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VIOLENT BEGINNINGS:

Children growing up
in Lebanon's crisis

December 2021



A group of children are sitting on the ground in a makeshift camp. In the foreground, a young boy is seen from the back, looking towards the camera. To his right, a girl is sitting with her back to the camera, and a man is sitting next to her, holding a baby. In the background, other children are visible, and the camp is made of a blue and brown checkered fabric. The scene is set outdoors under a clear blue sky.

A barrage of devastating crises in Lebanon is fuelling a rise in the number of children experiencing abuse, exploitation and violence.

Over the last two years, the Lebanese lira has lost more than 90 per cent of its value¹, causing massive inflation and unemployment, and driving more than 80 percent of the population into multidimensional poverty². Alongside this profound financial freefall, the country is struggling with political instability, the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the August 2020 Beirut Port explosions. Every section of Lebanon's population is under extraordinary strain, with little sign of respite.

Life has never been easy for children living in Hesbi camp, South Lebanon. The crisis has only worsened the living conditions of these Lebanese families of Palestinian heritage. They report not having resources to cover the basics and most of them are cutting expenses from the education of their children, who are now working instead of in school.

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WITH FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL COLLAPSE, COMES SOCIAL BREAKDOWN AND INCREASED PROTECTION RISKS

“Lebanon’s crisis threatens the present and the future of millions of children. Ensuring their protection from abuse, harm, and violence and safeguarding their rights are needed more than ever”, emphasized the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) on Violence against Children, Dr. Najat Maalla M’jid.

Amid these unprecedented stresses, the structures that normally protect children are slowly disintegrating, and access to the basics they need to survive is deteriorating. Multidimensional poverty – which takes into account not just household income, but deprivation in areas like housing, healthcare and education – has nearly doubled in Lebanon, from 42 per cent in 2019, to 82 per cent in 2021³.

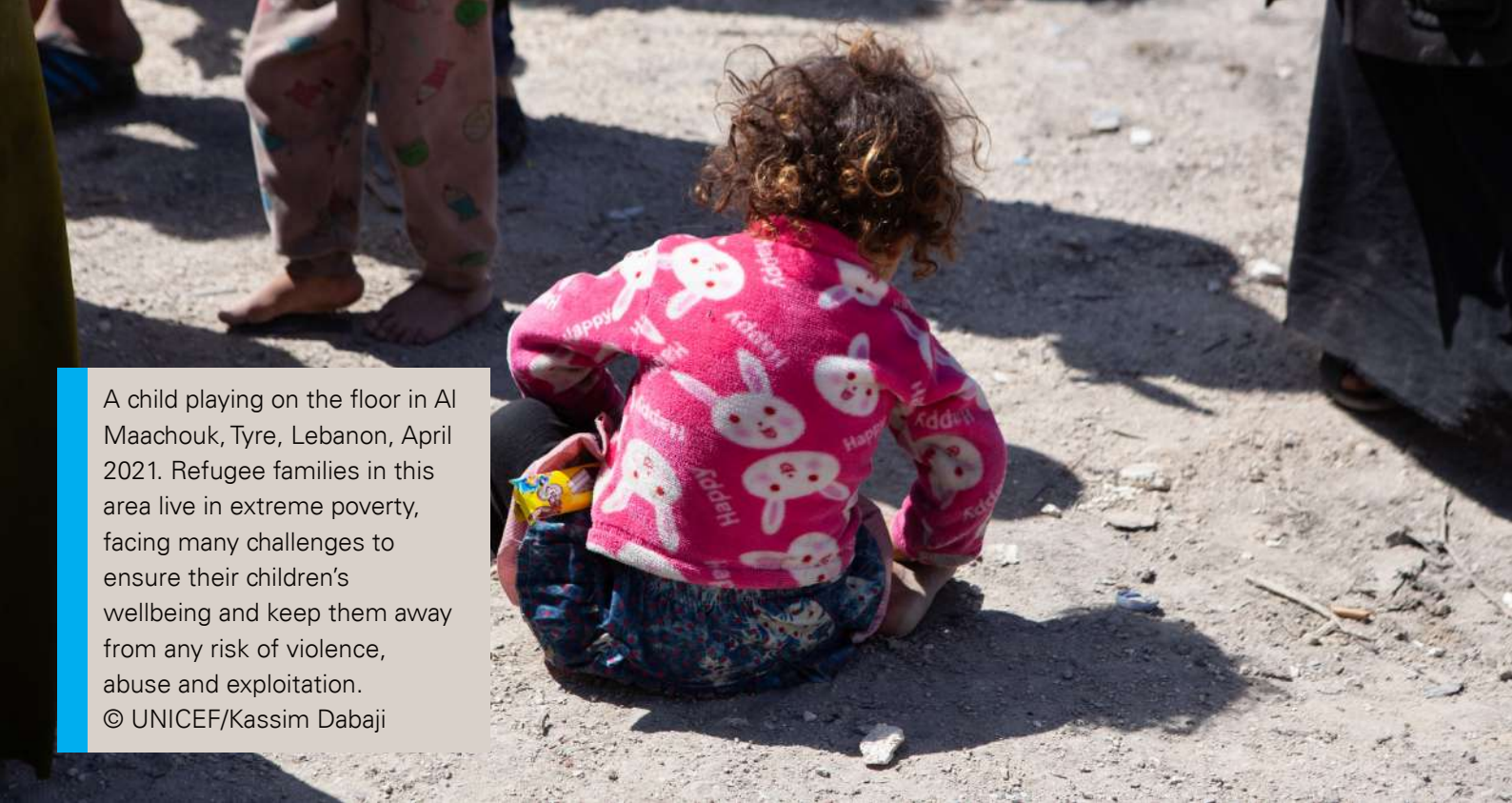
More and more families are struggling to provide food for their children. 53 per cent of families surveyed by UNICEF in October had at least one child who had skipped a meal in the past 30 days, compared with 37 per cent in April⁴. Almost the entirety of Lebanon’s refugee population is living in extreme poverty and does not have enough money to buy the food they need to survive⁵.

Access to education is also inadequate. The COVID-19 pandemic kept 1.2 million students out of school in 2020 and into 2021. Hundreds of thousands of children are still unable to attend

school, some as they simply cannot afford the fare to travel there.⁶ A survey by UNICEF in April found that more than one in five (21 per cent) of children had no way to access distance learning and the majority (81 per cent) of those questioned experienced difficulties in studying or focusing at home⁷.

Elsewhere, 2.8 million people are affected by water shortages⁸, while 93 per cent of households surveyed by UNICEF in October reported the price of medications had increased between July and September⁹. The survey also showed that the number of families able to afford healthcare is declining, with almost 34 per cent of children who required primary health care not receiving it, up from 28 per cent in April¹⁰.

As basic social services collapse, so too do the social systems that protect children, placing them at increased risk of violence, abuse and exploitation.



A child playing on the floor in Al Maachouk, Tyre, Lebanon, April 2021. Refugee families in this area live in extreme poverty, facing many challenges to ensure their children’s wellbeing and keep them away from any risk of violence, abuse and exploitation.
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DESPERATE TIMES

Families are increasingly turning to dangerous coping strategies. Around 1.8 million children are now judged to be experiencing multidimensional poverty, up from around 900,000 in 2019. These children are living in households that are more likely to resort to measures like child labour or child

marriage to help make ends meet. The number of cases of child abuse and exploitation handled by UNICEF and partners shot up by almost half (44 per cent) between October 2020 and October 2021, from 3,913 to 5,621 cases.



"I work the whole day long until it gets dark. I work to support my siblings. I bring them food. That's all."
Hadi, 10.

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Child labour is on the rise. More than half (53 per cent) of respondents to a UNICEF poll of partner organisations in September noted child labour as their number one protection concern¹¹, up from 41 per cent three months previously. In a UNICEF survey in October, 12 per cent of families questioned said they send at least one child out to work, up from 9 per cent six months previously¹². The number of Lebanese households questioned who are sending their children to work had increased by seven times within the same time period¹³. The annual Vulnerability Assessment of

Syrian Refugees, carried out by the UN Refugee Agency, the World Food Programme and UNICEF, shows that the number of Syrian refugee children working more than doubled between 2019 and 2021, to 27,825 children, the majority of whom are boys¹⁴. Partners report that children as young as six are now working on farms, on the streets and illegally selling fuel, putting them at risk of serious burns and even death. While working, children are frequently exposed to other threats, such as abuse, violence and sexual exploitation.



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Child marriage is also a major risk, as desperate families seek dowries and security for their offspring. One in five Syrian girls between the ages of 15-19 in Lebanon is married¹⁵. 22 per cent of Syrian girls aged 15-18 who do not attend school say it is due to marriage, compared to 0.1 per cent of boys¹⁶. Latest figures show four per cent of Lebanese girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are married¹⁷, but experts fear the true figures may be much higher.

Furthermore, the pressure of Lebanon's multiple crises is producing new threats for children. UNICEF partners have highlighted destitute families abandoning babies in the streets and children facing increased risk of abduction¹⁸. UNICEF also fears the number of children ending up separated from extended family and in residential care could increase as families struggle in the deteriorating economic situation. Lebanon already has one of the highest rates of institutionalisation of children in the world – estimated at over 20,000 children in residential homes¹⁹.

“I got married at the age of 13. The man who came to my home to ask for me was 18; I didn't know him, and I didn't want to get married, but my mother insisted that I had no other choice. At the time, I was still at school. I used to enjoy going. I had friends; we learned; we played; we talked about our futures. On the day I got married, this stopped.”

Rahaf, now 15, was pregnant within weeks of her marriage and experienced domestic violence at the hands of her husband. She is now back living with her mother, but her husband took away her daughter as soon as she was born.

TENSIONS SPILL OVER


With stress simmering at home, a lack of regular school routine during COVID-19 lockdowns and a decline in social services, at least one million children in Lebanon are at risk of direct violence. UNICEF partners are reporting increasing rates of domestic violence²⁰, which puts both women and children at greater risk. The proportion of Lebanese girls and women seeking services for gender-based violence rose sharply in the past three years (from 21 per cent of total cases in 2018 to 26 per cent in 2019 to 35 per cent in 2020)²¹. Two thirds (66 per cent) of respondents surveyed by UNICEF in October felt their children's wellbeing was much worse off than a year ago, with more than half of parents (52 per cent) saying they "feel the urge to yell" at their children and more than quarter of the families (31 per cent) acknowledging they feel less tolerant towards their children than before²².

In this pressure cooker environment, mental health issues are rising among young people, often resulting in risky, violent behaviour and substance abuse. A UNICEF assessment that interviewed

adolescents aged 15 to 24 in September 2021 shows that one in four reported often feeling depressed²³. Just over half of the 900 respondents said their lives had worsened over the past year²⁴. Furthermore, more than half of children in households questioned as part of a needs assessment after the Beirut Port Explosions reported experiencing stress and anxiety²⁵.

More and more children are coming into contact with the criminal justice system as a result of the worsening crises: Some after participating in violence and protests about the political and economic situation in the country, others as they are victim of, or witness to, violence in the home. Still more are questioned about their immigration status or are pushed into crime, substance use or begging, as they struggle to survive. Every year more than 2000 children in contact with the law receive support through NGOs supported by UNICEF – including support at police stations, court hearings and reintegration upon release.

"Children's safety and wellbeing are intricately connected to every pillar of a well-functioning society," says Yukie Mokuo, UNICEF Lebanon Representative. "It takes a village - food, housing, healthcare, regular schooling, thriving families and functioning social services and institutions - to help children grow up free from harm. When society begins to crumble, children are left extremely vulnerable to abuse, violence and exploitation."

A young girl with dark hair and a white flower in her hair is looking through a wire mesh fence. She is wearing a blue and white striped top. The background is dark and out of focus, with some green foliage visible in the foreground.

With stress simmering at home, a lack of regular school routine during COVID-19 lockdowns and a decline in social services, at least one million children in Lebanon are at risk of direct violence.

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ENDING VIOLENCE

Children have one childhood. If they are denied the right to grow up free from harm, the negative consequences will last a lifetime.

Protecting children requires activating all pillars of society and improving children's overall wellbeing, including by:

- Reducing poverty for both Lebanese and refugee families.
- Revising laws and policies to protect children.
- Improving access to social and child protection services, learning, healthcare and justice.
- Catalysing long-term cultural shifts in societal attitudes.

Child protection services need to be complementary – ensuring that a child who is out of school receives not just education, but also social welfare and protection support; and a child at risk of marriage and violence is protected from danger, but is also given access to education and skills training. Around the world, child and family welfare systems, as well as legal protection and social welfare for the most vulnerable families, are key to stop children falling through the cracks.

To help children in Lebanon grow up safe from harm, we need a cohesive national response. This includes the UN country team, civil society organisations, academics, donors, the corporate sector, financial institutions and faith-based leaders helping to drive forward change and modelling best practice for child protection. We also need to see swift action from the Government to prioritise protection:

- The Ministry of Education and Higher Education must ensure school environments are safe for all children.
- The Ministry of Public Health must ensure health practitioners have the skills and resources to handle protection cases.
- The Ministry of Social Affairs must work to support families to create a caring environment at home.

Finally, to succeed in our efforts we need to empower and engage children as actors of change and part of the solution in all matters that affect their rights.

Qudwa hub



UNICEF and partners are working to address child protection and gender-based violence in over 240 locations across Lebanon, through "Qudwa hubs". These centres are places where children can access legal, psychological and emotional support and participate in different activities to strengthen their resilience and reduce their risk of being abused or exploited. They are also bases from which UNICEF works with diverse community members, including religious leaders, community leaders, hairdressers and scouts, to create sustainable grassroots networks and a movement for social change to empower and protect children.



14-year-old Narjes and her siblings at a psychosocial support activity in Bourj Hammoud, Beirut, this year. UNICEF/Foad Choufany

The programme focuses on geographical areas with high levels of children involved in hazardous child labour or living on the street. In the hubs, trained staff are able to identify the most vulnerable children and provide them with intense support. Parents and caregivers are also able to take part in parenting activities and other trainings to help them cope with the unfolding crises in the country.

Outside the centre's four walls, a network of community activists is helping to build awareness of child protection, encouraging people to spot dangers and report suspicions. The hubs also bring mobile activities – like books and theatre- to children and their families who may not have the money or resources to travel to the service centre itself, offering vital mental health and protection support.

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Children's names in this publication have been changed to protect their identity



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