

DIHAD Conference March 2022**SDGs 5 and 10 – Panel Discussion****Dr. Dorothee Klaus****Director, Relief and Social Services (United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA))**

I would like to reflect on some of the regional economic and social developments in three locations where UNRWA is currently providing assistance and services to Palestine refugees: Syria, Gaza and Lebanon.

Over the past decade, we have seen a dramatic deterioration of living conditions - with the proportion of those living above the poverty line shrinking ever further.

- **Gaza: 81.5% poverty headcount¹**
- **Syria: 83% poverty headcount²**
- **Lebanon: 73% poverty headcount³**

Political economies have been tilted to provide income to around 10-20 per cent of the population while all others scramble below the poverty line. Those living above the poverty line appear to have access to highly coveted income opportunities: (i) remittances from abroad, (ii) employment with international organisations (both translating into access to foreign currency) or (ii) access to privileged economic resources managed and distributed by the political regimes.

Employment and the generation of income no longer seems to be a guarantor of preventing poverty including employment in the public sector. Where employment no longer guarantees the necessary source of income for survival, dependency on humanitarian aid increases and places immense pressure on organisations such as the UN system to step in with international resources. Given near universal poverty rates, employment or even types of employment no longer serve as differentiating feature according to which targeted distribution of aid can be undertaken. Inequalities are such that they play out below the poverty line – it is now a matter just how poor you are compared to others.

In this context, dependency ratios are high – very few income earners must feed larger numbers of non-employed or non-employable persons. Particularly disadvantaged are those unable to seek employment such as elderly, disabled and female heads of households and their families. Given the reduced ability of communities and extended families to support while conflict and displacement and migration may have

¹ UNRWA High Frequency Crisis Monitoring Survey report for Gaza, UNRWA and PCBS, November 2021

² UNRWA High Frequency Crisis monitoring Survey report for Syria, May 2021

³ UNRWA High Frequency Crisis Monitoring report for Lebanon, July 2021

further undermined social cohesion and solidarity, these population groups become even more vulnerable in times of crisis.

Let us look at some of the disaggregated data by sex related to employment from UNRWA's 2021 High Frequency Crisis Monitoring Surveys carried out in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon:

- In **Lebanon**, employment restrictions bar Palestinians from nearly all professions and leave the unregulated labour sector only.
- 89 per cent of females aged 16 years + are out of the labour force compared to 40 per cent of men aged 16 years +
- Only 9 per cent of females are employed compared to 45% of men.⁴

- In **Gaza**, the lack of cash in the economy and inability to import and export are continuously depressing the labour market.
- 87 per cent of females are out of the labour force compared to 42 per cent of men
- Only 4 per cent of females are employed compared to 29 per cent of men. For men – it appears that many are looking for work and not finding (unemployed).

- In **Syria**, the war has dramatically shifted the demographic composition: a total of 25 per cent of families are headed by someone older than 60 years, a total of 20% of families are headed by a female. There is a considerable gap in the proportion of traditional income earners: males in the age bracket 25-50 years.
- 87 per cent of females are out of the labour force compared to 42 per cent of men (the exact same figures as Gaza)
- 11.5 per cent of females are employed compared to 54 per cent of men.

As employment appears to be fragile and providing low income, one would assume that choices to be made are to decrease the dependency ratio within households and increase the income. The most apparent approach could have been to increase persons in the labour force that contribute to household income by increasing female employment. However, it appears that the gender inequality in employment continues despite the huge economic pressures; female employment remains extraordinarily low compared to that of men despite equal and sometimes higher education status between the sexes.

The gender inequalities in employment are a factor that is not conducive to alleviate pressures on limited income earners under already highly restrictive conditions.

We have tried to understand how women cope under the severed living conditions in the Gaza Strip that is living under blockade since 2007 and nearly 15 years and carried out an anthropological study.⁵

⁴ Discrepancy between out-of-labour force and employed is 'unemployed' – searching for work and not finding work.

⁵ How does she cope? Women pushed to new limits in the Gaza Strip. UNRWA, 2018

What did we find?

- Education barely translates into income
- Women are extraordinarily busy in making ends meet: collecting firewood, getting up at night when electricity comes to wash and clean, taking care of children and other family members, preparing foods with ever less and cheaper ingredients.
- Women forego medical expenses for their health and struggle to maintain their dignity in all of it.
- We have assessed their psycho-social well-being (WHO well-being score methodology): in Gaza women scored 39 out of 100 points – the threshold for depression is 29; cut-off for well-being is 50; and the index for women in Denmark stands at 70 points.
- Economic and social inequalities translate into reduced mental health and well-being which again generates co-morbidities.
- Women working or even becoming the main breadwinner is frowned upon.
- There are employment sectors ‘suitable for women’ and ‘unsuitable for women’.
- Suitable for women: food production, beauty, tailoring, teaching/public sector in sex separated environments.
- Unsuitable for women: high levels of independence, mixed environments, travel, public exposure
- Women performing in ‘unsuitable employments’ do so risking their reputation and against resistance of family and community. They try to by-pass by placing a ‘male face’ or going online.
- Younger women are indicating that they prefer to delay marriage and childbearing as this increases their dependencies, potentially decreasing their economic status while increasing pressures.

At the same time we see pressures on very young women in times of crises to marry – underage marriage on the rise. When we wanted to publish the report, male staff at UNRWA Gaza were initially against – long debates took place whether exposing the fact that women in Gaza are working and supporting families can be reconciled with the male image as primary breadwinners and caretakers of their families and women.

The image of the male as breadwinner and primary income earner reflects men’s position of power within the family environment – marriage elevates the male into this position of power and responsibility, while at the same time reducing the agency of women. It further appears that in contexts

where men are feeling disempowered themselves – such as in contexts of displacement, political oppression, social exclusion – the tendency is to retreat to positions of superiority where they are sanctioned and supported by cultural and social values.

his may also explain the increase in gender-based violence within families in such contexts, where men are given free rein to dominate women including restricting their movements, their social contacts, and the possibility of them becoming economically active - which is also a form of independence. Denying the right to work for women by men is also a form of GBV often not understood.

Economic depression coupled with pre-existing stereotypes of gendered power relations appears to be reinforcing the same, to the very detriment of women's well-being and social status, but also affecting considerably the productive and income generating capacities within families. It appears that maintaining these power relations is more important than opening space for additional income opportunities, reducing household poverty, and thereby also increasing chances for children to survive, grow and develop.

Experiences with advocacy and communication are difficult to lead and more often than not rejected as foreign financed imperialist and colonialist attempts of re-engineering social contracts between the sexes.

What are some of the entry points addressing the gender inequality creating higher dependency ratios within households that have been possible and acceptable?

- A professionalized social work force that engages with families – not just providing individual counseling – to help revisit power structures and allocation of roles and responsibilities together with all family members and exploring opportunities to improve the well-being of all family members.
- Targeting female headed households with higher amounts of cash assistance to mitigate the risk of unsecure habitat, abject poverty due to inability of generating income, and to buffer against the structurally induced lack of income.
- Introducing individual registration cards that allow all persons to access services irrespective of and without disclosure of their marital status to vital services. This benefits in particular unmarried young men as well as single females (whether divorced, separated, widowed or unmarried) which otherwise are related to either husbands or fathers without exception in so-called family registration cards as per the registration practices prevalent in the region undermining their right to being seen and treated as autonomous individuals irrespective of marital status and gender.