



# GENDER ALERT ON MISSING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN LEBANON'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS: WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

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## CONTEXT

Over the last three years, Lebanon has been assailed by compounded crises that have affected the whole population, especially women, girls and marginalized groups.<sup>1</sup> Compounded by the spread of COVID-19, incidents of gender based-violence (GBV) have increased, with women and girls disproportionately affected.<sup>2</sup> The past three years – when compared to the years before – have witnessed more reporting of domestic violence<sup>3</sup> and an increase in the severity and emergency nature of such incidents.<sup>4</sup> The Internal Security Forces (ISF) data shows an increase of 241% in domestic violence reported during the spread of COVID-19 when compared to the 18 months before.<sup>5</sup> In parallel, in 2020, more than half of Lebanese and Syrian women and girls<sup>6</sup> in Lebanon reported feeling less safe at their homes (44%) and communities (57%).<sup>7</sup> As of this writing, the prolonged economic crisis and protracted refugee crisis persist, and violence against women and girls continues to worsen alongside them.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UN Women. 2021. [Gender-Responsive Recovery in Lebanon: Recommendations for fiscal, social, and labour policy reform](#); UN Women et al. 2020. [Rapid Gender Analysis of the August Beirut Port Explosion: an intersectional examination](#).

<sup>2</sup>UN Women et al. 2020. [Gender Alert on COVID-19 Lebanon: access to justice and GBV, 2020](#).

<sup>3</sup>Internal Security Forces data as of March 31, 2020; this is also inclusive of child protection cases of DV.

<sup>4</sup>KAFA. 2020. [March monthly report on domestic violence](#).

<sup>5</sup>Data provided by ISF to UN Women comparing number of domestic violence cases from 6 October 2018-7 March 2020 with the number of cases from 8 March 2020- 31 December 2022.

<sup>6</sup>SGBV Partners (Abaad, Care International, DRC, IRC and Interos) conducted phone interviews with 562 GBV service users (women and girls) in Lebanon.

<sup>7</sup>SGBV Inter-Agency Task Force in Lebanon. 2020. [Impact of COVID-19 on the SGBV Situation in Lebanon](#).

<sup>8</sup>UN Women and Gender Working Group in Lebanon. 2022. [Gender Statistical Profile of Lebanon](#).

## ISSUE IN FOCUS: MISSING WOMEN AND GIRLS

This Gender Alert published by UN Women, Fe-male, and KAFA pulls together recent national resources and data on missing women and girls, as a first step to better understanding the issue and bring together a coherent prevention and response. The primary data included in their brief includes official figures from the Lebanese Internal Forces (ISF), and UN Women's gender analysis of the latest humanitarian national assessments, Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) and Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA), with a focus on missing women and girls. It is complemented by secondary data, namely articles from Lebanese media and relevant reports. The data presented in this brief was validated through a roundtable discussion in February 2023 with the ISF, UN agencies, local actors responding to GBV in Lebanon.<sup>9</sup>

### In Numbers

Amid Lebanon's humanitarian crisis and the escalating occurrence of gendered violence, almost every week women and girls are reported missing by the police and media.<sup>10</sup> In 2021, 81 women and girls were reported missing to the ISF,<sup>11</sup> among which 62% were Lebanese and 30% were Syrian. This number increased by about one-third to 129 women and girls disappearing in 2022, where 67% of them were Lebanese and 24% were Syrian. Moreover, according to ISF reports, the majority of them were missing for unknown reasons (108), reasons associated with mental health (15), escaping domestic violence (1), family disputes (1) and/or other reasons. As per UN Women's Lebanon Media Monitoring between March 2021 and June 2022, the number of reported cases of missing females is more than twice that of males during the same period.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note the intersecting layers of vulnerability migrant women and girls face, which makes them more prone to exploitation and abuse. Whether they are also more at risk of disappearances is unclear and needs further investigation. Data on missing migrant women is lacking and the ISF numbers presented in this Gender Alert do not cover this population as migrant affairs are under the jurisdiction of the Lebanese General Security. Moreover, for migrant women, the Kafala (sponsorship) system results in broken social ties and consequently makes reporting disappearances more challenging.

### Challenges

Reporting, investigations, accountability and justice for missing and disappeared persons are complex and difficult issues worldwide and are made more challenging in the current context of crisis and collapse in Lebanon. The current judicial paralysis, with most justice sector employees on an extended strike,<sup>13</sup> is compounding this. Since August 2022, approximately 400 out of the 550 judges in the country have been on strike which obstructs the filing of official complaints to the general prosecution and consequently the documentation of missing women cases along with other cases.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the lack of resources and funds for police stations hinders the police's ability to follow-up and investigate cases of missing women and girls.

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<sup>9</sup> ISF, KAFA, Fe-Male, UN Women, UNHCR, Makhzoumi Foundation, Amel Association, Legal Agenda and Abaad.

<sup>10</sup> UN Women Lebanon Media Monitoring 2021-2022.

<sup>11</sup> Official statistics and data provided by the ISF to UN Women in February 2023.

<sup>12</sup> UN Women Lebanon Media Monitoring March 2021-June 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Houssari, Najia. Arab News. August 23, 2022. "[Lebanon faces judicial paralysis as judges refuse to work](#)".

<sup>14</sup> As of January 2023, the strike has stopped.

## GLOBAL TRENDS ON MISSING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CRISIS CONTEXTS

Globally, crises are correlated with increased violence against women, and often increased disappearances of women and girls. In Mexico, the cases of missing women and girls increased by 40% from 2017 to 2021, at the time of the country's economic recession.<sup>15</sup> More recently, concerns around human trafficking have increased following the Ukrainian war.<sup>16</sup> When crisis collides with the increased presence of violent extremist groups, female disappearances are often closely interlinked to significant increases in human trafficking, femicide and sexual violence.<sup>17</sup> As examples, in Nigeria, Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls in 2014 during inter-communal conflict and many of them are still missing to date.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, over 600 women and girls were kidnapped and enslaved in Mozambique after the violent attacks by extremist groups in 2017.<sup>19</sup> In the MENA region, ISIS regularly kidnapped and enslaved Yazidi women. While these crisis contexts are vastly different from Lebanon, they demonstrate how contexts of insecurity and weakened state apparatuses can increase the risk of female disappearances.

## OBSERVED TRENDS IN LEBANON

### 1. Cases of missing women and girls can be an indication of murder or femicide<sup>20</sup>

- A total of 50 femicides were investigated by ISF in 2021 and 2022.<sup>21</sup>
- A mother and three daughters went missing for 25 days before their bodies were found in south Lebanon in March 2022.<sup>22</sup>

### 2. Since 2021 incidents and risks of human trafficking into/across Lebanon are increasing,<sup>23</sup> with women and girls, especially migrants and refugees, most likely to be the victims.<sup>24</sup>

While women and girls are trafficked into Lebanon, women and girls can also be trafficked locally in Lebanon, leading to their disappearance.<sup>25</sup>

- According to Kafa's Anti-Trafficking and Exploitation Unit,<sup>26</sup> most of the human trafficking incidents within Lebanon involving women and girls are for the purposes of sexual exploitation and violence.
- Between 2020 and 2021, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) identified 367 female victims of trafficking in Lebanon (though this does not capture the full extent of trafficking into the country).<sup>27</sup>
- Eight individuals were arrested for human trafficking in the entire year of 2020; in comparison 12 individuals were arrested for the same reason during the first 8 months of 2021.<sup>28</sup>
- In October 2021, a group of men were arrested for human trafficking and forcing Syrian women to work in prostitution after illegally bringing them to Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Welch, Haydn. Council on Foreign Relations. April 29, 2022. "[Women This Week: Outcry Over Disappearances and Femicides Grows in Mexico.](#)"

<sup>16</sup> Donoghue, Leah. World Vision. 2022. [World Vision warns of growing human trafficking risk for women fleeing Ukraine on International Women's Day.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Organization of the American States. 2018. [General Recommendation of the Committee of Experts of the MESECVI \(No. 2\) Missing Women and Girls in the Hemisphere](#)

<sup>18</sup> Fitzgerald, James et al. BBC. July 27, 2022. "[Nigeria's Chibok girls: Two victims found eight years on.](#)"

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2021. [Mozambique: Hundreds of Women and Girls Abducted.](#)

<sup>20</sup> Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide).

<sup>21</sup> Data provided by ISF to UN Women Lebanon in February 2023.

<sup>22</sup> New Arab. 26 March 2022. "[Horrific murder of mother, three daughters shakes Lebanon.](#)"

<sup>23</sup> Simpson, Solomon. Borgen Project. 2021. [Human Trafficking in Lebanon.](#)

<sup>24</sup> Observations from Kafa's Anti-Trafficking and Exploitation Unit.

<sup>25</sup> Gruevska-Graham, Melita. International Center for Migration and Policy Development (ICMPD) et al. 2013.

[Trafficking in Human Beings in Lebanon - A Stock-Taking Report.](#)

<sup>26</sup> Julie El Khoury, Project Coordinator at Kafa's Anti-Trafficking and Exploitation Unit.

<sup>27</sup> Mezher, Zeina. UN Women et al. 2021. [Migrant Workers' Rights Are Women's Rights.](#)

<sup>28</sup> Elaph News. 29 November 2021. "[تراجعت الأسعار لكن العصابات باقية وتتمدد.. الدعارة في زمن الإنهيار.](#)"

<sup>29</sup> Tlais, Hussain. Al Hurra. 29 November 2021. "[الدعارة في زمن الأزمة.. شهادات وأسرار «التجارة القذرة» في لبنان.](#)"

### 3. Anecdotal evidence shows that kidnapping for forced marriage or early marriage might be linked to women and girls being reported missing by their families.

There could also be a further link between disappearances and a family's refusal to marry their daughter to a man she wants to marry for reasons, including age, religion, sectarian affiliation, and other factors, resulting in women leaving home. In other cases, women or girls are kidnapped and forced to marry someone against their will.

- The ISF documented 92 cases of women and girls kidnapping for marriage, whether forced marriage, eloped or child marriage, between 2021 and 2022.<sup>30</sup>
- Fe-Male, a Lebanese feminist organization,<sup>31</sup> has observed links in their work between the females in early and forced marriages, and the disappearance of women and girls. Fe-Male works with girls who had to leave their parents' home and get married to escape violence and patriarchal authority and practices or to ease the financial burden on the family.
- Early marriage of girls and young women has been consistently identified as an issue among Syrian refugees, where 22% of Syrian girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 19 were married compared to 2% of Syrian boys and young men.<sup>32</sup> At the household level, 1% of Lebanese, PRL and migrant households had at least one child in an early marriage.<sup>33</sup>
- In January 2022, a religious man was arrested for marrying a 15-year-old girl to a man that she allegedly "eloped" with. The judge considered it human trafficking since she was kidnapped from her family for sexual exploitation.<sup>34</sup>
- In June 2022, a girl reported missing by her father was found to be kidnapped into a forced marriage. The family killed the man and the girl returned to her home.<sup>35</sup>

### 4. Kidnapping for ransom: with the economic crisis and deterioration of living conditions, such crimes have been on the rise. This type of crime is strongly linked to women and girls going missing.<sup>36</sup>

- The ISF reported that female kidnapping for ransom increased from one reported case in 2021 to 15 cases in 2022.<sup>37</sup>
- Vulnerable populations receiving humanitarian assistance, particularly refugees, are increasingly concerned about kidnapping. With almost 1 in every 7 Palestinian refugee households, and almost 1 in every 10 Syrian refugee households (9%) reporting the kidnapping of girls as a safety concern.<sup>38 39</sup>
- A female minor was kidnaped for ransom in 2022; and later the kidnappers were arrested.<sup>40</sup>
- A Syrian mother and her two daughters were kidnapped for ransom after the kidnappers illegally arranged their entrance from Syria to Lebanon in 2022.<sup>41</sup>

Emerging evidence suggests that the disappearances of women and girls in Lebanon have been on the rise. While the causes and conditions differ, there is a clear gendered issues to the disappearances; that they are disappearing because they are females. More attention to this issue is needed from all stakeholders, especially humanitarian actors, and government entities, namely security personnel, working to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls.

<sup>30</sup> Data provided by ISF to UN Women Lebanon in February 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Hayat Mershad, Fe-Male Executive Director.

<sup>32</sup> UNHCR et al. 2022. Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees. publication forthcoming, data shared with authors for the development of this brief)

<sup>33</sup> REACH. 2022. Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment. (Publication forthcoming, data shared with authors for the development of this brief)

<sup>34</sup> Chebaro, Asrar. Irfaa Sawtak. 21 January 2022. "أطفال بنجبون أطفالاً... ضحايا الأزمة و«قوانين الطوائف» في لبنان".

<sup>35</sup> Annahar. 7 June 2022. "خطيفة قاصر تخطف روحاً في القلمون... العنف يتمادى".

<sup>36</sup> The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. 2017. [In Syria's War Economy, Women have become a Form of Currency](#).

<sup>37</sup> Data provided by ISF to UN Women Lebanon in February 2023.

<sup>38</sup> REACH. 2022. Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment. (Publication forthcoming, data shared with authors for the development of this brief)

<sup>39</sup> UNHCR et al. 2022. Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees. publication forthcoming, data shared with authors for the development of this brief)

<sup>40</sup> Gerages, Layla. Annahar. 5 January 2022. "حالات الاختفاء «إلى ازدياد»... أسبوعان على فقدان ابنة الـ ٢٢ عاماً ولم يُعرف عنها شيء".

<sup>41</sup> Syria TV. 2022. "القبض على عصابة خطفت سيدة سورية وابتنيها في لبنان".

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Government of Lebanon and Lebanon's Security Agencies**

- Increase coordination between different Lebanese security agencies, including the ISF, General Security, and Municipal Police, and establish information sharing mechanisms on disappearing and missing persons.
- Establish follow-up mechanism within different Lebanese security agencies on cases of missing individuals in order to systematically investigate reasons for disappearance.
- Continue to train police personnel on new GBV issues, specifically on documentation and follow-up.
- Scale up collaboration with civil society organizations working on GBV when it comes to information sharing, referrals and follow-up on cases.
- Continue to train and technically support judges on facilitating GBV-related judicial orders.

### **Humanitarian Responders and Stakeholders**

- Continue to prioritize funding and scale-up support GBV case management and safe shelters for survivors.
- Communicate and share GBV prevention best practices with other sectors, such as the protection and health sectors, to prevent cases of disappearance.
- Support the work of different Lebanese security agencies and strengthen the referral pathway with ISF and GBV service providers.
- Increase the knowledge and data on the issue of missing women and girls in Lebanon by conducting in-depth analysis and quantitative research.

### **Protection and GBV Service Providers**

- Collaborate with security forces responding to cases of missing women and girls by supporting and strengthening their work.
- Provide tailored trainings on female disappearances for security forces personnel, including content on protection of survivors escaping violence.
- Update the existing Inter-agency GBV referral pathway by including information for service providers on ISF's existing services and processes to encourage safe collaboration.
- Advocate and raise awareness to affected communities on the importance of reporting cases of missing women and girls to security forces to help address underreporting and ensure documentation.

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