



IMPACT STORY



PALESTINIAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN LEBANON TAKE PROMINENT ROLES IN RESOLVING CONFLICT

Photo: UN Women/Dar Al Mussawir

In Ein El Helweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, periodic conflict and instability plague the lives of its residents. Since its establishment in 1949 in southern Lebanon, the camp, which today hosts a population of almost 60,000, has suffered much infighting due to political rivalries and high poverty rates.

Leila Sleiman, a 52-year-old Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in the camp, has been battling to shield her children from this aspect of life in Ein El Helweh for many years. In 1991, an armed clash among a group of residents of the camp resulted in Sleiman tragically losing her husband, leaving her a widow with four young children at the age of 23.

Since then, she has refused to comply with reductive definition of the “widow” label, that would have typically limited her role to grieving and staying home. Instead, Sleiman worked hard to become self-reliant and provide a stable environment for her children. She started her own business producing homemade food items, including thyme and blossom water, which over the years has become a successful business in the markets of Ein El Helweh and even in the neighbouring city of Saida.

Sleiman stands proud of what she has been able to achieve against the odds. “My children are my most significant achievement,” she shared. “I was able to protect them and

Photo above: Women refugees in the Ein El Helweh refugee camp participate in a mediation training.

PARTNERS FOR CHANGE

The UN Women project “**Fostering Stabilization and Social Cohesion in Lebanon through Women’s Engagement in Conflict Prevention and Management**” (2019-2020) was implemented in partnership with the **University of Saint Joseph’s Centre for Professional Mediation** with funding from the **Rebecca Dykes Foundation** and the **Government of Finland**. The **UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)** provided outreach support within Palestinian refugee communities.

Plans for scaling this project and establishing eight more mediation networks are underway with support from the Government of Finland.

realize my own ambitions through them by putting them through school and then university.”

UN Women has worked in Ein El Helweh to support women’s increasing roles in the prevention of violence and conflict at the community level under the project “Fostering Stabilization and Social Cohesion in Lebanon through Women’s Engagement in Conflict Prevention and Management” (2019-2020). The project’s three-pronged approach focused on building women’s capacities in conflict prevention and management, establishing a network of women mediators with gender expertise and institutionalizing the role of mediators in formal and

informal institutions. The project, which was implemented in partnership with the the University of Saint Joseph's Centre for Professional Mediation and funded by the Rebecca Dykes Foundation and the Government of Finland, is part of UN Women's Women, Peace and Security Programme.

"This project aims to apply the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security at the local and national levels by supporting groups of women to actively engage in mediation efforts in their communities," said Jocelyne Gerges, UN Women's mediation trainer from the Centre for Professional Mediation. "This form of conflict prevention is crucial to helping diffuse tensions and support conflicting parties to come up with healthier alternatives than resorting to violence."

Between May 2019 and December 2020, the Centre for Professional Mediation held trainings—including on active listening, building positive relations, mediation and negotiations—for members of the network. Some women participated in a training of trainers programme and others are now part of the legal support unit that trains armed personnel in all 12 Palestinian camps on international human rights and humanitarian law. The final phase of the project involved bringing together women trained on conflict resolution to brainstorm ideas for peacebuilding, with the aim of developing a plan to prevent conflict within the community.

Sleiman, who took part in the mediation training, believes it equipped her with the confidence she needs to deal with any kind of conflict. "I am now able to put in practice the mediation and negotiation skills I have acquired, like active listening and positive communication to resolve conflict and protect my children and grandchildren," she shared.

The Ein El Helweh camp was largely demolished during the civil war from 1975-1990, driving women, who previously might not have left their homes due to traditional perceptions of family roles, to assume responsibility for the businesses of deceased and absent spouses, fathers and brothers as well as the rebuilding of homes that had been destroyed. With conflict still a part of life in the camp and with the current challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, women continue to play a significant role in managing the day-to-day and building long-term peace through conflict resolution in their communities.

"During these unprecedented times in Lebanon, the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (NAP 1325) provide

WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN THE EIN EL HELWEH REFUGEE CAMP IN LEBANON


Lebanon hosts more than **400,000** Palestinian refugees who live in 12 self-governed camps around the country. Camp residents face poverty, overcrowding, high rates of unemployment, substandard housing and poor infrastructure. Armed violence between different Palestinian political factions is common, leaving women and children to bear the brunt of clashes.

UN Women supported the formation of networks in Lebanon, including in the Ein El Helweh refugee camp, and led discussions on women, peace and security for participants with the aim of making linkages between their work and the localization of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Lebanon. The networks offer a safe space for women to discuss issues related to women's leadership, acceptance in public life and participation in decision-making processes.

UN Women supported the Government of Lebanon in the development and passage, in 2019, of Lebanon's **National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325** (NAP 1325) and worked with the National Commission for Lebanese Women to establish implementation and reporting mechanisms. UN Women continues to support the localization of NAP 1325 by working on community mediation, conflict prevention, memorialization and reconciliation.

a critical framework to respond to the country's economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic," said Rachel Dore-Weeks, UN Women Head of Office in Lebanon. "The NAP 1325 prioritizes the gendered needs of women and girls in times of crisis, pandemics, and conflicts. Its implementation is therefore critical for peace and stability in Lebanon."

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