

2023

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

INTERVIEWS REPORT



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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2023

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT

The aim of this project is to gain insights into the experiences and perspectives of women from diverse backgrounds living in Lebanon, and to explore the intersections of their identities and the opportunities, or lack thereof, that they encounter in their daily lives. By conducting six interviews with women who identify as transwomen, migrants from Africa, refugees, divorced women, and women facing various forms of discrimination, we hope to shed light on the unique challenges that these women face. Our goal is to use this project to amplify the voices of these women who are often marginalized and underrepresented in society.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted individual in-depth interviews with women from various backgrounds, reported on their stories and used these findings to highlight the voices of women in the Lebanese society.

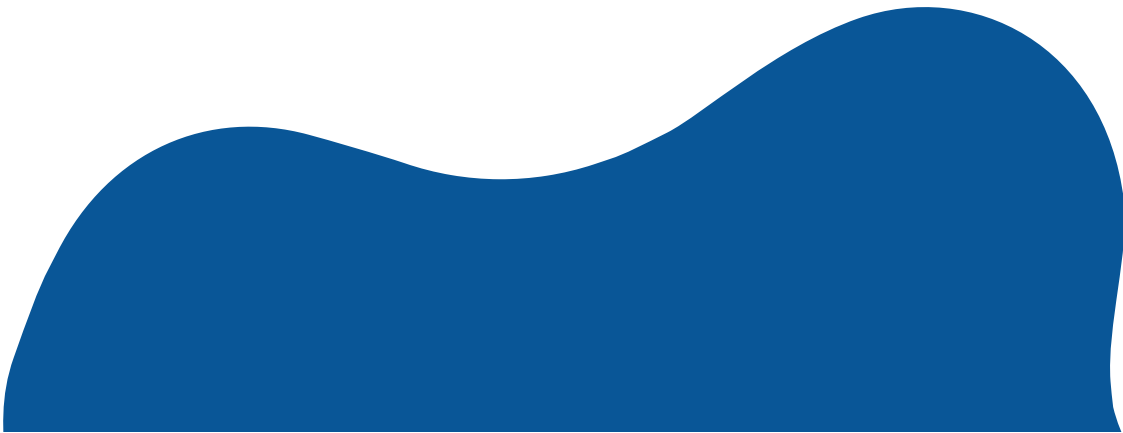
DISCLAIMER

This project only reflects the vision and opinion of the interviewees, and does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Freidrich Ebert Stiftung - Lebanon office



The son of the lady I work for told me "I will show you what it means to be forced", after refusing to do additional tasks.

- Cameroonian migrant worker



RHÉA

Rhélia, a migrant woman from **Cameroon**, came to Lebanon more than four years ago, to work in households under the **Kafala system**. She faced many difficulties, especially when it came to choosing households. She reports being forced to work like a **slave** for a family that she did not essentially choose, but because the last household she had worked for no longer wanted to pay her salary. She fought to stay, and was **deprived of her passport and money**.

As a migrant worker, Rhélia felt like a "robot", someone who had to endure everything, **even if people treated her badly**. She had to remain silent and accept all kinds of **violence**, whether it was **verbal, physical, or sexual**.

She does not see any opportunities for women like herself in Lebanon, and believed that there was **nothing as great as freedom**. Freedom for her is not only independence, it's more than that. She describes the dreams of her friends who come to escape the **economic hardships of their country**, but are faced with even **greater social and economical restraints** once they arrive here.

Rhélia found that the experience had strengthened her intellect and psych, although she **did not deserve to go through any of it**, nor did her sisters. She recalls herself coming to the country with big hopes, but was immediately struck with the **unjust reality of discrimination and slavery** that accompanied her arrival to the country.

When asked about the future, Rhélia hopes for a more equal and just society where people are more humane towards each other, and she believes that migrant workers should have the opportunity to travel and **not be dependent on a "Kafil"**.



“

We do have to fight harder than other women, and male Palestinians.

- Palestinian Refugee

I have to change my Palestinian accent sometimes because I expect the looks I would get, you constantly have to put on a mask to hide your true identity.

- Palestinian Refugee

”



SARA

Sara, 21 years old, is a **third-generation Palestinian refugee** whose grandparents fled to Lebanon during the Nakba. She is currently a **university student** and considers herself lucky not to have experienced gender-based violence like many women in her community. However, being a Palestinian refugee and a woman puts her at a disadvantage in Lebanon, where she faces discrimination on two fronts. Sara acknowledges that **Palestinian women's experiences vary widely**, but she notes that they must fight harder than other women and Palestinian men.

When asked about opportunities available to women like her in Lebanon and the barriers she has faced, Sara identifies two types of barriers: economic/legislative and social. She explains that, as a Palestinian woman, **she cannot work in 70 careers** such as medicine and engineering, **regardless of social stigma**, and that pursuing a career outside Lebanon is difficult because she would have to stick with her husband. Social barriers are also prevalent, as she often **feels the need to hide her Palestinian accent** in certain settings to avoid negative reactions.

When asked about positive experiences or opportunities, Sara mentions organizations that provide scholarships for Palestinian students, although not specifically for women. When looking to the future, Sara hopes for a more just and equal society for women from her background living in Lebanon. However, she acknowledges that **changing social perspectives will take time, while systematic changes may take longer**. Sara believes that education is key to empowering women in refugee camps to pursue successful careers, but the lack of viable career options within Lebanon presents a significant challenge.

“

I did **lose friendships**, or I decided to **cut off people**. My relationships with family members were **damaged**.

- *Bisexual woman*

It means being **secretive**. Having to hide in front of others.

- *Bisexual woman*

”

MIRA

Mira is a 24-year-old Lebanese woman who identifies as **bisexual**. She explains that her experience of being a woman from a different sexual orientation in Lebanon is that she is **repeatedly invalidated and erased**, with her identity being categorized as either straight or gay. Mira feels the need to live in **secrecy** when dating a woman and not being acknowledged, meaning she has to be secretive about her sexuality.

In terms of opportunities, Mira explains that she does not pass on any opportunities, but she repeatedly tried to **blend in**. She found herself within the LGBTQ NGO scene, where her interests were fostered and she gained exposure, leading to better career prospects and a better understanding of what she wants to major in. However, Mira has faced discrimination and has **lost friendships and relationships** with family members due to her sexual orientation. Within the community, Mira explains that she has faced **biphobia**, which is normalized, and a lot of lesbians do not want to be romantically involved with bisexual women.

Mira hopes for more acknowledgment of different sexualities that fall outside of the binary (straight/gay) in the future. She also hopes for better **protection** for people from the LGBT community, **from harm** whether it's from the police or family. Mira believes that more acceptance and understanding of different sexualities are needed to create a more **equal** and **just society**.

Discrimination and **biphobia continue to be normalized within the community**, and more needs to be done to address these issues and create a safer and more **inclusive environment for all**.



“

My husband's family stopped talking to me because I decided to stop wearing black. Even if you are a widow, you shouldn't give up on living your life

- *Lebanese widowed woman*

LAYLA

Layla is a widow who lost her husband in 2018. The experience of losing her life partner and becoming a **single mom** was devastating and necessitated strength she didn't know she had. She has lived a nightmare but has also discovered that she is **much more than a widow** and is now a **thriving woman**. Layla's experience of being a woman in Lebanon is **both wonderful and dangerous**. She describes it as being powerful, confident, assertive, strong-willed, compassionate, and fierce.

Despite the progress made by women in Lebanon, Layla notes that they still face many barriers. Women are often **stereotyped as homemakers**, and gender discrimination is still rampant. **Responsibilities** towards the family can make it **difficult to balance work and personal life**. Layla finds it frustrating to be treated differently simply because she is a woman and believes that gender discrimination needs to be eliminated.

Layla has faced discrimination and prejudice in her daily life in Lebanon. However, her **12-year-old** son gives her hope in the future. She believes that **raising future generations** to be on gender equality is essential.

Looking into the future, Layla hopes that Lebanon will catch up with the rest of the world when it comes to **women's rights**. She believes that more protection and awareness against abuse, domestic violence, and personal status laws are needed. As a parent, she feels responsible for actively educating her child on these topics and create a **society that embraces diversity**, nurtures talents, and offers **equal opportunities** to everyone.



**We were raised to follow
religion when religion doesn't
even protect us. In all
religions women are
discriminated**

- Lebanese divorcee



SAMAR

Samar, 42 years old, is a woman who recently got her **divorce** following a long separation. She comes from a middle-class family, and got married 20 years ago. She is a **mother of two daughters**, a **business owner** and beauty technician.

Samar believes that being a divorced woman is much harder for those without any work, and **financial independence** is crucial to achieving anything. She emphasizes that education is essential for women, and achieving self-autonomy allows women to get back on their feet during hardships. She believes that women should have **access to education** and be financially independent **before getting married**.

Samar has faced discrimination in society. She believes that **religious figures and courts give men more liberty than women**. However, her **family** has always stood by her and taught her to be independent. She looks forward to the future of her daughters because it gives her hope. Samar is privileged to have a family that supported her through every step of the way, but she says that **not all women are as fortunate**.

Samar notes that there are no organizations that stand by divorced women to provide them with any support. The **courts, religion, and government do not protect women**. Samar hopes that in the future, more people will advocate for divorced women, provide them with **financial and emotional support**. She believes that a lot of women want to get a divorce but do not have the resources to do so.

Samar considers herself lucky because she got **custody of her daughters**. However, she knows that **not all women are as fortunate**. Samar's youngest daughter cannot travel without the father's agreement, even though he is not present in their lives. **The law demands this**, and Samar hopes that this will change in the future.



“

I miss my mother, but I don't regret leaving behind people who were evil to me.

- Lebanese transwoman

Being rejected by my family and experiencing prejudice in healthcare and education were among the most difficult obstacles I have encountered.

- Lebanese transwoman

”



LAMA

Lama, a 30-year-old Lebanese **transwoman**, has had a challenging journey. After being **kicked out** of her house, she had to start from scratch and worked in retail to support herself. However, her struggles didn't end there. Lama has faced **discrimination** from society, particularly within the **health system**. She was often addressed differently and **denied medical services**, which only made her feel more isolated and marginalized.

Lama recalled one incident when she was hospitalized for a minor surgery, and the **nurses were taking pictures of her** while she was lying in bed. She felt humiliated and **violated**, as if her identity as a transgender woman was something to be gawked at and ridiculed. Despite her protests, the nurses continued to take pictures without her consent, and she **felt powerless** to stop them.

Lama is **does not feel that she can remain hopeful** for a more inclusive society. She dreams of a Lebanon where everyone is accepted for who they are, **regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation**. She strongly affirms the need for **legal protection** that doesn't discriminate against individuals who are simply existing and living their truth.

For Lama, education is the key to creating a more accepting and inclusive society. She emphasizes the importance of **educating people about the LGBTQ+ community**, so that they can better understand and respect everyone's rights to live their lives authentically.

Lama wishes for a world where trans individuals are **no longer stigmatized, discriminated against, or criminalized**. She firmly believes in the importance of creating a safe space for trans people, where they can access the **medical care** they need without facing discrimination or prejudice.



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