

Displaced Arab Families:
Mothers' Voices on Living and Coping
In Post-War Beirut

An Arab Families Working Group Brief

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When the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, Lebanese governments focused on the processes of rebuilding and reconstruction. Such efforts have included the rebuilding of Downtown Beirut, a significant expansion of the airport, and the restoration of Beirut's sports stadium. This state emphasis on reconstruction has been met with criticism for neglecting to address social development and poverty issues, as well as for generating patterns of displacement via the building of urban slums that were greatly expanded during the war. The absence of state policies for dealing with poverty issues has been linked to the state's assumption that economic growth may be a solution to poverty.

In addition to avoiding the issue of the root causes of poverty, the state has also failed to address social issues connected to internally displaced people who

have not returned home in the years following the civil war. An estimated 90,000 families were displaced by the end of the war, mainly from Mount Lebanon, Beirut, and the south, and, according to the Lebanese Ministry of Displaced Persons, about half were occupying other peoples' homes and makeshift accommodations that are unfit for human tenancy.

Apart from anecdotal evidence from local community service agencies, little is known about these internally displaced families. The scarcity of research on these families may be due to the diminished attention by the state and the widely accepted assumption that families displaced during the war have simply returned and rebuilt their homes. A 2005 Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) research study challenges this assumption.

AFWG interviewed families that were displaced during the civil war. To escape violence, these families fled to two communities in the suburbs of Beirut. Subsequently, they became impoverished; they continue to seek and fail to find economic security and satisfactory living conditions. Additionally, as of 2005, they continued to experience the hardships and consequences of war, although the war ended fifteen years before the study. AFWG's study explored displaced families' mechanism for coping with and adapting to social problems under conditions of internal migration and displacement. During the study, particular attention was given to women's voices, exploring the triple burden that poor

women face in carrying out their family, community, and work-related responsibilities.

Background

When the civil war broke out in 1975, approximately one million persons were displaced. The first wave of displacement occurred along religious lines, dividing the capital into Muslim and Christian parts. Subsequently, the capital became a receiver of groups displaced by further internal fighting and the Israeli invasions of 1978, 1982, and 2006.

Prior to the AFWG study, literature on forced displacement and refugees presented some issues relevant to the emerging body of knowledge on war-related displacement. The term “Internally Displaced Persons” (IDPs) refers to people who have been forced to leave their homes to flee persecution, violence, armed conflict, violations of human rights, or natural disasters, but who have not crossed internationally recognized borders. In contrast to refugees, IDPs do not enjoy any special status and are not guaranteed protection or assistance by any legal instrument. Additionally, in contrast to refugees, IDPs are covered only by the laws of their own country; protection under international law is only applicable due to displacement because of armed conflict. Even then, international law is non-binding.

Such professional definitions of IDPs and refugees tend to stereotype both as dependent, helpless victims. Both are often seen as passive recipients of material assistance, or as unreliable, exaggerating, or dishonest informants. In fact, the majority of refugees and IDPs are women and children with specific characteristics that can only be understood and healed by trained professionals.

Research Approach

AFWG used a qualitative research design because of its relevance to the aims of the study. The research methods included participant observation, together with formal and informal interviews, many of which were audio-taped, over a period of ten months from October 2005 through July 2006.

The study was conducted in the eastern Beirut suburb of Naba'a and then in the southern suburb of Raml al-'Aali. These areas are somewhat similar, as they were both receiving sites for displaced families during the war.

The participants in our study included mothers and daughters of families affected by internal migration and war-induced displacement. The research team conducted a total of 43 interviews, 25 with mothers and 18 with daughters in Raml and Naba'a. All interviews were conducted in colloquial Arabic and tape-recorded with the participants' approval. The audio data and field notes were subjected to

thematic analysis. The data sets from the two communities were compared for similarities and differences.

Findings

The women interviewed described a life of continual economic hardship and, consequently, a strain on their family relations. While their husbands work primarily in semi-skilled jobs (such as carpenters, electricians, and painters), the work tends to be sporadic and inadequate to support a family.

The majority of women we interviewed are housewives, many of whom married early in their adulthood and did not finish their educations. As a result, they have difficulty helping their children with their studies, which causes them anxiety.

A few women work to supplement their husband's income or as the sole supporters of their single-parent households. Many of them describe the situation as difficult and ongoing:

Without work, men sometimes break down... It's up to the woman to act and take responsibility if the man is unemployed (A woman in Naba'a)

I work... I do handcrafts and work with beads and things like that... My husband's work is irregular... He can't hold down a job... He feels trapped and tied down... He likes to work on his own... I can't rely on him (A 34 year-old woman in Naba'a)

To further cope with financial hardship, the women spend cautiously on food, buying staples from local grocery stores with affordable prices, purchasing goods in bulk, and budgeting expenses according to income. Limited disposable income restricts the variety of foods they buy to bread, a few kinds of vegetables, and rice or lentils.

Interestingly, when the women were asked about their views of the ideal family and how they rated their own families in this regard, it is noteworthy that *none* of them thought that their families entirely met their own standards for an ideal family. Participants' perceptions of an ideal are driven by both material and non-material considerations. Non-material standards include a strong supporting family network and family cohesion, in which family matters take priority over others. The ideal family is portrayed as one that has the ability to meet the material needs of its children and one that has financial stability from a sustainable source of income, such as the husband's work. Many interviewees seem to yearn for what they do not have.

Conclusion

The AFWG study highlights the plight of many displaced Lebanese families. Although various governments have attempted to "rebuild" following the war's

end in 1990, the persistent social and economic ramifications of displacement were still experienced by interviewees in 2005. These effects continued as attention paid to IDPs, both by the state and individuals began to wane. AFWG believes that successive postwar Lebanese governments have failed to acknowledge the needs of displaced persons and their families. This is evidenced by the continued neglect of successive governments to address the social and economic needs of displaced families. The Lebanese government needs to address the root causes of poverty among displaced individuals and their families, as well as the economic and social difficulties created by war-time displacement.