



Dar Al Amal
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Sex Workers in Crisis-Hit Lebanon:

An Assessment of the
Impact of the Economic
Deterioration, COVID-19 Pandemic, and the Beirut
Blast on Female Sex Workers Living in Lebanon



جمعية العناية الصحية
SIDC

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“My criminal record is a big problem... I got arrested, I did my prison sentence, and now my criminal record should be clean because I paid my dues... why do I have to wait again another 5 years for my criminal record to be clean again? This is a big problem for us, no one will accept to hire me with this criminal record...”

Participant 10

“I am surviving on anti-anxiety pills, and I can barely even find them in pharmacies. I am so tired and psychologically damaged... I am not able to meet my basic needs or the ones for my children. We used to have food in the house, now the fridge is always empty. I can't even find alternative work”.

Participant 3

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the recent crises that hit Lebanon starting by the end of 2019, and despite the fact that the general population was affected by them, vulnerable and minority groups in specific were most impacted. Although many humanitarian and development actors responded to these emergencies in different ways and across different populations in need, very little work has been reported to be conducted among female sex workers in Lebanon during this critical period. This group, which is the sole focus of the present study, is arguably one of the most vulnerable among vulnerable and minority groups because of the criminalization of the work they perform and the fact that they subsequently experience much difficulty exercising their human rights and benefiting from available services. In this study, we aimed to assess the experiences and needs of sex workers in Lebanon throughout these crises, and to understand which services are available to them and which are needed.

To do so, we conducted key informant interviews with sex workers and a focus group discussion with key Community-Based Stakeholders (CBOs) who work with this population. The qualitative data we collected was analyzed through qualitative content analysis, were triangulated across sex workers and CBOs, and were reported under 6 themes: (1) livelihoods, (2) shelter and basic assistance, (3) protection and security, (4) healthcare, (5) legal status, (6) key needs and available services.

Results found that the economic deterioration had the largest impact on sex workers, whereby their ability to generate an income was severely reduced because of multiple factors such as decrease value of money, inability of clients to pay, among others that are explained in the study findings. This was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic which also reduced their ability to work due to fearing infections. Subsequently, their ability to meet their basic needs, provide for their families, and sustain their shelter significantly reduced. Furthermore, their ability to access healthcare services, in terms of covering costs of medications, screenings, treatment, and transportation of healthcare centers was reported to be concerning. Finally, protection concerns were also reported, in that abuse, exploitation, harassment, were increasingly being experienced by sex workers, while their ability to obtain their basic human rights were almost impossible because of the criminalized nature of their work.

As synthesized by the findings of this study, multiple recommendations are reported by the end of this study for humanitarian, legal, and governmental actors looking to better serve this population.

TABLE OF CONTENT

i. INTRODUCTION.....	5
ii. METHODOLOGY.....	6
iii. FINDINGS	8
a) <i>Livelihoods</i>	8
b) <i>Shelter and Basic Needs</i>	10
c) <i>Protection and Security</i>	11
d) <i>Healthcare</i>	13
e) <i>Legal Status</i>	14
f) <i>Key Needs and Available Services</i>	15
iv. CONCLUSION	17
v. RECOMMENDATIONS	18

INTRODUCTION

The history of Lebanon is rife with economic, social, political, and security turmoil. However, by the end of 2019, the country experienced unprecedented emergencies that shook its very foundations and threatened the survival of its population. These included respectively (1) political upheavals leading up to a major revolution, (2) the collapse of the Lebanese pound whose value decreased by over 80% when matched against the U.S dollar and remains on the downfall, (3) spread of the COVID-19 coupled with near collapse of the healthcare system, and (4) the devastating Beirut port explosion which killed hundreds of individuals, injured thousands of individuals, and damaged hundreds of thousands of houses and other properties across the capital Beirut (Saleh et al., 2021). Although any of the aforementioned would have been recorded as causing major shifts in the history of the country, these emergencies came sequentially one after the other at a time where Lebanon was unprepared to respond to them. This resulted in exponentially increasing their damages on a national level due to their intersecting and compounding impact.

In light of these overwhelming problems in the country, and while almost everyone was affected by them, minority and vulnerable groups in specific are reported to have experienced worse outcomes and higher threats to their survival and wellbeing than the general population (Hall 2020). With that said, and even across minority and vulnerable groups, the impact of the crises is expected to vary depending on their status within society, the availability of services to them, and the legal framework through which they operate, among other factors. Of those groups, sex workers warrant special attention because of multiple reasons. Although there are multiple groups of sex workers in Lebanon with varying degrees of vulnerability and differing experiences, such as female sex workers, male sex workers, and sex workers who are LGBT individuals, among others, this research focuses solely on female sex workers because they represent the vast majority of sex workers in Lebanon. Sex workers operate under a system that views their work as criminal behavior, and which condemns their practices (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This means that (1) their human rights are largely disregarded in view of their work, (2) they may have remarkable difficulty accessing support and services across sectors, (3) they may have challenges generating an income beyond sex work, and (4) they may have significant challenges gaining social acceptance, support, and protection while they experience stigma and discrimination from society.

Historically, and since 1931, sex work was regulated and considered legal only if practiced under the specific conditions of sex workers being registered and solely working in licensed brothels. However, ever since the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, along with the ensuing political, social, and security turmoil, these regulatory aspects were suspended and licenses stopped being issued. In this regard and by Lebanese law, all sex work, be it from the demand or supply side, has been considered as criminal and illegal behavior until the present day (Brophy, 2012). That said, sex work was and remains practiced primarily in super night clubs, through illegal contact on the streets, in hotels, or in other underground designated locations (Brophy, 2012). In addition to that, illegal sex trafficking of women and girls from neighboring countries, most notably Syria, is commonly reported. The latter tend to be coerced into practicing sex work, exploited by “pimps”, and subjected to multiple forms of abuses, violence, and threats (Simpson, 2021). Despite this being widespread in Lebanon, they tend to experience significantly worse outcomes legally and socially when compared to Lebanese sex workers as a result of them being more vulnerable in view of their nationality (Simpson, 2021).

Generally speaking, pervasive stigma and discrimination, and the fact that sex workers are perceived as criminals, places them at higher risks to experience negative outcomes on multiple levels when compared to the general population. For example, (1) on a healthcare level, they are more likely to experience poorer mental and physical health (Dentato, 2012), (2) on a protection level, they are for the most part unable to submit complaints of any abuses they may face and that makes them vulnerable to all sorts of dangers emanating from clients and law enforcement such as physical abuse, harassment, sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, not receiving their fair, or even being threatened with death (Human Rights Watch, 2020), (3) on a livelihoods level, they are less likely to be able to work not only because of stigma and discrimination, but also because of legal restrictions should they experience arrest and it being noted on their criminal records. These are some of the many challenges that they experience, which hinder their survival, threaten their dignified living, and limit their ability to provide for themselves and for their families.

Despite these facts being common among this population in Lebanon and in other countries, it is expected that the multiple crises that hit Lebanon starting by the end of 2019 had exponentially increased the magnitude of these challenges. However, since the onset of the crises, little

research has been conducted on this population in Lebanon, and their needs are largely unknown in this context. In this research study, we sought to further investigate this issue, in order to better understand the impact of the COVID-19, economic deterioration, and the Beirut blast on sex workers in Lebanon. This research aims to draw a comprehensive understanding of the situation in order to generate evidence-based recommendations for donors, humanitarian and development actors, and researchers working to improve the lives of this key vulnerable population. The following research questions guided this present work:

1. How did the series of crises in Lebanon (i.e. COVID-19, Beirut blast, economic collapse, political and social unrest) impact female sex workers?

2. What are the challenges and difficulties faced by sex workers as a result of the crises on the level of their (1) health and health risk behaviors, (2) psychological wellbeing, (3) financial capacity, (4) legal status, (5) security and protection?
3. How did the work of sex workers change as a result of the crises? What are the most prioritized needs of sex workers that require urgent response?
4. Who are the current actors providing support and relief efforts to sex workers in Lebanon, and what are the available and missing services?

METHODOLOGY

Design

An exploratory qualitative approach was used in this study. In light of the aforementioned research questions, our emphasis was primarily on collecting qualitative data through focus group discussions and interviews, in order to capture the richness and nuances of participants' experiences with the present issue. Given the recency of the intersecting crises in Lebanon and their anticipated impact on sex workers, and given the absence of recent data on this issue, an exploratory approach served to better understand the extent of the problem and the potential solutions at hand.

Participants & Sampling

For the purposes of this study, we recruited two samples through two data collection approaches to gather multiple perspectives from stakeholders involved. The purpose therefore was to triangulate the findings to better guide policy recommendations. Accordingly, the two participant groups included:

1. Female Sex Workers

Interviewing female sex workers is the main goal of this study, since understanding their needs, challenges, and narratives in the context of the recent crises is the central theme. Sampling sex workers was therefore diverse, as we aimed to recruit a purposive sample of 10 individuals from different age groups and locations until data saturation was reached. The sample consisted of Syrian (n=3) and Lebanese

(n=7) female sex workers whose ages ranged from 25 to 45, 3 of which have been incarcerated in the past 2 years. All participants were married and were responsible for one or more children, lived in poorest neighborhoods in the suburbs of Beirut, and had an educational background limited to primary or middle school level. Most of the participants relied on sex work as their primary means of income and thus performed it full time, while others had lower-paying jobs in addition to sex workers. Participants were not screened for HIV and we selected regardless of their HIV status.

This group participated in a semi-structured interview with trained enumerators from Dar Al Amal, who completed the interviews in-person while abiding by social distancing and COVID-19 precautionary measures.

In addition to the interviews, a brief online self-reported survey targeting a convenience sample of sex workers was circulated among civil society organizations that work with this population in order to collect quantitative data on the issue at hand. An online survey was chosen over completing it in-person due to the sensitive nature of the topic at hand, knowing that online methods may provide additional privacy and security for the target sample. It was also important to use online methods in order to increase the coverage and reach of participants as we aimed to collect data from sex workers in areas stretching beyond the capital Beirut.

Recruitment of sex workers for both interviews and the online survey was conducted through snowballing methodology starting with key informants that are in contact with Dar Al Amal Association, through social media

advertisements, and through communications with key partner organizations.

2. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Being essential actors in providing services and understanding the needs of sex workers, representatives from CSOs that work with sex workers were also recruited. These individuals represented CSOs that work in fields directly or indirectly related to sex workers. For instance, they represented CSOs that work in protection of vulnerable women, that provide support for minority groups such as basic assistance, shelter, social services, and so on, that work with HIV and substance abuse populations, and with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence to name a few. An additional member representing the Ministry of Social Affairs was also included for the purpose of adding a policy-level perspective to the discussion.

It was assumed that these CSO representatives will have key insights to share regarding the challenges and opportunities associated with this issue based on their work experiences, and will thus be able to provide important and needed information for the project along with key policy recommendations. One representative from each of the five selected CSOs was recruited to participate in a focus group discussion. They were contacted through personal invitations from Dar Al Amal representatives.

Instruments

As an overview, the data collection tools were developed with the aim of understanding the impact of the crises on sex workers on different levels in addition to their ability to work, and on the available and needed services. The specific data collection tools listed below were developed accordingly, and they can be found in the appendices:

- Semi-structured interview guide for sex workers
- Focus group guide for CBOs
- Online survey for sex workers

Procedures

The data was collected by the social workers from Dar Al Amal team.

Given the restrictions imposed by security concerns, fuel shortages, and the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection

activities were conducted in-person where applicable, or online or over the phone when in-person in contact was not viable: (1) The focus group with CSOs was conducted online over Zoom and in-person at Dar al Amal office, (2) the semi-structured interviews with sex workers were conducted over the phone or in-person, and (3) the online survey targeting sex workers was distributed through an online data collection platform. Results of the online survey however were not reported in this research because the number of participants was significantly lower than expected (less than 30 participants) and therefore the sample size was not large enough despite multiple efforts to engage with targeted sex workers. This may have been due to the sensitive nature of the questions and the potential legal repercussions that sex workers may have feared. We conducted semi-structured interviews as opposed to focus groups with sex workers in order to provide adequate privacy and confidentiality to motivate them to share personal narratives in-depth and to limit their hesitancy. As for CSOs, we conducted a focus group discussion with them in order to facilitate collective brainstorming and sharing of experiences to facilitate inclusive and representative outcomes.

All interviews and the focus group discussion were audio-recorded, unless participants did not consent to it, in which case notes were taken instead. The focus group discussion lasted around 120 minutes, whereas the semi-structured interviews lasted from 15 to 45 minutes. Finally, the online survey was brief and required 10 to 15 minutes for completion.

Data Analysis

All collected data was privately stored and was only accessible to the research team. Qualitative data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, and was reported in terms of emerging themes. All data from the interviews and focus group discussion were triangulated. We used Microsoft Word and Excel for data analysis.

The research team who collected data is well familiar with the target population, as they primarily work with vulnerable women. The researcher who analyzed and reported the data is a native Arabic speaker, is fluent in English, and has ample experience working with minority groups in the Lebanese context. These factors are likely to minimize biases and reduce limitations associated with data collection, data analysis, and reporting.

Ethical Considerations

At first contact with the research team, participants were well debriefed about the study and the potential risks and benefits involved with participation were explained to them. Seeing the sensitive nature of the topic, all participants were provided an informed consent that delineates their roles and their rights in this research and were asked to provide

In general, this study found that the economic deterioration in the country had by the far largest impact, as it was consistently reported by study participants and humanitarian actors. This was further compounded by the COVID-19, which reduced the ability of sex workers to generate an income in a collapsing economy. All participants reported that the crises had a colossal impact on their lives, on their work, and on their ability to survive and provide for their families. These narratives, as triangulated by the expert observations of CBO representatives who work with this populations are reported in the sections below in-depth under 6 key themes: (1) livelihoods, (2) shelter and basic needs, (3) protection and security, (4) healthcare, (5) legal status, and (6) key needs and available services.

1. Livelihoods:

Perhaps the most important impact that the crises had on sex workers in Lebanon over the past two years has been their ability to generate an income. This was consistently reported to be their biggest concern for survival, and it was the highest priority for them to request assistance for. Limited ability to generate an income has manifested because of multiple reasons. First, in terms of reduction in the value of the money they received from clients, whereby while they could not increase their prices, they still received the same amount of money, whose value significantly depreciated in a context where all other services and products in the country became much more expensive.

P2: We used to directly make money in a very easy way, now it became very difficult. We used to make this money and go buy groceries and other things we needed, and we would still have some left for later. Now sometimes I can't even buy bread and I barely make any money.

P3: Before these crises the situation was a lot better. Now everything feels like it is falling apart due to the economic

verbal or electronic consent to participate. In addition, acknowledging that many participants might have had trauma ensuing from the crises, all participants were informed of their rights to refrain from completing the interview in the event where they may feel any disturbances, and they were also provided with referrals to sources for psychosocial support in case the interviews triggered any traumatic experiences.

FINDINGS

deterioration, COVID, and Beirut blast. All this impacted us so much. We used to be able to work and get by, but now there is no chance at all. Everything is expensive, and clients don't want to pay more than they used to.

While the value of the money they generated significantly reduced, their ability both to find clients and to be able to work was also hindered. For instance, because of COVID-19, both clients and sex workers were reportedly afraid of catching the virus, which in turn reduced the demand for, and the willingness to engage in this work.

P1: I used to work once or twice a week because the money I made was enough. Now there aren't clients anymore... clients are afraid of COVID-19 and most don't have money to pay

P3: COVID-19 had a huge impact because everyone became vigilant. Both I and the clients are afraid of infections especially that I also have kids. Clients are also afraid because they see that I am on the street and that I interact with multiple people per day.

Another reason is that purchasing power of the clients was also reduced along with the financial deterioration, which meant that transportation became difficult, willingness to pay became limited, and ability to manage the work became more challenging. For instance, it was reported by multiple participants that clients became less willing to pay for hotel rooms, which they traditionally covered before the crises, and instead opted for cheaper options such as using their cars and going to remote and unsupervised places. This in turn brought along its own sets of protection and security problems.

P1: Increasing hotel prices also affected our work because they used to be so much cheaper compared to now, which is demotivating clients from meeting with us so that we can do our work. As a result, many girls are putting themselves in so much danger because clients are taking the girls to remote

places where they can have some privacy but where they can also be abused without anyone knowing about them.

P3: Before COVID-19 clients used to rent hotel rooms, and cover the protection costs. Now they rely on staying in the car and they do not even pay for protection. So, we have to pay for condoms, face mask, and gloves, sanitizers and all... which are really expensive also.

Finally, although many sex workers used to work for pimps who would help them find clients and provide them with some level protection in exchange for a percentage of their earnings, this largely came to a halt after the crises because of the economic deterioration, whereby girls opted for managing their own work in order to avoid sharing their earnings. That said, other groups of sex workers had less freedom to do that.

P1: Previously, girls used to work under a pimp who used to facilitate finding clients, but who would also take a percentage of the money earned by the girl. Now this doesn't work anymore because it will barely pay off anything for the girl. It's very rare to find a girl working under a pimp anymore.

P7: There are two types of sex workers, those who manage their own work, and those who work for a pimp or organized groups. Those who work alone tend to have more freedom in their prices, in their rules, and in the general way they do things. The other group however tends to be migrants from neighboring countries who are usually sold from one pimp to another regardless of their consent. They usually give them a specific salary regardless of how many people they sleep with per month...the rest of the money goes back to the pimp.

In the context of such drastic changes in their work arrangements, many participants reported experiencing severe financial difficulties that threatened their survival and their ability to provide for their families. Despite this being a widespread problem across the general population, this group in specific experienced more difficulties as a result of stigma and discrimination, and significantly reduced ability to work in other fields to generate an income because of many obstacles on social and legal levels. As a result, some changed the way they did their work, and others started finding other work avenues altogether.

P7: I had to start changing the types of clients I work with, for example now I go for older clients who have their own houses... its better than staying on the street and putting

myself in higher danger. But it's still not enough, so sometimes I find myself going back to the streets also.

P1: The economic situation is so bad that I have to gather plastic bottles and give them away for some money... I've also recently started asking my underage daughter to start looking for work so that she can support us with household finances.

It is important to note that many of the participants reported that they perceived sex work as one of the very few options that are available to them to generate an income and to meet their basic needs despite the challenges and risks it posed on them. Many of them are willing to work in different fields and are open to other forms of income generation should the opportunity be presented to them.

P5: I used to have a stable job before COVID-19, however when COVID-19 hit and when the economic deterioration happened, my boss wanted to reduce the number of employees so he kicked me out among others also. So then when I stayed at home without work, I relied on sex work to be able to make some money... I had to provide for my family.

P5: One of the most difficult things in my line of work right now is that sometimes I have to stay on the streets for 3, 4, 5 hours at a time. I would really need this money to be able to provide food for my family but then you end up not finding any clients. People can't pay anymore for this. I always ask myself, what can I do? Really... my kids need to eat, they need medication, they need to survive... so I suffocate with this pressure. It even got to a point that for some clients I would ask them to provide household necessities such as olive oil, burghul, or other essential foods in exchange for sex.

CBO: We've seen from our work that with the deterioration of work opportunities for sex workers, many of these women were coming to us asking us for any kinds of jobs in cleaning, helping older people or infants/younger people. It worked for some, but for many others the women were constantly afraid of stigma and discrimination, and having fears about people knowing about their history, which made them very isolated and demotivated to integrate within society. Many women actually do want to change their work and have other income-generating opportunities; however, it is understandable how difficult this is to happen considering the overwhelmingly low job opportunities in the country, especially during this period.

It is important also to acknowledge that in many cases the policies, stigma, discrimination, and the fact that

sex work is a taboo and criminalized type of work, exponentially increase the difficulty of sex workers being able to integrate in society and be accepted to engage in other forms of income-generation. Although the legal ramifications will be further explored in a subsequent section specified for this issue, both participants and CSOs alluded to the fact that these were major barriers for sex workers to secure their livelihoods and generating an income. For instance, for sex workers who were incarcerated, they reported that having “prostitution” marked on their criminal record prevented them from being accepted in jobs. This in turn was exacerbated stigmatizing attitudes towards them because of the public perceiving them as criminals.

CBO: We've noticed that sex workers who would like to change their work and lifestyles face major challenges because of systemic barriers, lack of resources across sectors, and very strict eligibility criteria.

Key Findings:

- Limited ability to generate an income has been the most important impact of the crises on sex workers.
- Clients of sex workers reduced because of lower purchasing power and fear of COVID-19 infections.
- Alternative work arrangements were reported, and they presented serious protection concerns.
- Despite willingness to work in other fields, sex workers have limited ability to do so due to policies, stigma, and discrimination that work against them.

2. Shelter and Basic Needs:

One of the most serious consequences resulting from the challenges to generate an income was found to be the inability of sex workers to secure their basic survival and shelter needs.

CBO: In general, the conditions of life of these groups are really difficult and, in many ways, work against them in the

basic areas of life such as receiving support (if available) for shelter, health, food security, receiving cash support and others.

It was reported by both participants and CBO representatives that many are at risk of eviction because of their inability to pay the increasing rent prices, that which places significant stress on sex workers, and in many cases forces them to rely on sex work even when they intended to work other jobs.

P2: Our biggest concerns are ensuring our basic needs such as being able to eat and have safe shelter. We can't handle these extreme prices anymore. We can't survive like this. I have to rely on alternative sources for income-generation such as cleaning houses and offices because I have no other option... they are not enough of course but they do help a little.

Before crises, participants reported having more capacity to secure basic survival needs and ensure sustainable shelter. However, triggered primarily by economic deterioration, increasing rent prices, and reduced income-generation opportunities, and amplified by COVID-19 repercussions, the situation changed drastically for sex workers following the crises.

P1: Even in terms of shelter, rent is getting a lot more expensive to the point that we are not sure what to prioritize in terms of payments anymore. I know some girls that are selling their household furniture and appliances just to be able to afford to buy food for their kids.

P5: COVID-19 impacted my work mostly because I feared infections because I don't want to hurt my children. However sometimes I absolutely have to because I cannot find alternative work and my kids need to eat. So, in these cases I go to work but take precautionary measures. Other times I used to collect plastic from the streets when I really did not want to do this work.

P3: I am constantly worried and I can barely sleep. I think about how to feed my kids, how to pay the landlord who always pressures me... I even cut my subscription to electricity because I can't afford it anymore. Right now, I am at risk of eviction because you never know when the landlord will come and kick me out if I don't pay him.

P1: Our income from work used to be so much better before, even if we used to get paid as low as 20.000 L.L, this would at least guarantee our ability to buy water, food, and some of the essentials. Now we need at least 100.000 L.L and it is not even enough.

One participant even went on to explain that she preferred to stay in prison where she spent a significant amount of time, because at least there she could guarantee access to shelter and she would be able to have her basic survival needs met.

P10: I was arrested because of sex work before COVID-19, and at the time the money I used to make was enough for me to survive... however after being arrested and then leaving prison, my situation got so much worse, even though I stopped this kind of work. Without the support of a couple of organizations that are helping me, I wouldn't be able to survive now... Ironically, and I don't think you would hear this from other girls, but my prison experience was very good for me. Outside of prison I had no job, I had difficulty finding shelter, I didn't have close people to me such as family and friends, and I had no education to rely on. As soon as I left prison, I felt the need to go back to sex work because it was my only way to make enough money. In prison I had shelter and security, I had friends.

Another angle to this problem is the fact that for sex workers who become recognized for the work they do, they may be ostracized by their environments because of stigma associated with their work. Those who may not be able to afford their own housing tend to be at risk of eviction as a result of not being accepted by family members, or not being able to sustain a job.

CBO: Some girls even after having finished their prison sentence, and after it was found by others that they used to engage in sex work, they were fired from their jobs or were asked to provide their criminal record, or got verbal abuse from their parents, using really demeaning language. This makes them feel alone and without any forms of support, which prompts them in many cases to leave their house and seek refuge elsewhere, many times they end up being on the street.

That said, some CBO representatives also mentioned that despite the fact that a limited number of emergency shelters for vulnerable women are available in Lebanon, many may not be able to access them for various reasons. For instance, (1) their presence is restricted to specific areas in Lebanon, usually centralized in Beirut, (2) many may not

have enough capacity to take on new beneficiaries, (3) there is a lack of mapping to refer beneficiaries for such services, and (4) there may be low awareness regarding their presence.

Key Findings

- Limited ability to generate an income had a strong impact on the ability of sex workers to ensure basic survival needs and shelter.

3. Protection and Security:

In the absence of formal recognition of the vulnerability and human rights of sex workers, and in a context where sex work is criminalized, sex workers are traditionally at risk of all types of gender-based violence, abuses, and exploitation from multiple segments of the population including law enforcement and municipal police.

P2: Police and municipality police used to cause tensions and threaten us and force us to leave the places where we usually find clients. During COVID-19 they started going to these places holding sticks and hitting us until we leave... they used to hurt the girls, but I used to see them from afar and leave before they got me.

In this context, during COVID-19 it was reported that the number of arrests for sex workers decreased because of multiple reasons such as reduced human resources, them being pre-occupied with other issues around the country and de-prioritizing sex worker arrests, and having limited places in detention centers. This may have provided additional security for sex workers, knowing that they were not targeted as much throughout the pandemic, and that they had additional freedom for movement and work.

P3: We used to always run away from the police and municipality police during lockdowns because their presence was strong. It still exists now, but it reduced after the lockdowns.

P7: Now there aren't supervisions anymore like before, and cops are not fully doing their jobs and they are not always present.

CBO: It is important to mention that the number of arrests that have been on sex workers has reduced dramatically since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly due to limited ability of the police to do their normal tasks. Not because they started believing in decriminalization of sex work.

The presence of law enforcement used to pose serious threats on sex workers because of the harassment, abuse, and exploitation risks they presented. However, although their absence generated some positive aspects, throughout the crises it also generated major protection concerns. For example, one of the biggest changes in the work arrangements of sex workers was reported to be transitioning to working from cars in remote and unsupervised locations. This meant that clients had more and easier opportunities to exploit these girls, not pay them, abuse them, and even threaten them with weapons; all of which constitute human rights violations which sex workers would not be able to report and access

P3: Staying in the car instead of a hotel room is very dangerous because you hear stories of clients finishing and then kicking out the girl without paying her. Some clients even threaten you with guns and there is nothing you can do about it when you are in a remote area and there is no one to support us or that we can complain to – or we end up getting arrested. Now, we don't agree to meet in cars, either a house should be available or a hotel room.

P7: Because of the pervasive lack of security in the country, we are even at more risk now because clients can very easily take advantage of a sex worker waiting on the streets for clients. They can get away with things now that might danger us. They used to happen before but not to this extent, it's getting much worse.

Other forms of abuse and gender-based violence were also reported besides protection concerns associated with working from cars, as this participant explains:

P1: Clients are starting to rob the girls and this has been very common among the other girls I know and that I'm in contact with. Just a few days ago 4 -5 clients took one of the girls I know and they started inviting each other and taking turns and then they stole back the money they gave her and left her without anything. They told her if you want to come out of this alive and well, you keep quiet until we drive you back to your destination... right now security in the country is terrible and people can get away with anything

CBO: We've seen increases in violence towards sex workers ranging from emotional, physical, financial, sexual... it all increased during this period based on the work we've been doing and the beneficiaries we've been seeing.

Although limited ability or willingness to pay is a big reason for such abuses, the overwhelming inability for sex workers to complain and ask for their rights because of the illegal nature of their work means that their human rights can be exploited without them being able to do anything about it.

P1: We don't feel protected at all. Even in the cases of abuses happening against other girls, municipalities and police are often taking the side of the client. Even they themselves, even if the girls are not working, they harass them and ask her questions such as what are you doing here, why are you here, and other intrusive questions.

CBO: A very important point is that sex workers are especially vulnerable in society due to the nature of their work, which means that they are at high risk of abuse and that they cannot really do anything about it or even report it to the police.

Furthermore, besides these on-the-job abuses reported by participants, there remain more security and protection concerns. While these may also be faced by others in the general population, sex workers who are known in their neighborhoods for the work that they do face higher risks even when not working, merely as a result of the stigma attached to them. For instance, once a sex worker is identified in a given neighborhood, she is likely to experience verbal abuse that may extend to physical abuse in certain neighborhoods. This is primarily due to the lack of acceptance and lack of respect attributed to sex workers by some individuals, especially in poorer areas, which heightens the vigilance of sex workers even within their own homes as described below.

P3: From a security perspective, I frequently see people following me at night and several times clients tried to break down the door to my house at night, and some tried to take back the money they gave me...

P1: I feel a lot less safe in my house particularly because of the electricity cuts. This is because previously I used to be a little reassured that cameras were active in case something was about to happen in the neighborhood, while now I constantly feel vigilant when I hear any suspicious sound.

That said, and as reported on multiple occasions by sex workers participating in this study, child protection concerns also merit consideration. For instance, due to increasing stress levels reported by sex workers, along with their limited ability to provide basic survival needs for themselves and their families among other factors, this inevitably impacts their children. Rises in domestic violence, food insecurity and malnutrition, limited access to education, and in some cases coercion into underage labor, represent serious child protection concerns in the context of this study.

Key Findings

- Despite the abuses and harassment sex workers faced by the presence of law enforcement, throughout the crises, the absence of law enforcement also generated additional protection concerns.
- Abuse and exploitation by clients was reported from sex workers who transitioned to working in cars instead of hotels or homes.
- Although many protection and security concerns were reported, sex workers are not able to obtain their human rights and are not able to complain or report any offenses, abuses, or threats posed against them.

4. Healthcare:

On the level of healthcare, and largely as a consequence of the economic deterioration and skyrocketing prices, the biggest problems as echoed by both participants and CBOs were associated with access to healthcare in terms of screenings, medical consultations, and medical treatment, along with access to and ability to afford medication.

P1: I am not able to access healthcare services [PHCs or doctors consultations] because of the economic deterioration – not for myself and not for my kids.

P2: I'm afraid of going to seek healthcare services because of the prices.

P4: Because of the terrible financial situation I'm in, every time we have difficult health situations that I have to deal with in the house such as when one of my children gets sick, I find myself starting to get very tense and I start shouting uncontrollably... I start biting my nails and getting really anxious because I can't provide for my family.

Even when these services are available, largely from funded PHCs and civil society organizations, participants still reported difficulty affording transportation to reach them.

P1: Sometimes we can't even get to the free STI / HIV screening services because of the rising transportation rates. Instead of paying this transportation fee, I'd rather buy some food for myself and for my children. However, I'm also okay with using free health services because I care about my health, but they are very rare and I can't always come across them.

CBO: Currently, not being able to access services is largely due to transportation costs and this has been getting worse since COVID-19 hit the country

More so, knowing that the nature of their work may place them at high risk of contracting STIs - most significantly HIV - and may impact their sexual and reproductive health, in many instances they feel the pressure to perform without protection because clients expect them to pay for contraceptives while their prices became unaffordable to them.

P1: Condoms used to be accessible much more than now at 5.000 L.L for example. Even if I couldn't afford it, the client would take it upon himself to buy one without much concern about the payment. Now it doesn't work that way anymore, clients even say that they don't care about using a condom if they have to pay over 30.000 L.L for it. Either we pay for it or they proceed without using one. Because we desperately need the money, we sometimes have to agree to this despite the risks.

CBO: We expect to see increases in STI rates because of those challenges.

As a result, this poses major threats on their health status, which is further compounded by their risk of exposure to COVID-19. Participants reported difficulties abiding by social distancing by virtue of their work, or even exercising basic levels of protection; and this was also supported by the observations of some CBO representatives.

P2: I negotiate with clients different methods to maintain safety during COVID-19 such as use of condom and all, and I try not to do the full act to stay protected.

CBO: There were also challenges with preventing COVID-19 among these women because of limited availability of hand gels, masks, and spreading correct information

With this kind of pressure, and understandably so, the mental health of participants was also reported to be a major health issue. This is because of rising stress levels and pressures to meet basic survival needs and attempting to cope with daily struggles.

P1: Psychologically I feel destroyed because there are no solutions and there is nothing I can do about it. I'm not able to control my emotions anymore because of all this stress... just a few days ago I hit my child like I've never done before, I can't take this anymore.

P3: I am surviving on anti-anxiety pills, and I can barely even find them in pharmacies. I am so tired and psychologically damaged... I am not able to meet my basic needs or the ones for my children. We used to have food in the house, now the fridge is always empty. I can't even find alternative work.

While the majority of participants reported experiencing psychological pressures, those who were in close proximity to the Beirut blast reported experiencing additional psychological symptoms such as trauma from witnessing and suffering consequences of the blast.

P4: Because of the Beirut blast, my family became traumatized from loud noises... every time my kid hears any loud and sudden noise from the street, he starts shouting and crying. I am very sad about this because I can't treat him. We saw gruesome scenes when the blast happened and I had to comfort them while I was terrified... I broke my leg and my kids had pieces of glass fly into their faces.

That said, participants reported having limited access to mental health services, in a time where some mentioned that they would be willing to access them should they be available to them.

P1: We wish could receive some mental health services so that we can talk to psychologists and feel a little better

P4: We've received some free psychological treatment at some centers, however there is a long wait list and they only

offer 3 sessions. Otherwise, I can't afford private therapists so I need some support with this.

Although none of the sex workers alluded to the issue of alcohol and illicit drug use, some CBO representatives shed light on this issue, claiming that sex workers largely resort to them as coping mechanisms not only to regulate their emotions in the face of the multiple stressors, but also to numb themselves when working.

CBO: Sex workers rely firstly on alcohol and other substances as a way to cope with their work and the stress associated with it. These groups usually need a lot of mental health support because they are vulnerable and are at high risk to develop disorders. However, because of the limited awareness they have about mental health and drug use, they tend to seek treatment when the problems have already escalated and are serious. Even when they come and visit centers such as ours, we find that they have difficulty committing to treatment and showing up on time.

Key Findings

- Rising prices and transportation challenges were reported to be the largest barriers to accessing healthcare services by sex workers.
- Protection from STIs and from COVID-19 were reported to be problematic by sex workers and by CBOs.
- Psychological distress and substance use are reportedly increasing among sex workers.

5. Legal Status:

The legal aspect of criminalizing sex work is arguably one of the largest obstacles that sex workers face within society to maintain a healthy and dignified living. During the crises this law seemed to be kept active based on the reports of interviewed sex workers with no changes being reported except for the reduced number of arrests.

CBO: It is important to take into consideration that the ministry of social affairs might have difficulty developing and implementing policies in favor of sex workers because there are direct conflicts between the legal view of sex work which sees this work as criminalized.

Criminalization of sex work in many instances can be strongly linked to decreased job opportunities, which may in turn limit the ability of sex workers to generate an income or to re-integrate in society should they wish to transition to other types of jobs. For instance, criminalization of sex work is directly correlated with stigma and discrimination from society towards sex workers because of the pervasive perception of them engaging in illegal activities which is assumed to reflect on their characters or ability to contribute to society. With this in mind, and as supported by several narratives derived from study participants, sex workers who aim to engage in alternative forms of income-generation are at risk of (1) losing their jobs should be recognized as current or previous sex workers because of general lack of acceptance towards them, and (2) not being admitted to jobs should they have “prostitution” marked on their criminal record. This is not to say that all sex workers will not have the ability to engage in alternative forms of income generation, however this risk is prevalent and should be seriously considered because of its strong impact on their livelihoods.

P10: My criminal record is a big problem... I got arrested, I did my prison sentence, and now my criminal record should be clean because I paid my dues... why do I have to wait again another 5 years for my criminal record to be clean again? This is a big problem for us, no one will accept to hire me with this criminal record... Even after I went on TV and I honestly explained my story, at the same night it was being aired, the person I used to work for came and kicked me out of my work that night... I had to sleep on the street then because I had nowhere else to go and it was late already. He threw my clothes out of the balcony.

Criminalization also means that the human rights of sex workers may not be unconditionally granted to them, whereby on the contrary it reinforces the abuses they may experience without being able to complain or demand for their rights. It also means that because of the perception of them being criminals, it becomes difficult for them to qualify for services and to be recognized as a vulnerable population in national strategies. The combination of these consequences resulting from criminalization of sex work should inspire urgent reforms. Ultimately, this is important because through being recognized as a vulnerable population with unique

needs in comparison to the general population or other vulnerable groups, sex workers may be more likely to receive tailored services.

CBO: One very important point is that these groups were not taken into consideration in national strategies such as for COVID-19 vaccination, and were not on the list of vulnerable populations that should receive certain services from civil society...

CBO: ...This is why there should be amendments to these policies to be able to provide for sex workers their basic human rights and improve their access to services.

Key Findings

- Criminalization of sex work poses the largest obstacle to sex workers attaining their human rights, being acknowledged in national strategies as a vulnerable population, and having the option of re-integrating in society and finding alternative income-generating activities.

6. Access to Available Services:

As might be reported by most of the general population in light of the severe economic crisis, and not surprisingly, sex workers have ranked financial support and attaining basic survival needs as the highest priority. This encompasses being able to sustain a shelter, provide food and other essentials to themselves and their families, ensure access to affordable healthcare and medication, and have income-generating opportunities.

P2: My primary need is to have cash to be able to pay my debts and not have to rely on anyone to survive.

P3: We've received some services from organizations that we have close contact with, but we still have many withstanding needs that are not being addressed. For example, the highest priority I have is to be able to pay the rent and maintain my shelter; I also need medication for chronic conditions in the household such as for my mother's case.

This was also echoed by CBO representatives working with this population.

CBO: From my experience as an actor directly working with this population. I find that the economic deterioration had the biggest impact on them because they are unable to provide even basic necessities for themselves and for their families. Everything is more expensive now.

CBO: They are so pre-occupied with working on meeting their basic survival needs to the point that they started de-prioritizing dealing with other needs such as exploitation, violence, and other forms of abuse that they face. These things might have reduced their demand for such services at the expense of finding food, shelter, and basic healthcare.

CBO: It is important for us as humanitarian actors to look at them as individuals who are undergoing severe economic difficulties... it is important for us to help them attain their basic needs, shelter services, education for their children etc...

That said, some of the interviewed CBOs described the services they provided for this population throughout the crises which ranged from basic assistance to shelter, healthcare, and emergency cash assistance.

CBO: We did a small initiative, which is basically social media posts to inform sex workers of the services that we were offering, through which we covered basic needs, emergency cash, and shelter for them... we also did outreach to inform them in case they wanted to benefit from them. We offered temporary shelter services to support in case of emergencies, as a way to help these groups in transitional phases or extreme vulnerability until they figure out their next steps.

CBO: During COVID-19 when we expanded our mental health services to include therapy through online modalities, we noticed that many people were signing up that were not necessarily our usual beneficiaries... of these people, sex workers made up a big number.

Despite these efforts, CBO representatives alluded to multiple challenges restricting their ability to provide services for this population. This included limited funding, limited acknowledgement of the vulnerability of this population, limited social and legal acceptance of this population, and limited prioritization for support of this population.

CBO: Although we provide some services for them and other social services are available from other organizations, we are constantly trying to search for additional funds to be able to respond to their growing needs in a sustainable way. In order

for us to be able to write proposals and to apply for grants, it is important to have this vulnerable group recognized as a priority for the donors, and to be able to subsidize their basic daily needs... It is important for this group to stay on the agenda of vulnerable groups and not to be marginalized.

CBO: Governmental institutions can play a role in participating in policy making and strategic plans. We find that because of stigma and discrimination and the fact sexuality and sex work are taboo subject, people tend to shy away from working on these topics and supporting sex workers. More than that, we find that there are very few experts in the country who understand and are able to work with these groups. We also find that most services are centralized in Beirut, and not much is available outside of the capital.

Subsequently, CBO representatives highlighted the need to better align the agendas of humanitarian actors and governmental institutions. This included starting from agreeing on a common ideology and understanding of sex workers, such as unifying the lens through which humanitarian actors should view sex work as this may guide the policies, interventions, and the services to be offered to them.

CBOS: There needs to be a common understanding of sex workers from an ideological perspective. One way to properly address this issue is to have a common understanding of this type of work and this type of groups in order to align the agendas of humanitarian actors and to better address this issue. We are all working for the benefit of this group, and in many cases, we agree on several approaches... however despite that, it is important for us to have a unified understanding and agreement on how we want to view this issue... do we want to consider sex workers as victims of abuse who are forced to work in this field? Do we want to consider that they are willingly engaging in this work and then take on a harm reduction approach?

In addition to that, a representative from a governmental institution who participated in the FGD highlighted an urgent need to have clear mapping of services available for sex workers because they are largely unknown on the national level.

CBO: As a governmental institution, we find that working with these groups is very difficult. First of all, shelters that intake sex workers are very low in numbers, and even more difficult are for sex workers who have children. At this point we have a big need for a clear mapping of services available

to support sex workers, because we have very limited knowledge of how to refer sex workers to related actors, and who we can refer them to. We need to have a clear listing of actors and available services, and we need to have a system to assess the profile and needs of these vulnerable groups. Importantly, the focus is mostly centralized in Beirut and mount Lebanon, and there are little considerations being given to populations stretched across other areas in Lebanon such as in the north, the Bekaa, and the South.

Finally, one of the CBO representatives called for humanitarian actors to work on designing complementary interventions that offer comprehensive packages of support to

sex workers that acknowledge the interrelation and intersection of challenges in their lives.

CBOs: There needs to be a package of services... it is unrealistic to have separate services being provided without any continuity or complementarity... the package needs to be comprehensive, practical, and easy to access... This is important because you can't expect someone to focus with you on education and mental health services when they are pre-occupied with finding a way to have food on their tables. You also cannot expect to provide health screening services or facilitate health check-up services in PHCs or other clinics when they are not able to find medication or even afford them.

CONCLUSION & LIMITATIONS

In conclusion, the present study found that sex workers were mostly affected by the economic deterioration in the country, which limited their ability to generate an income due multiple reasons, and this was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. This had widespread impact on their ability to meet their basic needs such as providing food, shelter, healthcare, and other survival necessities. More so, it was found that despite already existing abuses experienced from law enforcement and clients, sex workers were increasingly at risk of multiple forms of protection and security threats throughout the crises due to their inability to obtain their human rights from legal authorities as a result of their work which is criminalized. They were also found to be excluded from many humanitarian services as a result of them not being acknowledged enough as a key vulnerable population in national strategies.

It is crucial for humanitarian, legal, and governmental actors to consider the findings of this research study in order to better revise the national agenda in favor of this vulnerable population. This should start by first setting up a committee to align the humanitarian response and to unify the national perception of sex work and sex workers before proceeding further with humanitarian assistances and policy reform. For instance, there already exists an ongoing international debate regarding the legal perception of sex work, which has large implications on the livelihoods of sex workers, on their interactions with the legal system, on their reception of services, and on their wellbeing.

One side has been traditionally known to call for criminalizing the demand for sex work, while de-

criminalizing the supply of sex work; this approach views sex workers as victims of abuse that are coerced into providing sex for money, and generally views sex work as an unfortunate consequence of an unjust society. The other side however calls for decriminalizing sex work both from the demand and supply side; this approach assumes that sex workers have a choice in engaging in this type of work, and that sex work should be legal and regulated, with the focus being on reducing harms associated with this work.

While both approaches warrant consideration, siding on any of the two is expected to largely dictate the national response plan. It is important to be mindful of the fact that this debate has been on-going for quite some time, however it has not been initiated to the best of our knowledge in Lebanon yet. Although this transcends beyond the scope of this study, we believe that it is crucial to start discussions around this issue among key actors. With this in mind, sex workers being a key vulnerable group should be placed at the center of all such efforts and the focus should first be on preserving their security and survival needs until such a committee agrees on policy reforms and on setting up the action plan for the way forward. Importantly, it is crucial for actors and response plans to consider the intersectionality of the crises and their compounded impact, in order to design and implement relevant interventions. In this regard, it is recommended for actors not to work in silos by targeting specific needs and vulnerabilities, but to rather ensure complimentary and continuity.

The findings of this research should be interpreted in light on some limitations. For instance, it is important to acknowledge the many of the data collected may have been

subjected to bias or miscommunication from the part of participants, CBOs, or the research team, given the sensitive nature of the topic. It is likely that this aspect of the research may have limited the extent to which participants fully and deeply disclosed their narratives and experiences. However because the research team who collected the data had developed healthy rapport and close relationships with participants, by virtue of their daily work with them, this limitation may have been minimized. That said, we encountered difficulty in recruiting a minimally acceptable sample size for the qualitative online survey, which ultimately prohibited our ability to analyze and report the small number of surveys we received. Despite having distributed the survey link to multiple groups of sex workers across Lebanon, the vast majority did not opt to participate potentially due to fear or legal repercussions, fear of social stigma, low literacy, or

general lack of interest in participating. This hindered our ability to produce a mixed-methods study, and limited our design to a qualitative one. Therefore, we lacked important data to better understand the larger context of sex work in Lebanon. This is especially true seeing that all of the recruited sex workers resident in areas within the suburbs of Beirut, which makes our selection restricted to this small area. Future research is advised to expand the coverage and scope of recruitment, to employ strategies for quantitative methods, and to ensure representativeness of the sample, given the lack of data on this population. Also, it is worthy mentioning that we only recruited female sex workers, as it was beyond the scope of this research to consider other groups such as individuals from the LGBTI community, male sex workers, migrant sex workers, and other groups which could show higher vulnerability than our present group.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. [Acknowledge sex workers in the national list of vulnerable groups](#) to enhance their eligibility for services and their inclusion in national strategies. Although this may be difficult to achieve as a result of potential legal restrictions, amendments should be proposed and activated to grant them their basic human rights.
2. [Ensure funding to support organizations](#) working to provide basic assistances such as food support and shelter opportunities for sex workers at risk of eviction. Importantly, in a country where most healthcare services are privatized, and governmental healthcare services are scarce, additional funding should be considered for organizations to support the basic healthcare needs of most vulnerable and marginalized populations such as sex workers.
3. [Cash for work modalities are needed to support this population](#) in reducing their exposure to potentially abusive clients while trying generate money. Knowing that this is temporary and non-sustainable, they can be complemented by tailored livelihoods interventions to develop income-generating programs that have a protection angle. This may contribute in reducing dependence on humanitarian actors.
4. [Protection actors should consider designing and implementing interventions](#) that aim to enhance the legal and social safety and security of sex workers. This should also include child protection aspects, as children of sex workers tend to be highly vulnerable to domestic violence and child labour, and as a result may have limited access to sustainable education.
5. [Human rights organizations and other actors working with vulnerable groups should lobby](#) to abolish sex work as an illegal type of work and to remove “prostitution” from the criminal record, as this poses major obstacles for sex workers to re-enter the job market.
6. [Healthcare services should be made more accessible and affordable for sex workers](#), while recognizing their unique health needs, which has been shown to be a top priority need for this group. In addition to that, sex workers should be granted additional access to sexual health services and screenings because of the reduction in condom use, and should be given better access to COVID-19 related services because of their consistent exposure to clients. Protection equipment such as condoms, face masks, hand sanitizers, gloves, and others should be made more easily available to them in order to enhance their protection from infections, sexual and otherwise.

7. [Law enforcement should be trained](#) to understand the danger and threats that sex workers are under and should aim first to protect their human rights as opposed to exacerbating their potential for abuse and related risks, in conjunction with lobbying for decriminalizing sex work.
8. [Social media campaigns should be launched](#) with a focus on targeting overarching stigma and discrimination among sex workers.
9. [Ensure that basic needs are met](#) through complementary and integrated services for food security, shelter, health..
10. [Efforts should be directed towards building collaborations](#) between actors across sectors to ensure holistic and comprehensive packages that complement each other, upon prioritizing acknowledgment of sex workers as a vulnerable group and prioritizing them in strategic planning.
11. [Expansion of services across Lebanon should be considered](#) to avoid centralization of services in Beirut and Mount Lebanon only, in addition to facilitating transportation to and from centers for vulnerable and economically disadvantaged groups. Mobile services are crucial avenues to explore and

utilize by humanitarian actors, given their potential in enhancing access to services despite geographical location, transportation challenges, and privacy concerns.

12. [There is a dire need for national and comprehensive mapping of services](#) available for sex workers in order to facilitate and strengthen referral systems within and across governmental organizations humanitarian actors. There
13. [There needs to be discussions around the unification of ideologies](#) regarding sex workers between humanitarian, legal, and governmental actors.
14. [More research on \(1\) male and transgender sex workers are needed, and on \(2\) sex workers who are non-Lebanese such as migrant workers, displaced individuals, and those who do not have legal status.](#) This is important to understand their particular vulnerabilities, as they are likely to differ than those of female sex workers who are Lebanese.

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Appendix I – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

We would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview as part of the study titled “Experiences and Needs of Sex Workers in Lebanon During Crisis” that is being conducted by Dar Al Amal in Lebanon. As detailed in the consent form, our study aims to analyze the impact of the sequential crises, and specifically the COVID-19 pandemic, on sex workers in Lebanon. For that, you are invited to participate in an interview to share with us your perspective on this issue, along your experiences and needs.

We would like to request your approval to audio record this interview, in order not to miss any important comments when we analyze the data. We will not be using any names in the final report, and you can be assured of complete confidentiality. If you feel uncomfortable with voice recording the interview please just notify us and we will take notes instead.

1. Can you describe your experiences before, during, and after the sequential crises in Lebanon (COVID-19, Beirut Blast, economic collapse etc...)?
 - a. In what ways did each of the above-mentioned crises impact your ability to generate an income?
 - b. In what ways did each of the above-mentioned crises impact your wellbeing?
 - c. Which of the above-mentioned crises had the biggest impact on your work and wellbeing?
Please explain

- a. What are the specific challenges and difficulties you and other sex workers faced (and are still facing) during these crises? Please describe them on the following levels:
 - b. Physical health (STIs, diseases etc...), mental health (depression, anxiety etc...), and health risk behaviors (condom use etc...)
 - c. Access to healthcare services
 - d. Legal status and ability to work
 - e. Security and protection
 - f. Shelter and living condition
 - g. In what ways did the prison environment increase those challenges? If it did not increase challenges, what role did being in prison play in this process?

- a. How did you cope as a response to the above-mentioned crises?
 - b. In what ways did your work arrangements and your ability to generate an income change?
 - c. Did you receive any support from civil societies or governmental agencies? If yes were they comprehensive or relevant to your needs? If no, what would you have needed from them?

- a. What are the most urgent priority needs that you require in response to the experiences you faced during and after the crises?
 - b. Financial-related
 - c. Health-related
 - d. Shelter related
 - e. Security-related

Appendix II – Focus Group Discussion Guide

We would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this focus group discussion as part of the study titled “Experiences and Needs of Sex Workers in Lebanon During Crisis” that is being conducted by Dar Al Amal in Lebanon. As detailed in the consent form, our study aims to analyze the impact of the sequential crises, and specifically the COVID-19 pandemic, on sex workers in Lebanon. For that, you are invited to participate in a focus group to share with us your perspective on this issue, along your knowledge and expertise of working with individuals from this population group.

We would like to request your approval to audio record this interview, in order not to miss any important comments when we analyze the data. We will not be using any names in the final report, and you can be assured of complete confidentiality. If you feel uncomfortable with voice recording the interview please just notify us and we will take notes instead.

- a. Based on your expertise of working with this population, can you describe the specific experiences of sex workers before, during, and after the sequential crises in Lebanon?
 - b. In what ways was their well-being impacted?
 - c. In what ways was their ability to generate an income impacted?
 - d. Which of the above-mentioned crises had the biggest impact on them? Please elaborate on your answer

- a. To the best of your knowledge, what are the specific challenges that they faced on the levels of their:
 - b. Health and health-risk behaviors
 - c. Legal status and ability to work
 - d. Security and protection
 - e. Access to healthcare services
 - f. Shelter and living conditions

- a. How would you describe their coping mechanisms during and after the crises?
 - b. In what ways did their work arrangements change?
 - c. In what ways did their income generation change?
 - d. In what ways did their health-related behaviors change?

- a. What are the available services and resources for sex workers in Lebanon?
 - b. In what ways can sex workers benefit from them?
 - c. To what extent are they knowledgeable about them?

- a. What are the most urgent response areas that should be prioritized for sex workers in crisis?

Appendix III – Online Survey

We would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this online survey as part of the study titled “Experiences and Needs of Sex Workers in Lebanon During Crisis” that is being conducted by Dar Al Amal in Lebanon. As detailed in the consent form, our study aims to analyze the impact of the sequential crises, and specifically the COVID-19 pandemic, on sex workers in Lebanon. For that, you are invited to participate in online survey to share with us your perspective on this issue, by answering the following questions.

- 1-What is your age? (open-ended)
- 2-Where do you live? (Multiple-choice)
- 3-What is your nationality? (Multiple-choice)4-What is the highest level of education you’ve achieved? (Multiple-choice)
- 5-Are you currently working? (yes/no)
- 6-Are you currently working in sex work? (yes/no)7-Have you previously worked in sex work? (yes/no)
- 8-What was your average income from sex work in LBP before the crises? (open-ended)
- 9-What was the average number of clients you had per day before the crises?
- 10-What was the average number of clients you had per week before the crises?
- 11-What has been your average income from sex work in LBP during the crises? (Open-ended)
- 12-What was the average number of clients you had per day after the crises?
- 13-What was the average number of clients you had per week after the crises?
- 14-How would you describe the impact of the crises on your work? (Multiple-choice)
- 15-Did you lose your ability to generate an income from sex work as a result of the crises? (yes/no)
- 16-How did your work arrangements change? (Multiple-choice)
 - a) 17-Rate the extent to which each of the below is problematic to you on a scale of 0 (no problem at all) to 5 (very problematic):
 - a.The extent to which you feel safe and secure
 - b.The extent to which you fear contact with police enforcement
 - c.The extent to which you have a stable living arrangement
 - d.The extent to which you are able to secure an income from sex work
 - e.The extent to which you are able to secure an income from formal work
 - f.Your health status and ability to access healthcare services
 - g.Your ability to provide the basic needs for yourself
- 18-Please describe the main challenges you faced as a sex worker in Lebanon during the crises (open-ended)
- 19-Please describe the primary needs you require in response to the crises (open-ended)



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In response to the recent crises that hit Lebanon starting by the end of 2019, and despite the fact that the general population was affected by them, vulnerable and minority groups in specific were most impacted. Although many humanitarian and development actors responded to these emergencies in different ways and across different populations in need, very little work has been reported to be conducted among female sex workers in Lebanon during this critical period. In this study, we aimed to assess the experiences and needs of sex workers in Lebanon throughout these crises, and to understand which services are available to them and which are needed.

Results found that the economic deterioration had the largest impact on sex workers. This was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic which also reduced their ability to work due to fearing infections. Protection concerns were also reported, in that abuse, exploitation, harassment, were increasingly being experienced by sex workers, while their ability to obtain their basic human rights were almost impossible because of the criminalized nature of their work. As synthesized by the findings of this study, multiple recommendations are reported by the end of this study for humanitarian, legal, and governmental actors looking to better serve this population.