategic plans to make space for future emergency response situations, but most organizations will still rely on the sustainability of intersectional networks to ensure that they can appropriately and urgently direct people in a rapidly changing context and to combine resources and expertise with others in the CSO community. Most importantly, the expanding intersectional networks have improved coordination efforts amongst CSOs, which has been an ongoing challenge within the community due to limited funding and competition which has kept CSOs operating in their silos and prevented intersectional inequalities from being effectively addressed.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes\\_identity\\_and\\_politics\\_in\\_lebanon\\_october\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_identity_and_politics_in_lebanon_october_2020.pdf)

## Continuing Intersectional Advocacy as a Pathway to Reform

Intersectional networks not only promote linkages and build sustainability across sectors, they also have the capacity to reach a wide spectrum of stakeholders, maximize benefits and increase opportunities for advocacy and reform. Since the October revolution, marginalized and vulnerable communities have heavily relied on the professionalism and capacity of civil society to adequately respond to and minimize the impacts of the political, economic and public health crises. The ability of CSOs to meet these demands with full understanding of the challenges and needs can be greatly attributed to their commitment to leveraging intersectional advocacy tools and networks. The information and resource sharing that happened through these intersectional networks helped grow the capacity of grassroots organizations to become better advocates and in exchange, advanced the leadership skills of more established CSOs. Intersectionality helped strengthen advocacy priorities, enforce the commitment of CSOs to see these priorities through, and maintain the revolution's momentum, even as CSOs grappled with the onset of a global pandemic and the ramifications of the Beirut blast.

As Lebanon looks forward and addresses short- and long-term challenges, policymakers can benefit from the intimate knowledge and field experience of CSOs who operated in the midst of crises and successfully tackled the issues impacting marginalized and vulnerable communities. While the sectarian government structure attempts to minimize the space for civil society to advocate for intersectional policies, CSOs' ability to identify areas of opportunity, and employ an intersectional approach, highlights its effectiveness as a tool in addressing barriers to participation. As Beirut rebuilds, CSOs should continue to leverage intersectional networks and initiatives in order to set the groundwork for the much needed political and economic reform that would be incomplete without the voices of marginalized communities and the organizations that represent them.



HQ | 2011 Crystal Drive | Arlington, VA 22202 | USA

 [www.IFES.org](http://www.IFES.org)