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# PATHWAYS' PERSPECTIVES

ON SOCIAL POLICY IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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## THE MYTH OF A RESILIENT LEBANON: ISN'T IT TIME TO END THE GLOBAL PARADIGM OF GENDER INEQUALITY?

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Lebanon, once known as Paris of the Middle East, is an upper middle-income country that found itself on the brink of economic and political collapse at the start of this year. There was still hope until the COVID-19 pandemic hit, which led to rapid slowdown of business, worsening unemployment, hyperinflation, and widespread hunger in a country reliant on food imports. But, it was the Beirut blast on 4th August 2020 that finally pushed Lebanon over the edge. The recent blast and subsequent fires in this historic city are symbolic of the devastation but also of the urgent need for change.

*As part of ongoing work in Lebanon, I have followed the unending news of [crisis upon crisis](#) while engaging with in-country colleagues, who were affected [by one of the worst non-nuclear explosions in history](#). At the time, I was mostly at a loss for words, but managed to send kind thoughts to them regularly, from afar. That was about all I was able to do in – after all, it's year 2020.*

### LEBANON'S CRISES: A REFLECTION OF THE WORLD AND A DEEPLY FLAWED GLOBAL PARADIGM

It was illuminating to see Lebanon's crises make it to the international headlines steadily for about a month or so, before receding into the background once more. For many, it is just another Middle-Eastern country in turmoil, after all. There have been gaping holes in the political economy for a long time: sectarianism, [a weakened public sector](#), unemployment, persistent inequality, child poverty, refugees, stateless persons – the list goes on. Then, there is the year 2020 when, much like we see elsewhere, Lebanon's deepened fractures have quickly moved to the fore: a broken infrastructure; a central bank usurping the public's money; a corrupt

confessional democracy<sup>1</sup> that has been held together across regime change with the sole common interest of profiteering while avoiding a repeat of a fifteen year civil war; and, of course, confronting the truth of an economy whose bubble should have burst as far back as 2008. At the time, it was argued [that the country was "immune" to crisis](#), due to – as the IMF's Edward Gardner noted – friends with deep pockets and, possibly, a crystal ball. And so, Lebanon stumbled on, with the support of [powerful international allies](#) facilitating one unsustainable bailout after another.

By January 2020, Lebanon had become the third most indebted country in the world: debt was already amounting to 150 per cent of their GDP (Mahmalat, 2020), consuming a third of the public budget and leaving no "fiscal space" for investments in critical social services and infrastructure. This culminated in the anticipated defaulting of Eurobond loans in March, totalling US\$1.2 billion. Ever since, it has been freefall with the currency losing more than 80 per cent of its value by August. Talks with the IMF for a bailout plan indefinitely stalled, subsidies on fuel and other essentials were at risk of being cut, [middle-class citizens turned to app-based bartering in order to survive](#), and those already in poverty have become destitute. A powerful moment of social catharsis occurred when a [61-year old man committed suicide in front of Dunkin Donuts](#) in broad daylight, leaving a note behind of a famous Arabic song with the lyrics: "I am not heretic, but hunger is a heresy, poverty is a heresy..."

In the face of such crises, [the "resilience" of the people in Lebanon has been celebrated, time and time again](#). In the aftermath of the Beirut blast, news surfaced on how people were on the streets to clean up the city, search for those missing and to protest, such was the immense frustration with the

<sup>1</sup> Confessional democracy, as constitutionalised in Lebanon, ensures that every religious group, or confession, is represented in the parliamentary government and civic administration in proportion to the size of their population. However, it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of the practice since the last Population and Housing Census of the Lebanese Population was conducted in 1932, due to the highly political implications of having a regular Census.

Government. Indeed, the Government was nowhere to be seen at the time, resigning once it was revealed that, much like everything else in the country, state negligence was the cause of the blast.

Granted, the human spirit is resilient. But this narrative becomes problematic when portrayed as unbounded and limitless (unlike, apparently fiscal space). In fact, in Lebanon, these capacities for resilience have been running low for a while. This became apparent in 2015 with [the "You stink" campaign](#), a response to the breakdown of the urban waste management system. Last year, the "October Revolution" was a first on many fronts – most notably the largest bipartisan protests that Lebanon had ever seen, with [protesters labeling themselves the "happiest depressed people you'll ever meet"](#). Even as the country found itself without political leadership, [with people's reserves of resilience utterly exhausted](#), citizens insist that the existing political class cannot be part of the solution to a new Lebanon. Yet, signs of change are not yet visible, with leaders embroiled in a renewed power struggle before settling for a recently-ousted leader as the next Prime Minister.

None of it is new news. There are poignant analyses already undertaken by experts from the country and the region that highlight everything I have just described. The causes of economic devastation and deprivation have been decades in the making, but at their very core have been mechanisms established by the country's political class to fund, fuel and foster a complex power-sharing arrangement – the stability of which has ultimately superseded the stability of the country itself, its economy and its people.

Lebanon has [high income inequality](#) with the [highest concentration of billionaires per capita in the Middle East](#). In 2018, [tax revenues were only 15.3 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\)](#). There was never any commitment to redistribute wealth in the country, by investing in high quality, universal public services – one of the key ways of building an effective state and trust in government. Instead, for far too long, the country was portrayed as [a glowing example of neoliberalism](#) – which is in fact a paradigm for *safeguarding the interests of a few over the majority*. It is a deeply flawed paradigm, not only prevalent in Lebanon but actively promoted and established around the world.

Lebanon is but a reflection of this world, and not simply a "global south" anomaly of corruption and political capture. As will be described in the following sections, the flawed paradigm goes [hand in hand with entrenching existing unequal, patriarchal systems](#) by perpetuating narratives that are false and detrimental. One such narrative on which modern-day patriarchy has thrived is of the limited "fiscal space" that governments have to support their citizens, who are instead expected to exhibit unlimited "resilience" irrespective of the stress they experience.

“ Lebanon is but a reflection of this world, and not simply a “global south” anomaly of corruption and political capture.

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**PERPETUATING THE GENDERED NARRATIVE**

**PART 1: FISCAL SPACE OF THE GOVERNMENT IS LIMITED**

I cannot contain the surge of frustration when it appears that governments refuse to find the fiscal space to support the vast majority – the “precariat” [living on low and insecure incomes](#) and in dire straits – but are able to protect the coffers of banks and elites. As Lebanon’s example highlights, fiscal space is never just about the amount of resources available but whether countries have the *political will* to redistribute resources (through effective taxation) for the wellbeing of all and not just a few.

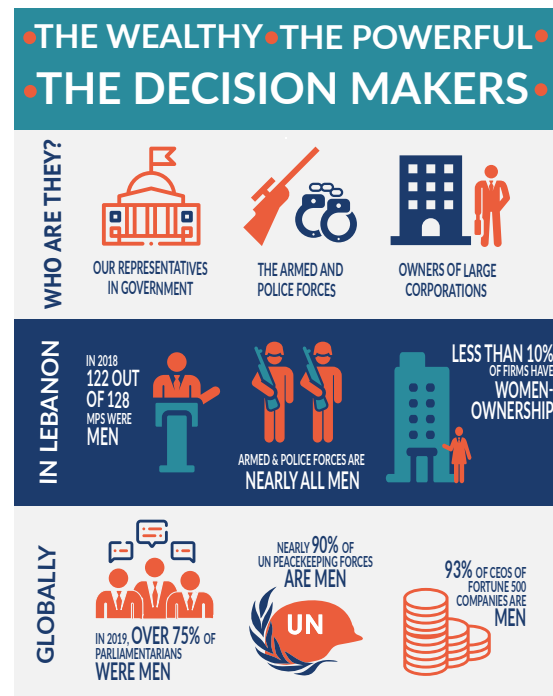
“  
The narrative of limited fiscal space is therefore not gender irrelevant, rather it is a powerful narrative that has sustained the power of an elite patriarchy.  
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All in all, fiscal space is a *gendered* space, because the hegemony of power and inequality is *always* gendered. As mentioned earlier, safeguarding the few goes hand in hand with ensuring that patriarchy is strong and very difficult to dismantle. As the [Association for Women’s Rights in Development \(AWID\) points out in a recent policy brief](#), global and national fiscal policies over the past decades have favoured accumulation by a few, especially through privately owned corporations, resulting in [one per cent of the world’s population owning as much as 63 per cent of world’s wealth](#).

As we are witnessing in Lebanon, this has been possible due to weak political systems that have allowed political leaders and their affiliated corporations to drain public resources leading to a concentration of wealth in the hands of mostly men, which goes untaxed. Alongside, we see underinvestment in social services such as healthcare, education, social care and social security – all of which are critical for children, women, people with disabilities and those at greater risk of experiencing or falling into poverty.

The narrative of limited fiscal space is therefore not gender irrelevant, rather it is a powerful narrative that has sustained the power of an elite patriarchy.

**FIGURE 1: WHO BENEFITS FROM THE NARRATIVE OF LIMITED FISCAL SPACE?**



Source: Development Pathways, based on web resources: (UN Women, 2019; Zillman, 2019; Halim, 2020; World Bank, 2020; UN Women, no date a; and UN Women, no date b).



**PART 2: THE RESILIENCE OF THE PEOPLE IS UNLIMITED**

In our current world context, experts often prefer to use complex semantics and calculations to describe systemic issues, so that high-level policy decisions can be made to appear as not affecting the intersectional realities of individuals and families, as they live their lives. This is, though, far from the truth.

An important parallel narrative, not typically associated with fiscal space, has been that of resilience, usually defined as a *family's or individual's capacity to absorb shocks*. The concept of resilience not only removes the focus from the state's obligation to uphold the rights of its people, as has happened in

Lebanon, it also places responsibility squarely on families and individuals to safeguard their own interests, especially when they live on low and insecure incomes which [my colleagues have written and spoken about at length](#). This is also gendered: the burden of such resilience within families falls largely on women, who pick up the invisible plethora of care and domestic activities, and are provided grants and loans to start up informal businesses in the name of economic empowerment, all simply to fulfil this mandate of being the picture-perfect resilient family. Now, post [COVID-19, the workload has increased for women globally](#), both young and old, with the economic value of unpaid care alone estimated at 40 per cent of GDP.

**FIGURE 2: WHO BEARS THE BRUNT OF THE UNLIMITED "RESILIENCE" NARRATIVE?**



Source: Development Pathways, based on web resources: (Combaz, 2018; CAS and ILO, 2019; ILO, 2020; UNDESA, no date; UNHCR, no date; UNICEF, no date; UNICEF Lebanon, no date; and WHO, no date).

## BUILDING A NEW PARADIGM. WHERE CAN WE BEGIN?

Lebanon urgently requires a paradigm shift, but so does much of the world we have been living in. The answers are not yet unanimous on the “where” and “how” to begin, but there is clarity on the imperative: creating a new paradigm for the post-COVID-19 (or infact post 2020) context.

[Studies have shown](#), including in the OECD, that economic growth underpinned by the principle of safeguarding the interests of a few does not and cannot lead to outcomes of rising prosperity for all and gender equality. In fact, not all solutions can be defined in monetary terms and [GDP is increasingly recognised as an inadequate measure of a country's \(i.e. human\) success](#).<sup>2</sup> Even with all progress that mankind has witnessed, never before have the cries of ordinary citizens been louder. Citizens are challenging and calling for an overhaul of the fundamental value-centric hierarchy and inequality that has organised every society, long justified in terms of a country's supposed limited fiscal space and private economic interests, pre-disposing some to more resources, more opportunities and more entitlements than others. On the other hand, those “devalued” by the language of dominant economic models have been excluded, marginalised and discriminated against: they have been relegated to survive solely on their ability to be “resilient” or, even worse, [stigmatised when they are not](#).

In 2019, almost unwittingly gearing up for the events of 2020, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 64 identified universal social protection as the *foundation* for breaking this cycle of social and economic devaluation. While much has to be done to make systems responsive to the intersectional experiences of people (see Box 1), universal social protection presents a powerful entry point for building their trust, thereby [strengthening state institutions](#). Introducing the social protection floor would uphold, at a minimum, the fundamental right of *everyone* to access

## BOX 1: A CARING STATE AND ECONOMY: THE NEW GLOBAL PARADIGM

After being on the fringes, a care-centred economic model is finally recognised as not radical but possibly exemplary for modern societies to “build back better”. The premise is to [re]build the political economy to value and thus care for all (not just a few).

Various schools of thought – from traditional welfare and feminist economics, to alternative theories of economic value and work as well as universal human rights – are putting forward core ideas:

- [Various forms of paid and unpaid care as the core "essential" activity within the economy](#);
- [Care as a right and recognised as high-value work](#);
- [Care as the duty of the State \(and market\) towards all people and the planet](#) and as integral to the new social contract;
- [Care, cooperation and systems of affiliation as a more efficient, sustainable approach to allocating resources](#) rather than individual competition and conflict (already evidenced in many indigenous societies).

basic income security and essential healthcare across the lifecycle, thereby offering a platform for the inclusion of people who have been historically devalued and derided for seeking equality.

Painful as this year may have been, the mythical narrative of unlimited resilience is finally coming undone, for Lebanon and much of the world. It is at this juncture that it becomes easier for us to recognise that a social protection floor presents the only major policy opportunity for fundamental change: empowering people to reject the kind of inequality (and devaluation) that have long been termed as being “natural”, “normal” and even “beneficial”, and paving the way for a new global paradigm.

With 2020 nearing its end, it's now time for a universal commitment to a universal social protection floor.

<sup>2</sup> GDP is now acknowledged as an inadequate measure for capturing value that is not created in traditional economic sectors. Despite attempts made to update this measure for changing societies, its validity in accurately measuring value created in other core areas of human activity has been refuted, in particular within the home (unpaid work) and digital spaces.

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Our Senior Social Policy Specialist, Anasuya Sengupta, takes a critical look at the Lebanese crisis not as an exception but a reflection of the unequal world we live in. She challenges the global narratives that have for decades entrenched the patriarchal elite and maintained gender inequality. While the year 2020 has been a painful magnifier of structural inequalities and injustices, it has presented us with a unique opportunity to finally shift the paradigm. She comes to the conclusion that universal social protection is a powerful building block, supported by evidence, that can help us move towards States and economies that care.