

# Embodied Experiences, Troubled Livelihoods: Ethnographic Observations from Ras Beirut

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Lives and Livelihoods in  
Turbulent Times  
Working Paper Series

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By Rahaf Zaher

Edited with an introduction by  
Nikolay Mintchev,  
Mayssa Jallad,  
and Mariam Daher

September 2022

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# Lives and Livelihoods in Turbulent Times

By Nikolay Mintchev, Mayssa Jallad and Mariam Daher

## INTRODUCTION

*Lives and Livelihoods in Turbulent Times* is a working paper series aiming to understand the changing nature of livelihoods in Lebanon today. The initial catalyst for the series was a set of ethnographic observations carried out by three researchers – Rahaf Zahar, Zainab Alawieh and Grace Abi Faraj – exploring the ways in which the livelihoods of Ras Beirut residents were changing at a time of crisis. People in Lebanon have long experienced protracted challenges in multiple domains, from electricity and water provision, to large scale displacement and political volatility. Since 2020, however, Lebanon has seen rapid economic deterioration, as well as a number of other crises and tragedies: the devastating explosion at the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020; the Covid-19 pandemic and its recurrent lockdowns and curfews; over a year of political paralysis in which the country was run by a caretaker government; a massive inflation that wiped out over 90% of the Lebanese Lira's value and led to an exorbitant increase in the pricing of goods; a fuel crisis leading to long queues, sometimes requiring people to wait for a full day at gas stations or purchase black-market gasoline at extortionate prices; and an ongoing electricity crisis where grid electricity is available for as little as an hour per day.

The papers in this series aim to formulate an account of how this multi-faceted crisis is experienced by people in Lebanon. The aim of the case studies and analyses is to develop a close understanding of what happens to people's livelihoods, as well as their lives more broadly, in such dire economic circumstances. For example, in the ethnographic work by Zahar, Alawieh and Abi Faraj, the conversations and observations that the authors write about began as conversations about livelihoods, but often ended up revealing personal struggles and aspirations, as well as deeply felt anxieties, grief and anger.

The expressions of the intimate emotions and experiences that some of the case studies depict so vividly should serve as a reminder that a livelihood does not just sustain oneself economically, but

also emotionally and socially, and in some ways also politically; the security and adequacy of a person's livelihood affects every aspect of their existence, from the things they think about on a daily basis, to the relationships they establish with others, the trust they build in their government, and the plans they make for their futures and the futures of their children. This has two important implications for how we understand the impact of the current crisis on people's lives: first, there is the well-known fact that the costs of poverty and livelihood insecurity are tremendous, extending well beyond matters of money; second, there is the crucial point that recovering from the damage done by the deterioration or loss of livelihoods requires the mobilisation of multiple and diverse strategies thanks to which people can make ends meet. In fact, the case studies presented in this volume and others give readers a picture of both the costs of livelihood loss/insecurity and the strategies that people use to deal with poverty.

The research carried out in the three volumes by Zahar, Alawieh and Abi Faraj was part of a bigger study on livelihoods in Lebanon. The three researchers were part of a team of citizen social scientists who conducted 'discreet choice experiment' (DCE) and livelihoods surveys with business owners and workers in Ras Beirut in order to understand the factors that guide the decision-making processes of providing and seeking employment (for more details on the meaning and practice of citizen social science, see Jallad et al. 2021).

Quantitative surveys such as DCEs, however, are limited in the kind of data they produce, leaving out potentially valuable information about both the context of the survey – namely, the here-and-now of the encounter between researcher and respondent – and the broader context of people's lives that determines the ways in which they answer the survey questions.

In response to this challenge, Zahar, Alawieh and Abi Faraj embarked on a further research



initiative to supplement the quantitative findings of the DCE surveys with qualitative data about the strategies that people develop in order to obtain and distribute essential resources in times of exceptional economic hardship. This qualitative study consisted of two parts. The first part was a programme of ethnographic observations of the DCE/livelihoods surveys themselves. This was modelled on previous methodological work at the RELIEF Centre in which we argued for the value of ethnographically observing the social and cultural dynamics that play out in the process of quantitative data collection (Jallad and Mintchev 2019, Shourbaji 2020). Building on this recent work, the case studies began with observations and descriptions of the contexts in which the DCE/livelihoods surveys took place, and the ways in which the interactions during the surveys unfolded. These were descriptions of what happens in the field when researchers approach potential respondents and ask them if they would like to participate in a study about livelihoods, and what the process of interviewing someone looks like once the survey is underway. The responses were diverse, as one would imagine. They ranged from hostility and dismissal to kindness and willingness to engage, but in all cases the ethnography of the process showed a human side of research that is usually lost in the numbers and figures of quantitative research.

During the second phase of the study, two of us (Jallad and Mintchev) worked together with the researchers and supported them in designing a set of bespoke questions and plans for continuing the engagement with each of the respondents in the original ethnographic observations. This helped the team to prepare for the second phase of qualitative data collection, which consisted of follow-up interviews in which Zaher, Alawieh and Abi Faraj returned to their interlocutors and continued the conversation by asking a number of questions about social and economic life in the context of the current crisis.

The responses to these follow-up interviews were very rich and informative, and they also became more emotionally intense as time passed and the crisis unfolded. They showed just how much time, energy, and social and emotional work goes into supporting oneself and others in the community when people's livelihoods are under such strenuous pressure. Ras Beirut residents told stories about reliance on remittances from friends and family members abroad, strengthening connections with neighbours and sharing food and other necessities

with them, working multiple jobs over long hours, relying on charity, and cutting expenditures down to a bare minimum, among other things. Interviews with employers also revealed various strategies of coping. One owner explained how he tried his best to keep his business open for the sake of the staff who work for him. Another business owner talked about his landlord's willingness to look the other way when it was impossible to pay the rent of the shop. These collective and individual strategies, however, could only go so far in mitigating the damaging impact of the crisis. In fact, the case studies also depict anxiety, anger, frustration and exhaustion, which inevitably results from the widespread lack of access to basic necessities. Shortages of essential medications mean that people have to spend hours on end searching for them in pharmacies across the city and even across the country, while electricity blackouts and fuel shortages create anxiety about buying certain foods, lest they were not cooked or refrigerated properly and could potentially cause food poisoning. And while it is true that some people are better off than others, especially if they have access to

jobs that pay in foreign currency, the sense of insecurity, decline, and anxiety about the future appears to be ubiquitous across the board, even among educated professionals in traditionally well-paid and prestigious jobs.

In any case, the details of how different people in Ras Beirut experience this crisis is something that readers can learn about in the working papers and so we will not expand on this topic in this introductory note. A final point that we would like to raise, however, is that this work has important value not just because it documents people's experiences in this uniquely challenging historical moment, but also because it highlights the enormous potential of communities to drive recovery as a 'bottom up' process. What the case studies show very vividly is that people's economic lives are intricately linked with their social, emotional, and political lives. Exchanges of money, goods and services are constantly taking place within informal social networks both at home and abroad. The resources that people have are either used to obtain basic essentials such as food, medication, care, and electricity, or shared with others in the community who are in need of support. This economy of belonging and sharing, whereby people support one another in acquiring basic necessities shows that 'horizontal' distributions between relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues and fellow residents of the same neighbourhood,



play a crucial role in helping people to get by at a time when economic and political elites are widely seen as the instigators of the crisis and viewed with deep suspicion. Our view is that these ‘horizontal’ networks between relatives, neighbours and so forth are crucial not only for the present moment but also for future recovery efforts of all sizes and scales. Recovery must emphasise investment in livelihoods, infrastructures and services that directly benefit the people and communities who are struggling to make ends meet, and who are self-organising to support one another through the exchange of various kinds of resources. Overlooking this fact risks alienating and excluding the majority of the public, thereby returning to business as usual at best, and a deepening of the current crisis at worst. Neither of these options is compatible with a better future, and neither is likely to alleviate the disillusionment and discontent that much of the material in this working paper series represent so vividly.

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# Embodied Experiences of Troubled Livelihoods: Ethnographic Observations from Ras Beirut

By Rahaf Zaher

## INTRODUCTION

As a citizen scientist conducting surveys, I was fascinated by the people I met – their acceptance of us, their personas, and their stories. Rarely a survey passed without bits and pieces of the survey respondent's life being shared with us, citizen scientists. When the opportunity arose to conduct an ethnographic account of these surveys in addition to follow-up interviews with their respondents, I saw it as a way of advancing the research while continuing to engage with the people whose lives I was able to learn about. I remember their neighborhoods and the fragrances upon entering their vicinity, their homes and all the personal art and pictures they displayed, and their faces and how they changed with every narrative.

The main aim of our project was to study the changing livelihoods of workers and employers in Ras Beirut amid the consecutive tragedies continuously endured in the past two years. The ethnographies gave us a sense of the progression of this struggle. Between the initial survey and the follow-up interview, one can clearly detect how new challenges arose as the situation continued to worsen. Additionally, we got to know the interviewees at an intimate level as they talked openly about their present situation, reminisced about a more secure past, and hoped for stability in the future.

Most interestingly, people's stories about their recent struggles were not the only notable take-aways from the interviews. Long-standing cultural beliefs and societal expectations were central to the participants' embodied experiences and narrations. Thus, in the following accounts, we see how the intersections of gender, race, age, nationality, class and so on dictate lives, livelihoods, and decisions and how these inequalities are only amplified in turbulent times.

## CHAPTER 1

### Rami: Part-Time Physiotherapist, Full-Time Security Guard April and August 2021

It was an afternoon in April. Samer<sup>1</sup> and I were searching for individuals to conduct the survey when we found ourselves in front of a very tall grey building that we hadn't passed by yet. Usually, we were unlucky with such intimidating modern buildings but on that day, we decided to try. We rang the concierge button and braced ourselves for the rejection. Yet, to our surprise, with no prior questions, we heard a buzz and the gates opened in front of us. Reluctantly, we entered. Greeting us was a trampoline and plastic balls scattered all around the front area. This was in great contrast to the intimidating building's exterior; past the gate, there was a more humane spirit.

The security guard, whom I will call Rami, was sitting behind a small desk. He greeted us and we proceeded to introduce the project and ask for permission to check for resident participants. To our surprise, he told us that out of all the floors, only two were occupied because the building was severely affected by the Beirut Port Blast, adding that the remaining residents would not participate in this kind of thing. Samer then jumped on his last chance of securing a survey and asked if Rami himself was interested. And he was! The survey began with Samer standing and me resting on a chair to take a breath in the airconditioned building lobby, after all the hours of walking.

As Samer started with the questions, Rami was very open, answering every question with a wide smile and a joke here and there. When Samer asked him about the highest degree he acquired, Rami opened his wallet and took out his American University of

<sup>1</sup> All names of citizen scientists and respondents have been changed to pseudonyms.



Beirut (AUB) Alumnus ID card and added “I studied Biology”. As I myself am an AUB Biology graduate, I was shocked by this piece of information. I could not help but wonder: is this the future that a degree from the highest ranked university grants you in Lebanon? Will all the years I spent at university and the investment I put in a degree not help me even work in my field of study in this country? Will I also be forced to work in a job that is completely unrelated to my field? He went on to explain that he travelled to Houston, Texas and studied physiotherapy there, finally achieving his degrees after 10 years. After recognizing our apparent shock, he asked Samer:

بتستغرب كيف رجعت؟

**Are you confused about why I came back?”**

When Samer answered with a yes, Rami explained that he had to come back because he was the owner of the family property after the death of his parents and he had to tend to it.

This conversation raised a question for me: why was someone with graduate degrees in physiotherapy working as a security guard? I didn’t ask this at the time because I didn’t want to disrupt the survey. However, when Samer asked Rami the question about how he obtained his job, we got our answer. Rami told us that this was not his only job as he also had a physiotherapy space at his home. In fact, he had learned about the opening for his security guard position when one of his patients mentioned it in a session. Rami added that since his physiotherapy job was not making ends meet, he went for it, adding:

عجب مؤهلاتي

**my qualifications are left on the side.”**

He also mentioned that he receives remittances from his daughter abroad and borrows money from his mother-in-law before shaking his head and sadly exclaiming:

شو بدنا نعمل... لازم نأمن لزوم العيش

**What shall we do, we need to secure a living.”**

Upon inquiring more about his job, Rami told us that business would be better had he been a woman, since most people want a woman to do their massages. Samer rolled on with the questions smoothly and when he asked Rami about the

major asset a worker should have to secure a job in Lebanon, the security guard looked at both of us disbelievingly and with an incredulous grin:

**“واسطة / wasta, of course!”**

He then shared with us his experience after graduation: “When I finally obtained my physiotherapy degree, I came back to Lebanon to work here. I had an interview in a very prestigious institute. I came to the interview with my degree and very excited. The first question the interviewer asked me was:

**“مين باعتك؟ / Who sent you?”**

**I didn’t know how to run away from there.”**

He concluded by clarifying that in order to have a good life in Lebanon, “بدك توقف للزعيم / you need to clap for political leaders” and then summarised why he did not get the job:

**“ما ببيع حالي / I don’t sell myself.”**

I interviewed Rami two months later in August, after four months of continuous crises in Lebanon. Asking for a second interview was thus a bit hard, as the situation of many of the participants was likely to have worsened. I met with Rami in the same mammoth building and I reminded him of what we did in the previous survey. He was as hospitable as last time, which broke a bit of the tension. He began with “أوف تغيرت كثير أشياء من وقتها” / Oh a lot of things have changed since then”, and so I followed up on that. I asked what significant changes he has noticed in his livelihood situation, to which he scoffed and said:

**“everything”, adding: “If my daughter sends me a 100\$, it is worth more than my salary now. هاي لحالها بتكفي / This alone is enough”**

When I inquired about his main expenditures and concerns, Rami elaborated on how every couple of weeks a new crisis arises. He summarized the situation succinctly: “One time it is the unavailability of fuel, another it is the need to buy the fuel from the black market. One time it is the unavailability of medicine, another it is the availability at ridiculously high prices of medicine. Let alone the days we spent in blackouts and had to throw away everything in our fridges, which is also not cheap anymore!” When I asked if his two jobs are enough to pay the bills





now, he just shook his head and said that he would work a third job if he could, but “العمر إله حقه” / Age has its price.”

Probing further, I reminded him that during the survey he stated that had he been a woman, his job would be much more profitable. So, I asked whether he thinks the crises have affected women and men in the same way. After a long pause he said: “It depends.” and went on to explain that the nature of the job dictates the effects of the crises. However, he then stated that:

بتستغرب كيف رجعت؟

**/ The greatest burden is on the man, because he is the head of the family and expected to provide for them.”**

I also reminded him that he previously said that a *wasta* gives a person a good life in Lebanon and then asked if he still believes this statement to be true. He revisited the aforementioned examples, explaining how having the right connections gives you a leeway to secure medicines, fuel, and vouchers that are otherwise inaccessible, or getting them at lower prices. He then concluded by saying:

بتستغرب كيف رجعت؟

**/ Now more than ever.”**

We have reached a point where sugar coating the situation does not do it anymore. The complexity of the situation Rami finds himself in is not an exception, it is the reality of the struggle faced by many Lebanese. It is a vivid example of how the context and circumstances that people find themselves in can dominate and overwhelm them. Although he studied in prestigious universities, had ambitious dreams, and worked to secure a good living for his kids and older self, the growing corruption in Lebanon devastated his plans. Finally, laying down the situation as it is, Rami showed how the fight for resources, particularly in harsh situations like Lebanon's, is classed, aged, and gendered.



## CHAPTER 2

### Mona: Stay-At-Home Nurse June and August 2021

On a very hot day in June, I met Karim in front of a building he had reluctantly decided to revisit due to the unfriendly treatment he and his colleague faced during their previous visit. Adding to our dread, there was no elevator in the building, so we had to climb up the stairs. We went through a series of door knocks and consecutive rejections before we finally received consent from a participant. The lady who opened the door had a tender smile and greeted us in. I will call her Mona in this account. When Mona noticed how tired we were from the weather and stairs, she turned the air conditioning on and told us not to sit directly below it lest we get sick. She also asked if we wanted coffee and water, and we both asked for water to quench our thirst.

When we asked about the number of people who live in the house, Mona told us that it's just her and one other old lady. When we asked how many people of her family live with her, she said none. She then explained that she is a stay-at-home nurse, taking care of an elderly lady with Alzheimer's who is the owner of the house. The following survey question asked if she was thinking of changing her current occupation. Mona answered:

يا خيي، صار عمري ٧٠ سنة، شو بدي أعمل بعد؟  
/ I'm 70, what is there left to do?"

Karim and I were visibly surprised, as she looked way younger, so she laughed and said:

ما مبيّن علي، صبح؟  
/ I don't look my age, right?"

After Karim inquired about her level of job satisfaction, she disclosed that she is not satisfied at all. After asking what makes her feel that way she said: "هالنواب والوزراء / parliamentarians and ministers." Agreeing with her but wanting to stay on topic, we rephrased the question and asked about her work satisfaction. She replied that she is very satisfied as she loves humanitarian work. She also mentioned that she is satisfied with her salary but said: "معاشي راح / my salary is gone." When we asked why, she explained that it is because she gets paid through the bank at the rate of 3900 lira to the dollar; had she been given her salary in cash she would be

able to convert it at a higher rate at any money exchange shop.

Midway through the survey, Mona was dialled by her patient. She apologized to us immediately and left to attend to the call, saying:

عندي ياها أهم شي... أذا ما في حدا عندها هون  
/ She's the most important thing to me, if nobody is here with her, God is here."

We waited for Mona to get back while savouring the coolness of the air-conditioned living room. When she came back, we went on with the questions and asked her to rank her income-level and compare it with that of her parents on a 1 to 10 scale. She smiled and said:

والله أحلى أيام... ما كان في قهر، ما كان في زعل، ما  
/ Oh! the most beautiful days, there was no agony, there was no sadness, there was no illness."

She also explained that she and her family were middle class "كان وضعنا وسط".

This had me thinking about classes in Lebanon, and how the middle class actually existed in the old days and lived a "lavish" life. This comes in stark difference to today's reality where the middle class is on the brink of extinction due to the polarization the country is witnessing where the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer.

Since Mona was a nurse, my whole plan to the follow-up interview revolved around the care economy and her embodied experience as a care giver in her private life as a mother and public life as a nurse. I met her again in August in the same apartment and she greeted me with the same kind smile before inviting me in. This time when she offered a coffee I agreed, and we drank coffee as we went with the interview. We sat in a different location this time as per her suggestion, in order for me to be able to take notes comfortably.



I started the interview by asking her to narrate her years as a caretaker. She had a pause in which she took a few sips of coffee and thought of what to say. Then she said:

**والله أنا تعبت كثير بحياتي**  
**/ God, I suffered a lot in my life."**

She then told me how she started working as a nurse at the local hospital where she used to live and then she married and became pregnant. Unfortunately, her husband died while she was pregnant, and she had to raise her daughter alone. She said: "I worked and suffered a lot, I had to raise my child as well as secure a future for her. I worked at Trad Hospital and in Barbir and took on any patient that needed my help at home. And I did it, I got her the most beautiful clothes and sent her to the best universities, I bought a house and a piece of land all for her." She then mentioned that although her daughter now lives in Africa and is a manager of a company there, she still thinks:

**لازم ساعد بنتي**  
**/ I should help my daughter."**

Mona also told me that before working for Leyla – the lady with whom she lives now – she used to work as a nurse for Leyla's relative for about 12 years. Then, when Leyla fell down and broke her hip, they brought Mona to be a stay-at-home nurse for her. When I asked Mona how long she is planning to keep on working, she answered:

**لحتى يبطل في**  
**/ Till I can't anymore."**

She then elaborated on how much she loves her work and prides herself in the experience she gained. She proudly told me how once, while checking on her patient, she found her rubbing her eyes and suspected a bacterial infection. She directly did an analysis of her bodily fluids and a culture and she was right! That helped her treat her patient early on and prevent any further complications. She then said: "Degrees are important, but experience is more important. My experience has almost made me a Doctor!"

Revisiting her juggle of domestic and professional work, I asked her what she thought would have been different had her husband not passed so soon. She told me that she would of course still work as

a nurse and take care of her daughter, but that she would not have had to work this much or hold the burden of her daughter's future on her shoulders alone, because he would bring another salary. Then, I asked Mona what she thinks the difference would have been if she was a male nurse, to which she answered: "Nursing is a woman's world. It's like taking care of your children or parents. You do not have to stick needles only; you have to attend to your patients and be there for them." She also added that women are more trusted to be stay-at-home nurses than men.

Regarding recent crises, I asked about the things people do to help each other. Mona told me how she helps her siblings and other family member with money because all of them are in bad financial conditions. She additionally mentioned that she helps strangers too, sometimes with money and at other times with portions of food, but that she prioritizes her family members: **الأقربون أول بالمعروف**. Finally, she explained that any decent person with some extra money should be doing this since people ought to be there for each other / **الناس لبعضها**.

Nursing and raising children are noble professions that often give caretakers a sense of pride. However, through Mona's narration, we can see how the traditional division of productive and reproductive labor is constructed – the notion that women take care of kids and parents while men bring in the primary salary – when she was clearly able to do both, as a single mother. Unfortunately, this gendering of labor has endured over time. It remains an issue that holds women predominantly responsible for the private sphere and places them in similar caretaking professions when they are present in the public sphere. The care economy majorly relies on women and it is essential to normalize the participation of males in it in order to break gender roles. Lastly, it was heart-warming that Mona had an optimistic view of society, at a time when such a view is so difficult to maintain. My own view tends to be less optimistic: when push comes to shove, can people really be there for each other if the resources available are not enough for all? However, as Mona showed through her care for others and her willingness to share, our connectedness and commitment to one another can make all the difference in the world in how we live our lives at a time of such deep crises.



## CHAPTER 3

### Diana: Full-Time Mother May and September 2021

It was an exceptionally hot day in May during the last couple of weeks of the project. My colleagues Yara, Samer and I were exhausted and worn out. At this stage, we were re-visiting buildings that we had already visited before, so we were semi-experts. The building we targeted was very old and had numerous apartments per floor; we felt that we had a high chance of obtaining consent to do a survey from one of the apartment residents. As we were ascending the stairs, we heard a conversation and so we hurried to find our potential participant. Yara and I approached the door from which the conversation was flowing while Samer stayed behind, just in case one of the women was not wearing her veil.

The house was very small, we could see all of its rooms through the front door. A woman approached the door holding her child in her arms, while other women sat on the floor in what looked like the apartment's living room. When Yara explained the project and asked for consent to conduct the survey, the woman immediately said: "But I'm Syrian, I don't know if I can help you." Yara told her that her input matters, so she accepted, but asked us to do the survey at the door since there was nowhere to sit inside. There was no air conditioning and the lights were very dim in the corridor. Let's call the participant Diana.

Yara began with the basic livelihood questions and asked Diana if she works. Diana replied that she is a housewife. Then she went on to clarify that her child has a medical condition and she has to stay at home with her. When Yara asked about the most appropriate contract length she would opt for if she were to obtain contracted work, Diana laughed and said:

حتى لو بدي اشتغل، زوجي ما بيخليني  
/ Even if I wanted to work, my  
husband would not let me."

Moving on, Yara asked her to rate the Lebanese government's performance in different sectors. Diana was very reluctant to answer and declared:

"I am Syrian, we are refugees here so الحمد لله على كل

شي / thank God for anything." Given her experience with the healthcare system in Lebanon due to her child's condition, that was the only sector she was comfortable rating. Moreover, while filling in the Discrete Choice Experiment (DCE) options, Diana voiced that her primary concern is social security due to the same aforementioned condition.

In addition to answering the survey questions, Diana mentioned that her household does not receive any kind of help from the United Nations. This was a repeated motif in the Syrian houses we visited, directly challenging the perceptions of many Lebanese workers whom we visited and interviewed. The latter frequently blamed Syrians for devouring all the countries' resources – jobs, money, and aid. Diana also mentioned that the only income she and her family have is the money that her husband brings in. With a defeated shoulder shrug, she told us that her husband works as a chef, so the Covid-19 lockdown period was very hard on them. Since restaurants were closed, her husband had no work and thus no income, and he had to search for other temporary jobs during that time to keep the family afloat.

Finally, for the demographic data section of the survey, we asked a number of questions including one about the respondent's religion. Mona answered right away but not without adding:

نحن ما منهتم بهالشي قد ما انتو بتهتمو فيه بلبنان  
/ We do not focus on this thing as  
much as you do in Lebanon."

I found it very interesting that people all around Ras Beirut were eager to tell the stories of their misery and misfortune of the last couple of years. In the case of refugees, people fled one unstable country only to find themselves living in another country that was now also unstable. So, I decided to do a follow up interview with Diana in order to learn more about her livelihood situation and how it has developed. I met with her again in mid-September, so the weather was much cooler. This time she knew about my arrival in advance so she did not have any guests. In fact, we sat in the same room that her guests were sitting in on the day of the survey. Diana, her child and I sat down and started with the interview.



I began with asking if Diana could share with me the kinds of observable changes she had noticed in the area, especially since the concurrent crises began in 2020. She said: “Oh many, many things. The area used to be so full of life and light, it has been dead for months now. People do not have fuel to do anything, there is no electricity for light, حتى الروح / even the beautiful soul and love for life that the Lebanese had has disappeared.” As I noticed that she was excluding her own experience, I asked her: “What about you? What has changed for you?” She smiled and said:

**مثلي مثل الكل  
/ I am like everyone else.”**

Taking that cue, I reminded Diana that she had told me before about her husband’s work as a chef and asked about updates on the situation. She told me that after the restaurants reopened, her husband went back to his job but he was now also working in another temporary job, which he found during the lockdown. This was because the restaurant where he worked did not change his salary. Diana then added:

**كل شي عم يعلأ إلا المعاشات  
/ Everything is going up except salaries.”**

I probed further and asked her if she had thought about joining paid work due to this situation. She took a few moments and then disclosed that she did think about it, but then, holding her daughter closer, she added: “But I can’t, for her.”

I went on and asked her: “Things have been getting harder for everyone, have you had any help from friends, family, or any organizations?” She replied:

**الدنيا ما بتخلي من الأوام  
/ The world is not without good people.”**

Then she explained how she and some of her neighbours in the building would cook and send dishes to each other to help, and that they received some food portions from NGO donations. I then asked about her opinion on what kinds of government or NGO support programs would make their life easier. Diana repeated:

**“أهم شي البنات / The most important thing is my girl.”**

Elaborating, she said: “Yes food portions help, but they do not solve anything. Huge piles of money go into my daughter’s medication and hospitalization and there is no substantial help in this area. But then again, ما حد قادر يدفع التكاليف هاي / I am like everyone else, and no one is able to pay these expenses.”

It was evident from Diana’s remarks that she equated her experience with that of Lebanese residents. Although this might lead one to believe that Lebanese and Syrians have equivalent experiences in Lebanon because the current crises are causing hardship and suffering for everyone across the country, her stories show that the reality is more complicated. It is obvious that Syrians are facing the additional burden of structural social and economic exclusion and that they are not seen or treated as equal to the Lebanese. In her article, “What It means to Be Syrian in Turkey?”<sup>2</sup>, Islem Bemri explains that “To be Syrian in Turkey means to be a citizen with the rank of a heavy guest.” Syrians are identically viewed here in Lebanon as “heavy guests” who have overstayed their welcome and are only a burden in an era of simultaneous crises. Furthermore, the intersectional identity of Diana as a woman and a Syrian refugee makes her more vulnerable than a Lebanese woman or man due to the challenges and forms of exclusion that she is facing.

Diana’s experience, much like the experiences of other women, was an example of the traditional perception that men belong to the public sphere and women belong to the private sphere. Diana was expected to stay at home and care for her daughter while her husband worked as the breadwinner. The responsibility of caring for her daughter consolidated her position in the household because even if she was granted permission to work, per her own words, she would not be able to do so due to the care work she needs to provide, and the absence of external support from either people or institutions.

2 <https://raseef22.net/article/1084775-what-it-means-to-be-syrian-in-turkey>



## CHAPTER 4

### Lama: Bank Manager June and August 2021

Lama is a Bank Manager who works in the Ras Beirut area. I knew her personally, so I contacted her to check if it would be possible for her to do the survey. It was very important to me to secure a survey for someone who works in banking, given that the sector is in the eye of the storm in today's crisis in Lebanon. Although Lama agreed to do the survey, it was very hard to secure a meeting with her. This was because the crisis in the banking sector and the laying off of employees by banks meant that she was now responsible for various branches simultaneously. When the meeting was finally secured, we met at the branch that she was originally the manager of. Her office there was very nice, filled with photographs of people I assumed were her family. The air conditioning worked so well, it felt otherworldly – I almost needed a jacket. After a few minutes of small talk, Lama asked if I preferred coffee, juice, or water. I told her I'd take an instant coffee. She added that she'd take the same and checked if I take it with a creamer, like her. When I nodded yes, she remarked:

“صار مثل الذهب”  
/ It has become like gold.”

We sipped our coffee and rolled on with the questions. When I asked about the main household provider, Lama declared that this was her. She clarified that her husband was retired now, but asserted that even before that, she was the main income provider. I think she was the only working woman I surveyed to declare herself as the income provider; other working women treated their work as something secondary and did not even mention that they contributed to the main income brought home by their husbands. Also, as part of the introductory questions, I asked Lama if she had any physical or mental illnesses. She laughed and said:

“كل موظفي البنوك صار عندهم مشاكل نفسية”  
/ every bank employee  
developed a psychological  
condition in the past two years.”

Going forward, I asked which crisis affected her life the most, to which she replied: “من وين بدي بلّش لبّش؟” / where do I even start?” Lama restated how the

revolution affected the banks, from material damage of property to psychological damage of employees. She also elaborated on how the revolution, the Covid-19 lockdowns and the financial crisis lead to a large number of layoffs in major banks in Lebanon. She ended her explanation on a sad note: “We watched lifelong friends and colleagues leave their jobs, and even the best among us felt that the threat was close.”

Continuing the conversation, I asked if Lama would like to change her current job. A sad look appeared on her face and she said that she's not sure – nobody would want to lose a job they already have in this situation, but in her and her colleagues' cases it was like gambling between one's mental and financial situation. She then elaborated: “I have had people scream at me, threaten me, accuse me and so on, of course I'd like not to live through that!” Finally, in light of all these changes happening to the Lebanese condition, one question revolved around rating the income-level of her family compared to that of her parents. She said that income levels can't be compared because the lira is not the same, the global economy is not the same, and one could earn enough for a comfortable life much easier in the past than in today's circumstances.

As mentioned before, I was already interested in the insights that a breadwinning woman in the Lebanese banking sector has to offer, so I chose to do a follow-up interview. At the time of the interview, the attack on banks had subsided, so Lama had more free time and I had better access to her. We met at the same office and we had an instant coffee like in the first meeting. She had a few questions about the purpose of the follow-up interview, and I told her that the stories behind the data matter and that embodied experiences put numbers into perspective.

I started the interview with the obvious point about the hardships that banks and their employees have gone through during the previous period and asked Lama to tell me more about what she went through. She started narrating some of the events that had happened to her. She explained how some clients accused her of preventing them from reaching their money and of smuggling hers

to Swiss banks, how some stood in the middle of the bank and shouted obscene words at her, and how others tried to shoot videos of her to post on the internet while she was trying to explain that the decisions the banks make are not in her hands. She confessed that there were days when she and her colleagues were afraid to come to the office due to news about the use of physical force and weapons on bank employees. There were other days when she and her colleagues felt ambivalent about the whole situation because they were citizens too, and they were facing the same kinds of problems as everyone else in the country. For Lama, it felt like bank employees were portrayed as كبش محرقة / scapegoats to divert the focus of the people away from other problems.

I then asked about the economic crisis and the effect it had on her work life and personal life. Lama replied: “I was facing the same financial problems [as everyone else] – my money is stuck in the bank – and at the same time held accountable for them by clients.” I asked about the recent fuel crisis, to which she explained that she was facing the same problems as everyone. She had nowhere to fill her car with fuel easily and had to look for fuel everywhere, eventually resorting to black market purchases. She also faced electricity cuts at home, which were unbearable, as well as bills that were skyrocketing. But she added:

**“The difference is that I have the money, but I cannot find the commodity, غيري مش قادر يأمن الإثنان / others have access to neither.”**

She also mentioned that many banks had to cut their working hours and even their ATM activation hours due to the shortage.

Building on this discussion about economic life, I asked Lama about her experience as a breadwinner and probed about whether she feels the economic crisis has affected men and women differently. For starters, she said that her husband helps a lot and is supportive, but she still spends a huge portion of her time cooking, caring, and being involved with her children. As for the different effects on men and women, she said that many employers assume that the male is the major breadwinner. This, according to her, meant that they would think twice before laying men off or not paying their salaries, much more so than if a female employee was in that same position. This led to a huge difference in the ways

in which male and female workers experienced the crisis. Moreover, Lama mentioned that people who have wide networks of connections, be they men or women, are more likely to secure resources for their dependents.

It was clear from this testimony that although Lama found herself in a better situation than many women and men who have much lower incomes or have lost their jobs, this did not ease the growing difficulty in securing resources. The challenges she still faced confirm that there is broader systemic malfunction that goes beyond human capital or even individual financial resources. In all, Lama’s story shows that although lack of money is a huge issue and obstacle for many people, even those who have the luxury of money still fall short of decent living conditions. Additionally, the structural inequalities which put women at a disadvantage when it comes to securing a livelihood were also vividly displayed. As a woman who has made it up the ladder to a prestigious position, Lama has proven herself a capable breadwinner in the productive sphere, yet a huge portion of the reproductive and care labor of her household still fell on her shoulders because that is the primary duty of a woman – or so they say.



## CHAPTER 5

### Tarek: Clothes Shop Owner May and September 2021

My colleagues and I were searching for shop owners to survey in Hamra. The possibilities seemed endless, so we were not as anxious as in other areas. However, as the situation in Lebanon was deteriorating at a rapid speed, we were wary of how the employers might receive us. On this particular day, I joined Karim and we started the search together. As soon as we located ourselves on the map, we found ourselves in front of a clothing shop, so we asked a person who worked there if the owner was available. The man we spoke to asked what we wanted from him and we started explaining the project only to be cut halfway through as he pointed us towards the owner. Immediately, we noticed that the temperature inside was much colder, in stark contrast to the outside scorcher, and so Karim exclaimed that we might get sick because of it.

We hovered around the owner as he was busy on a phone call. When he was done, he asked us what we wanted. We started explaining but we were soon cut off by another call and then another. When we were finally able to finish our explanation, the owner seemed reluctant to participate. He said:

**“Do you really need to ask people about their economic conditions and livelihoods? لازم تعرفوا الأجوبة / You should know the answers yourself. We are in Lebanon.”**

Karim told him that answers are actually varying and that every opinion matters to which the owner retaliated with: “Are you benefiting from this? are you getting paid?” We explained that this is a job, so he said: “In this case I’ll participate, just because I want you to benefit, nothing else. We need to help each other in this situation.” We will call this man Tarek.

I started the survey and when I asked if Tarek was the primary provider for his family, he seemed taken aback by the question and then answered: “Definitely / طبعاً.” Then, in the DCE section, he laughed multiple times, once about the very high or very low salary options and another when he read the educational qualifications, where he told us that he doesn’t care

and that most of his worker barely reached 10th grade / نَصْهَن ما خَلَص بَرِيْفِه. His employees laughed and nodded in confirmation. Soon after, when I asked him to rate the government’s performance and his satisfaction with different sectors, he did not even wait for us to mention the topics, he immediately said: “Zero for everything”. Us, citizen scientists, the owner, and the employees who were observing the survey all laughed a bittersweet laugh. After all, we all knew this to be the ugly truth, but it was still ridiculously laughable.

Later, elaborating on the condition of the shop, Tarek also exclaimed that it is “تحت الصفر / below zero”. He angrily disclosed how he has more than a year’s accumulation of rental payments that he hasn’t paid yet since the landlord wants the money in fresh dollars, which are impossible for him to earn. He continued that even if he was able to, he would not pay this huge amount in fresh dollars:

**“هيدا كفر / this is blasphemy”.**

On top of this, he pointed out hopelessly that sales have been getting lower and lower by the day as prices are getting higher and higher.

Throughout the survey, Tarek seemed nonchalant, as if he did not care what happened to him or his shop anymore. I couldn’t help but think that this nonchalance is what many Lebanese misperceive as resilience. This was also noticeable when I asked about his religion. Although he readily answered the question, he also asked:

**“But what does it matter? اللبناني / No matter what a Lebanese is, they are not comfortable.”**

As the nonchalance stuck with me, it was only appropriate to interview Tarek to know more about his experience as an employer in Ras Beirut. I met with him again at the shop on a relatively cool September afternoon. He did not have much time to spare so we started quickly. First, I asked him to talk about the reality of business owners in the area. He shook his head and said:





## “شو بدويحي الواحد” / What can I say!”

Then he went on to explain that even before the crises, sales were not that great and with all the crises taking place now, the situation had become devastating. Now, his shop could barely buy any clothes to sell because of the dollar rate and he had to increase the prices considerably. This had led to a great decrease in customers especially since there was huge competition in the area with many shops selling the same products.

When I asked if he thinks every shop is going through this, he said that he does not think so: “Although we do not sell authentic products, we sell first-hand. Other shops sell lower quality products with much lower prices, so they are better off now. I do not think customers today care about the quality as they used to before. Prestige is not as important as it used to be in Lebanon.” On the other hand, he elaborated how other shops that are parts of chains are doing fine because they are sustained by their companies.

Moving forward, I reminded him that four months earlier, when we conducted the original survey, he had told us that he was struggling. I now asked how he was able to sustain the business amidst the ongoing crises. He laughed bitterly and said: “Barely. I do not pay the full rent and thankfully the renter understands the situation. However, it’s the landlord’s right to get his full payment, so if he finds someone who can pay, he might kick me out. Besides, the electricity bills have become very high also and there are hours that pass when there is no light or air conditioning in the shop. Who would come in and choose something to wear if it is hot and there is no light inside?”

He then mentioned that thankfully he has other sources of income from small self-employment jobs he engages in: “بدبر حالي” / I manage myself.” After that, I asked about the kinds of support he thinks businesses need in order to survive and he said:

## “بدنا بلد وليرة مستقرة، مش أكثر” / We only want a stable country and currency, nothing more.”

Speaking to Tarek made me reflect upon a number of questions about Lebanon’s current predicament. The deteriorating situation in Lebanon has affected many livelihoods. With everyone trying to secure a good standard of living, can we blame landlords for

asking for higher rent prices? Simultaneously, how can we not sympathize with tenants who are barely able to secure basic needs, let alone rent? Although different kinds of pressure are experienced by both groups, it is essential to recognize that none of them is to blame. The focus should rather be on the absence of regulation by the state, which ought to be responsible for guaranteeing rights and good standards of living for both. Ras Beirut has recently become a ghost town: no streetlights at night, not as much traffic in touristic areas, and no signs of the luxury that one could previously find there. With no signs of any solutions for the near future, people are left to their own means and supporting relationships to live, or rather, to survive.





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