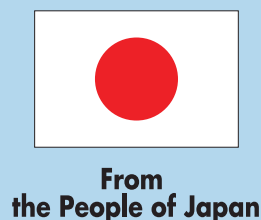




Photo © UN Women

# The Necessity of Childcare Services During Women's Economic Empowerment and Livelihoods Programming in Lebanon

November 2021



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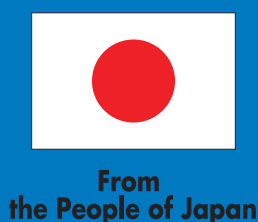
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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>CAS</b>	Central Administration of Statistics of Lebanon
<b>ESCWA</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>INGO</b>	International non-governmental organization
<b>LBP</b>	Lebanese pounds
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa
<b>MGF</b>	Mashreq Gender Facility
<b>MoSA</b>	Ministry of Social Affairs
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OJT</b>	On-the-job training
<b>SDCs</b>	Social Development Centres
<b>UN Women</b>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WLFP</b>	Women's labour force participation

# 1. Introduction

Few Syrian refugee and Lebanese women participate in the labour force in Lebanon, often due to critical gender barriers: housework and childcare obligations. This is particularly true for low-income women, who participate in economic activities at lower rates than men and are often unable to afford home help.<sup>1</sup> Inadequate or absent childcare services contribute to women's economic inactivity and serve as barriers that limit women's mobility. Across Lebanon, existing childcare needs outstrip available childcare services. Services that do exist are often too expensive for many.<sup>2</sup> Publicly funded Social Development Centres (SDCs) aim to offer childcare services, but such facilities are often underequipped and understaffed. Combined with the fact that childcare is largely perceived as women's responsibility, the lack of viable childcare options prevents women from entering the paid economy, whether through livelihoods trainings, job placements, cash-for-work initiatives or longer-term employment.

In light of this, UN Women and other actors, including the World Bank<sup>3</sup> and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA),<sup>4</sup> have consistently emphasized the importance of access to quality and affordable childcare as both a key enabler for women to enter and remain in the economy in Lebanon, and as an economy that can be leveraged to create jobs and income. At the operational level, UN Women has been working with SDCs and other livelihoods actors to provide childcare options to women in the labour market while advocating for access to affordable and quality childcare.

To facilitate greater access to the labour market for women, this study contributes to efforts to increase the number of women benefiting from labour market initiatives and livelihoods programming in Lebanon. In recognition that childcare is a key hurdle for many women to participate in livelihoods programmes, this study examines childcare options currently available to families, carers and parents and offers recommendations for the provision of affordable and quality childcare to national and international livelihoods partners in Lebanon. It specifically seeks to improve the understanding of:

1. How childcare is linked to women's ability to meaningfully participate in income-generating opportunities, and the important role of men in childcare;
2. The available types of childcare services for working Lebanese and Syrian mothers in low-income and economically marginalized areas, including livelihoods and economic recovery programming;
3. Access constraints for low-income Lebanese and Syrian refugee women; and,
4. What working Lebanese and Syrian mothers want, need and recommend for childcare services.

This study provides targeted strategic, programmatic and practical recommendations on how livelihoods and socioeconomic recovery programmes can offer childcare to programme participants. It draws attention to the experiences of working mothers with the goal of generating greater awareness of their needs. Finally, it contributes to efforts undertaken by the World Bank and ESCWA to strengthen national multi-stakeholder dialogue around the care economy and childcare.

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1 According to the Labour Force and Household Living Conditions Survey, mostly middle-class women are in the labour force in Lebanon.

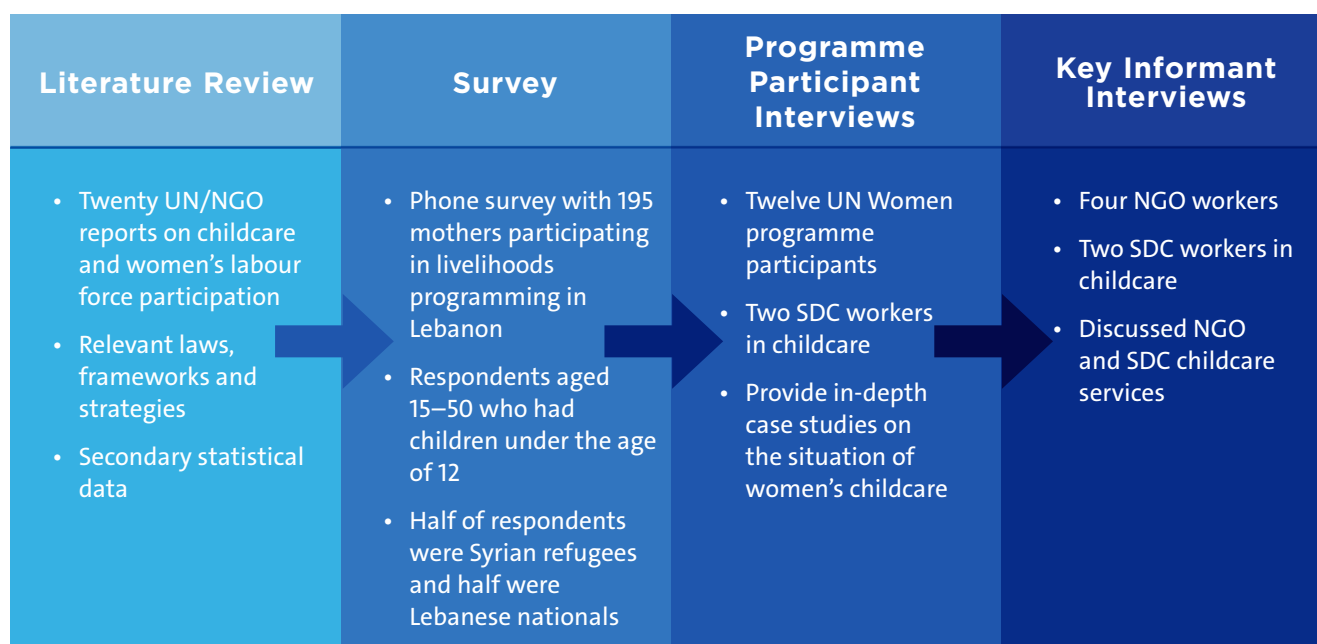
2 Arja and El Awady, forthcoming.

3 UN Women and World Bank 2021.

4 Arja and El Awady, forthcoming.

## 2. Method

This study used a mixed-method approach, summarized as follows:



Governorate	Lebanese	Syrian	Total
Akkar	8%	12%	10%
Beirut	13%	14%	13%
Bekaa	11%	13%	12%
Nabatieh	1%	0%	1%
Mount Lebanon	15%	5%	9%
North	51%	56%	54%
South	1%	0%	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Due to resource limitations and the large number of actors involved in this field, this study was unable to assess the extent to which livelihoods actors have successfully incorporated childcare offerings into their programmes, a main limitation of this study. Findings are therefore reflective of the organizations that chose to be involved in the study.

### 3. Background: Women's Labour Force Participation and Childcare

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women's labour force participation (WLFP) is low and paid childcare options are rarely utilized.

This is for reasons related to costs and family finances, gendered social norms and a lack of available childcare services. Lebanon has a slightly higher WLFP rate compared to the regional average, but it remains at half the global average.<sup>5</sup> Region-wide, significant contributors to low WLFP are marriage and children. In Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, getting married and having children is consistently associated with a lower probability of participating in the labour market.<sup>6</sup> In addition, research has shown that most Iraqis, Jordanians and Lebanese agree that paid childcare has the potential to negatively impact children.<sup>7</sup> In all countries hosting Syrian refugees, public childcare options remain limited and largely unaffordable, especially for refugee women.

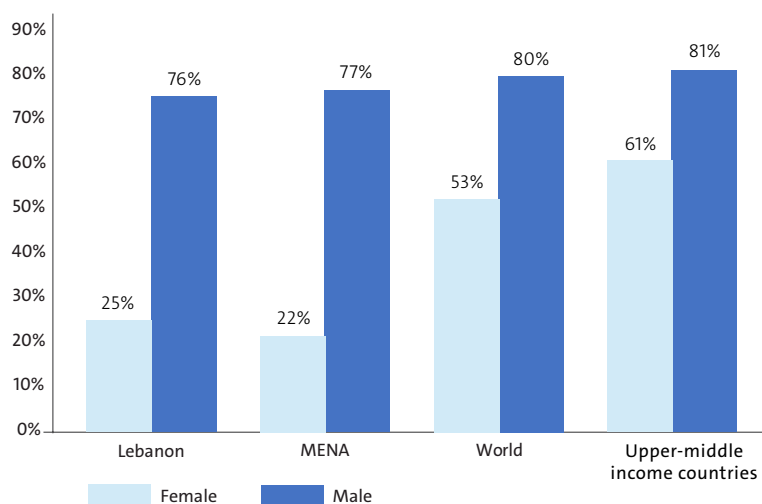
Despite women's low levels of participating in paid labour across the region, women's unpaid labour is extremely high in the Arab States.

The Arab States have the highest gender gap for unpaid care work anywhere in the world, where women perform 4.7 times more unpaid care work than men.<sup>8</sup> Women who do work are overrepresented in care-related jobs. While fewer than a quarter (22 per cent) of women in the region are in the paid labour force, more than half (53 per cent) of employed women work in care-related jobs, also the highest of any other region worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

As in the rest of the MENA region, the gender gap in labour force participation in Lebanon is stark. As of 2019, the WLFP rate was 29 per cent, while the rate of men's participation

Figure 1:

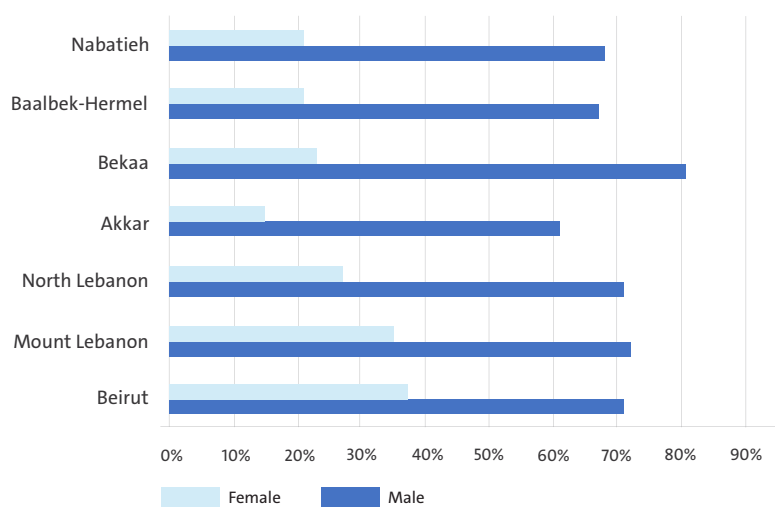
Women's labour force participation rate (15-64) in Lebanon compared with the world



Source: UN Women and World Bank 2021.

Figure 2:

Women's and Men's Labour Force Participation Rate by Governorate



Source: Labour Force and Household Living Conditions Survey 2018-2019

<sup>5</sup> UN Women and World Bank 2021.

<sup>6</sup> World Bank 2020b.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> UN Women 2020.

<sup>9</sup> ILO 2018; UN Women 2020.

was three times higher at 76 per cent.<sup>10</sup> For Syrians, labour force participation is even lower, at 12 per cent for women compared with 65 per cent for men.<sup>11</sup>

For both Lebanese and Syrian women, low WLFP is particularly prevalent in areas outside Beirut as well as for women with lower levels of education. The WLFP rate is as low as 15 per cent in Akkar, 21 per cent in Nabatieh and 23 per cent in Beqaa compared with 37 per cent in Beirut.<sup>12</sup>

**Increasing women's labour force participation in Lebanon is a shared objective across government, academic, civil society and humanitarian and development actors.** In 2019, the Government of Lebanon, through the World Bank Mashreq Gender Facility (MGF) Women's Economic Empowerment Action Plan (WEEAP), set the ambitious goal of increasing the WLFP rate in Lebanon by 5 percentage points in five years, led by the National Commission for Lebanese Women.<sup>13</sup> In turn, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) for the 2017–2021 period sets a target of reaching at least 50 per cent women across all of its economic empowerment interventions.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it encourages all LCRP partners to include access to childcare services for women and men in their programmes.<sup>15</sup>

Although each of these response plans acknowledge the linkages between increasing WLFP and reducing the burden of childcare on women, the extent to which childcare services have been adequately integrated into economic empowerment programmes remains limited. A recent survey conducted by UN Women on behalf of the European Union in Lebanon found that 45 per cent of women who participated in economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes in Lebanon were not working in the two to three years following the completion of their participation; these same women reported overall care responsibilities as the main reason for not working.<sup>16</sup>

**Patriarchal norms around family life and men being largely absent from care work are key factors preventing women from entering the paid economy.** In Lebanon, like in many other places, marriage and children are highly significant determinants of a woman's likelihood to work: being married reduces the likelihood of joining the labour force for women, between the ages of 25 and 34. According to a 2018 study, the rate of working women who were mothers of a child under the age of 3 compared to women who did not have children differed remarkably, by 14 percentage points.<sup>17</sup> A 2021 survey conducted by UN Women on behalf of the European Union found that 31 per cent of survey respondents (all women) had never considered engaging in paid work in their lives: 26 per cent said this was due to childcare responsibilities, 22 per cent said their spouses would not allow it, and 19 per cent pointed to their household upkeep responsibilities.<sup>18</sup> A study from a similar time period by UN Women and the World Bank found that women are more likely than men to be absent from work to care for children or family members. According to the study, women also consider issues such as flexibility, having no young children at home, the availability of a nursery, and encouragement from the spouse's family to a larger extent than men when deciding whether to work.<sup>19</sup>

These findings illustrate the fact that women are expected to assume the majority of unpaid care labour across society. A 2017 study of gender norms and masculinities in Lebanon found that 81 per cent of men and 72 per cent of women agreed that a husband's role in childcare was as a "helper". The same study also found that men remain largely absent from unpaid care labour: while 98 per cent of married women reported that they took on traditional roles such as washing

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<sup>10</sup> CAS and ILO 2019.

<sup>11</sup> The labour force is defined as the sum of employed and unemployed working-age individuals. The labour force participation rate is calculated as the labour force divided by the total population aged 18+.

<sup>12</sup> UN Women and World Bank 2021.

<sup>13</sup> The MGF aims to provide technical assistance to the Mashreq countries of Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon to enhance women's economic opportunities as a catalyst towards more inclusive, sustainable and peaceful societies, where economic growth benefits all.

<sup>14</sup> Government of Lebanon 2021. It should also be noted that according to the OECD, "economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth" (OECD n.d.). While economic empowerment and livelihoods programming address humanitarian needs and target both women and men, women's economic empowerment specifically seeks to increase women's "voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions" (UN Women n.d.) and can also have a development focus.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> European Union and UN Women, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> CAS and ILO 2019.

<sup>18</sup> European Union and UN Women, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Elzir Assy, A. 2018. "Gender Technical Assessment." Unpublished background note produced for the Lebanon Jobs PforR project, cited in UN Women and World Bank 2021.

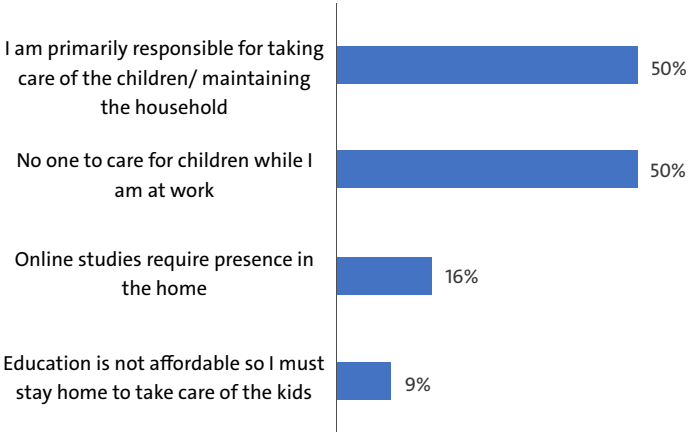
clothes, preparing food and cleaning the home, only 68 per cent of men reported doing the same.<sup>20</sup> Another recent study undertaken by UN Women and the World Bank found that 63 per cent of women and men believed that paid childcare could negatively affect children.<sup>21</sup> The perception that childcare must be undertaken within the family unit, and that men are auxiliary to childcare reinforces gender norms that prevent women from entering the workforce.

**In addition to social concerns around putting children in childcare, quality public or low-cost childcare is scarce.**

Public nurseries are operated by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) and are mainly found in Social Development Centres (SDCs).<sup>22</sup> There are approximately 280 SDCs in Lebanon, 45 of which (16 per cent) include day-care facilities. While these day-care facilities are meant to be accessible to all and target mainly the poor, vulnerable and marginalized communities, they are under resourced and do not always offer the convenience and quality of services that most parents or caretakers need. In addition, their working hours are limited, and many staff reportedly do not have the qualifications needed to care for children.<sup>23</sup> This means that very few women end up using public childcare options, and even fewer Syrian women. The 2021 survey conducted by UN Women on behalf of the European Union with 1,230 Lebanese and Syrian women, found that of the 404 women with children who were currently working or had worked in the past, only 11 per cent had taken their children to a community-based centre, SDC or private childcare centre while they worked.<sup>24</sup>

A 2021 UN Women, UNHCR and ILO study of Syrian women’s access to livelihoods confirms that Syrians especially struggle with childcare: 71 per cent of working Syrian refugee women reported challenges in the availability of childcare (those who report having childcare were married women, and typically it was provided by a family member), and 38 per cent struggled to maintain household needs while working.<sup>25</sup>

**Figure 3:**  
**How did having children factor into your ability to work? (n=1,230)**



Source: European Union and UN Women, 2021.

71%

of Syrian women reported challenges in the availability of childcare

**A Note on Men and Childcare**

This report makes the argument that childcare should be provided to promote greater women’s participation in economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes, thereby contributing to raising women’s labour force participation. The provision of childcare for women programme participants should be seen as a ‘must’; however, UN Women encourages livelihoods actors to provide childcare options not only to women programme participants but also to beneficiaries of all genders. Only offering childcare to women implicitly reinforces the idea that household caretaking is the responsibility of women. When men—and fathers and all male relatives—are offered childcare services in programming, it reduces the care burden on women and opens space whereby they have more opportunities to work. To support women’s access to the workplace, men should be encouraged to do their equal share of household childcare. The provision of childcare options to men beneficiaries is therefore an opportunity for economic empowerment and livelihoods actors to promote greater equality in care labour.

20 Mansour, Deneb and Brant 2017.  
21 UN Women and World Bank 2021.  
22 The MoSA has a care mandate over vulnerable, poor and marginalized groups and undertakes contractual agreements with NGOs for the provision of childcare. SDCs have been a feature of local-level service delivery in Lebanon since the late 1960s and constitute the most important local-level executive arm of the MoSA.  
23 Arja and El Awady, forthcoming.  
24 European Union and UN Women, 2021.  
25 UN Women, UNHCR and ILO 2021.

## 4. Findings

This section sets out the findings of the survey and qualitative interviews undertaken with UN Women programme participants, as well as NGO and SDC representatives. It is organized under eight main points targeted towards actors looking to meaningfully include women and men with children in economic empowerment programmes.

**1. Few women used any form of childcare service, especially women with disabled children.** Corroborating previous findings that Lebanese and Syrian women rarely use childcare services, this study found that only 13 per cent of study participants used any form of childcare service as their primary source of childcare. Only 6 per cent of respondents specifically said that they took their children to SDCs. Only one respondent was paying for private childcare services at the cost of LBP 10,000–25,000 per child,<sup>26</sup> while the rest said that they did not pay for any services received. The reasons for the low use of childcare included social norms, affordability and not trusting day-care services. For Syrian refugee women, it is likely that additional barriers include their lack of documentation and the fear of using public services, as only 18 per cent of Syrian refugee women have legal residency in Lebanon.<sup>27</sup>

Another reason few women used SDCs could be that many SDCs do not offer childcare services, and when they do, they have limitations in staff capacities, a centralized management system, space, hours, quality and the number of children that can be enrolled. Particularly in the context of Lebanon's economic crisis, SDCs are largely reliant on funding from the United Nations and NGOs, which creates dependency on project cycle funding and can translate into inconsistent service availability. One SDC manager interviewed as part of this exercise noted, *“We wouldn't be able to run without the support of NGOs.”*

It should also be noted that mothers of children with disabilities are likely to face extra burdens securing care for their children. For example, one programme participant respondent discussed the difficulties around providing childcare for her daughter with a disability: “I have a sick daughter, and she cannot walk properly. My daughter has undergone several surgeries. ... I knew that there was a service, but I decided to leave my daughter with her older brother to take care of her while she stays home, as it is hard for her to move and she has problems with mobility. *But I wish there was some kind of training for people like my daughter, especially because she has a disability.*” This mother was facing unique challenges in securing childcare for her disabled daughter, and this is likely the case for many others in her situation.

**2. Women in Lebanon, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, rely to a large extent on other women relatives for childcare.** In the absence of consistent, affordable and trustworthy childcare services, family networks, particularly women within these networks, tended to assume responsibility for childcare when women were at work. More than half (54 per cent) of survey participants of both nationalities said that their primary mode of childcare while they worked or participated in livelihoods programming was with female friends and family. An additional 26 per cent said that their children were in school while they worked (likely meaning that they would need to work shortened hours or part-time), with Lebanese women (35 per cent) almost twice as likely as Syrian women (19 per cent) to have their children in school.<sup>28</sup> This is likely because only 67 per cent of Syrian children of primary and secondary school age are in school. Close to 10 per cent of respondents said that their children were left by themselves, with Syrian women (14 per cent) more commonly reporting this was the case than Lebanese (5 per cent). When children were looked after by other relatives, 95 per cent of the time the caretaker was a woman.

Although most respondents said leaving their children with family members was a suitable option, some raised concerns over this arrangement. The majority (81 per cent) of respondents who left their children with family or friends said that they were fine with this arrangement, although problems with these arrangements were raised, with no difference between Lebanese and Syrian respondents. One programme participant interviewee mentioned how she did not feel that her parents were the best people to care for her child: “[My child's] grandmother and grandfather have disabilities and difficulties with moving freely and suffer from chronic illness, which made my daughter live in a situation full of conversations about illness and diseases. My daughter does not even act like a child—she acts like an old woman.”

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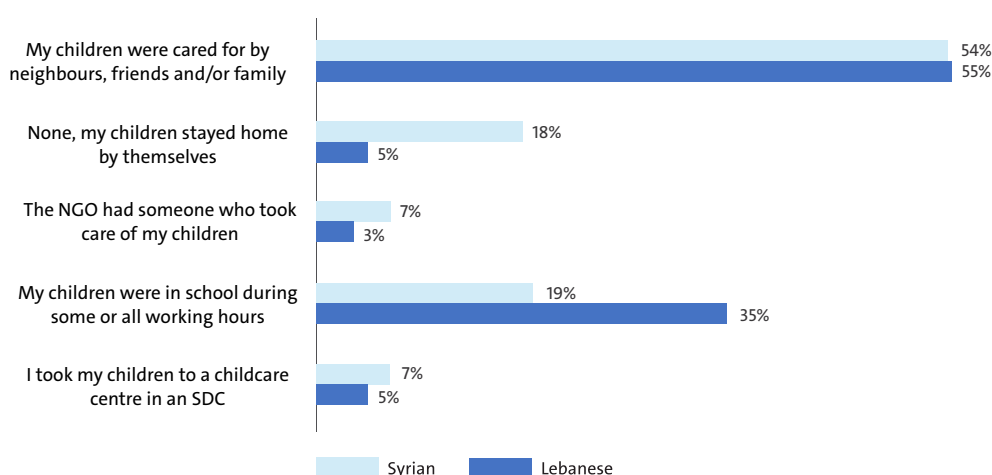
<sup>26</sup> The rate was reported in March 2021.

<sup>27</sup> UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Figure 4:

#### What Was Your Primary Means of Childcare While You Worked?



### 3. When women are working and do not have proper childcare options or support from their husbands, there is potential for protection issues to arise.

Concerningly, 1 in 5 (18 per cent) Syrian respondents and 1 in 20 (5 per cent) Lebanese respondents said that they had left their children under the age of 12 alone. Eight survey respondents mentioned having faced issues leaving their children alone, with 4 out of 8 reporting that their children were unable to take care of themselves. Three expressed psychological issues and stress due to leaving their children alone by themselves. One Syrian woman mentioned she was concerned that her child was “not fully safe with siblings,” and another mentioned an issue of “physical assault” happening while her children were alone. A Syrian programme participant said, *“If I have the choice to put my son in a day care, then I will not leave him with his siblings at home.”* Another programme participant relayed how concern over her children at home was a distraction for her during the programme: “I was not informed that [childcare] services existed, so at the training, my colleagues and I used to talk about how we are leaving the kids and where we are leaving them and how we rush home to go check rapidly on the kids and see if they are safe. We were thinking of the kids during the whole time of the training.” Aside from putting children at risk, leaving children at home alone can be highly stressful for their mothers.

One key informant who worked for an NGO noted how such protection risks were a key reason why her NGO had started implementing childcare services: “We did an assessment to better understand the reasons behind [why participants dropped out] and the risks based on ‘do no harm’ and conflict sensitivity. We realized some parents were taking their children to the neighbours or leaving them alone at home, sometimes leaving them with their oldest son or daughter, or [prospective participants] don’t join at all because they would always have to depend on whether parents or neighbours were available. *“We realized there were negative coping mechanisms [where participants] were leaving children and locking them at home. ... If your children are locked at home, that is a risk to the children.”*”

Another key informant said, “If you don’t offer [childcare], there might be a possibility that the kids are exposed to abuse, so we organized activities for children to prevent this.” Failing to offer childcare services, or to at least inquire about childcare for the participants of economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes, has the potential to subject children to harmful situations.

**1 in 5**  
Syrian women  
reported  
leaving their  
children  
alone

**4. Many women are interested in using childcare services and believe that there are better alternatives to leaving their children at home with relatives or alone.**

When well-designed childcare services were available for economic empowerment programmes, women reflected well on using the services on offer and said that such services facilitated their participation in the labour market. Of the 195 childcare survey respondents, 57 per cent said that they would prefer to use a formal service for childcare, while 31 per cent thought it was better to depend on family. The remaining respondents said that they would be interested in a combination of the two options. Syrian respondents (63 per cent) were more likely to opt for a formal method of childcare than their Lebanese counterparts (52 per cent). Notably, all programme participant interviewees who used the services on offer from an NGO reflected well on the experience, and those who did not have access to these services said that if they had been available, they would have used them. One programme participant interviewee said, “For me, it is much better to have my daughter in a free childcare service than leaving the child with her ill grandparents.” Another noted: “I did not have a choice other than to leave my child with his siblings. ... I did not know about the service. I would not have left my youngest son with his siblings. *If I knew that there was a free childcare service, I would have put him in the childcare facility instead.*” A third programme participant interviewee recounted: “One time we had a training in Taanayel, and I had to leave my son with my mother-in-law. But I would prefer a childcare service in that location so that my son would be near me.” A key informant who works for an NGO said: “[Participants] love it; we received very positive feedback. Even visitors and donors who came to listen [reflected positively]. They appreciate the service very much ... in terms of the well-being of participants and children.” When services are available and made known, women participants are eager to take advantage of them.

**57%** of women surveyed would prefer formal childcare services over

**31%** of women who prefer depending on family

**5. Participants welcome childcare services that are conveniently located, affordable (or free), include learning curricula, and take place in positive, nourishing environments, staffed by qualified personnel.** Programme participant interviewees from all backgrounds said that their children had benefited from going to a childcare centre and were pleased that the services provided were free and close to their homes. Programme participants noted that affordability and accessibility were of high importance. One remarked, “What is important is [that services are] of good price, are safe, are near the house, with all necessary services for kids to be safe at the childcare.” Another said, “If the childcare is cheap, good and affordable, I would put my kid [there], but if the childcare is for LBP 300,000 and I will pay more on taxis for commuting, then there is no way.” A third noted, “If I pay for the childcare and I pay for the taxi and I pay for breakfast or buying coffee or a sandwich, then my salary will not cover my spending, and I will be paying more than the money I make.” Affordability is clearly a key concern for many participants.

The presence of qualified staff was another point of consideration. Programme participants said that they had trusted the people taking care of their children and that this was an important factor. A programme participant interviewee reflected: “The workers at the childcare facility treated my son as their own, so I was really relaxed when I left my son with them. My son became attached to the workers in the childcare facility and missed them and asked to go to them.” She went on to say, “Childcare services are the best option [compared to leaving kids at home] as they do not just take care of the kids but also teach them about colours, shapes and numbers.” Another noted: “The most important is being clean, then it is about good care. Safety is important. And the experience of the workers at the childcare.” A third remarked, “Everything is important, but more important is the devotion of the workers at the childcare facility.”

In addition, childcare services offer opportunities to work with children and mothers on other important subjects. For example, one NGO worker noted that her NGO had designed childcare services to include messaging on preventing violence and maintaining personal hygiene. Two NGO workers mentioned that their NGOs had provided psychosocial support to the children attending the centre who needed it. One observed how this was beneficial to the children: “Children didn’t have basic skills in the beginning, but in the end, they were playing with one another and talking.” Childcare services have the potential to provide great benefit to both mothers and children, especially when they meet quality standards, contribute to children’s education and adopt holistic approaches.

6. While the availability of high-quality and affordable childcare can expand women's access to livelihoods programmes, patriarchal social norms will continue to create barriers for many women's participation in the labour market. Only 21 per cent of survey respondents reported that their husbands helped take care of the children while they participated in the programme. In addition, around 1 in 5 women surveyed said that their husbands had some objection to their children being taken care of while they participated in the programme. The main objection raised was that they should not be leaving their children because they were mothers. Comparatively, Lebanese respondents were less likely to report objections from their husbands (17 per cent) than Syrian respondents (21 per cent). One NGO worker also noted that “many of [the women participants] said their husbands were not working and that's why they accepted that the women would participate,” suggesting that women's participation can be seen as useful only when their husbands have no work, rather than an end in itself.

# 1 in 5

said that their husbands had some objection to their children being taken care of while they participated in the programme

7. Childcare services are often bypassed when deemed too complicated, or when women are offered work from home.

Offering childcare can be complicated for on-the-job training (OJT) and job placements because participants typically need to be present at a variety of job locations, rather than attending training in a centre. If an NGO offers childcare at a location that is separate from where participants need to attend activities, this means that participants would need to arrange for transportation, which would likely be a barrier. One NGO said that it did not offer childcare for OJT programme participants because “it would be challenging for women to reach the centre, drop off their children and go back. Because of this, we don't have women asking to keep their children [at the centre]. ... They wouldn't want to pay for additional transportation to drop off their kids.” Another NGO worker noted how her NGO had offered childcare for OJT participants but that there were few women who took up the offer because it was too far from their home. Different types of economic empowerment programmes need to consider childcare, not only those where participants attend activities at an NGO-supported site.

Particularly in the context of COVID-19, home-based targeting for women's economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes has become more common. While this is often a good option for working mothers, working from home does not mean that there is no need for childcare. An NGO respondent noted that programmes enabling women to work from home typically do not account for childcare needs, thereby creating a ‘double burden’ for women – paid work and domestic work. One Lebanese programme participant interviewee said, “I prefer working online or having a [virtual] sewing training to be able to work at home and have my daughter near me, but if a free childcare service is available, then that would be even better for me.”



Photo: UN Women-supported childcare centre at an NGO site (May 2020)

#### 8. For women to remain in the economy in the longer-term, sustainable childcare options must be available to them.

Without plans in place to alleviate care burdens in the long term, women will continue struggling to permanently join the workforce. Of the survey respondents, 42 per cent said that the availability of affordable and accessible childcare was an important factor in their decision to work, while another 35 per cent said that it was a very important factor, with no difference between Lebanese and Syrian respondents. Two programme participant interviewees remarked on the need for sustainability, with one saying, “[Childcare] should stay a permanent service [that is] available not only when there are trainings.” Another observed how childcare presents income-generating opportunities for women in itself: “If there are childcare trainings for women to learn how to take care of kids, then later they will have a better chance of finding a job in childcare, taking care of kids of mothers who work.” NGO workers also noted how many women would not have joined the programmes they implemented if not for the fact that childcare was on offer. One key informant who works for an NGO said, *“Once we started providing childcare services, we realized how many mothers would not have joined if not for the childcare.”* Another noted, “[Childcare] is very important because otherwise, [women participants] can’t attend the session.” Without sustainable childcare options, women get held back from joining trainings, internships and placements in the first place, as well as from potential future employment.

### Impact of COVID-19 on Access to Childcare

COVID-19 deeply impacted the abilities of livelihoods actors to run livelihoods programmes in general, much less offer childcare. It also significantly increased childcare responsibilities for women in light of national school closures, as well as other unpaid household and care work. Most NGO respondents said livelihoods programmes either paused or were conducted online during the first months of COVID-19. Some livelihoods programmes that have started offering in-person services again are taking precautions such as limiting the number of children, mandating that facilitators wear masks and implementing strict cleaning schedules, but some participants have remained uncertain about putting their children in care considering how difficult it is to enforce social distancing with children. One Syrian woman said, “[COVID-19] was the main reason why people are afraid to leave their kids at day care; my mother insists on leaving the children with her as it’s safer at home, and I believe she is right.” Another said, “If the kids go to a childcare [facility], then they will catch a fever or virus,” and a third said, “Nowadays [given the COVID-19 situation], it is better for the kids to stay home and I will take care of them.” COVID-19 will likely remain a concern for mothers for the short term, and perhaps for years to come, meaning livelihoods programmes will need to maintain policies to ensure that women and their families feel safe with their children in childcare.

## 5. Recommendations

Organizations implementing women's economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes across the humanitarian and development nexus must integrate the provision of childcare services into their programming in order to successfully target women. Moreover, childcare must be invested in on the long-term investment, beyond just the duration of a skills building or employment programme. Recommendations discuss the two childcare modalities most commonly used, on-site childcare services and conditional cash grants, provide the pros and cons for each, and then set out how best to implement them.

### Invest in the provision of childcare services at NGO-supported sites or at SDCs

<b>Pros</b>	Very high satisfaction levels and comfort among participants who access this service
	Children are provided with educational opportunities, social time, and food
	Can be coordinated with other education and/or PSS programming
	Provides an income-generating opportunity for additional community members (who can work in the center as facilitators, developing educational materials, drivers etc)
<b>Cons</b>	In situations where the program activities and childcare service are in different locations, it can be difficult and expensive for beneficiaries to transport their children to the childcare site.
	Challenges in implementing social distancing with children means it is a less COVID-19 compatible option
	Resource intensive and not a non-permanent solution

**1. Integrate childcare services as a part of all economic empowerment programme design, including budgets. For NGOs providing programming and services through SDCs, ensure that the below requirements are met in existing spaces or in new childcare spaces. Programmes should include provisions for the following:**

- **Staff:** There is a need to hire (or train existing) qualified childcare service providers who ideally have experience working with children and/or in the field of education. In addition, projects benefit from person(s) who can develop curricula and/or work in the centre in managerial roles. Appropriate ratios of facilitators to children and the ages of the children should be considered during hiring, as infants and very young children require more personnel.
- **Space:** The space must be safe, clean and large enough to accommodate the number of children who will be cared for while their mothers participate in the programme. COVID-19 limitations on the number of children per room should be considered. Additional consideration should be given to whether such spaces are accessible to children with physical disabilities.
- **Supplies:** Child-friendly spaces require a variety of equipment. Items listed by one NGO respondent providing childcare services included: carpets or mats for the floor, small tables and chairs, stationery, painting supplies, posters, books and activity kits. If services are available for very young or older children, appropriate supplies should be provided.

- **Food and refreshments:** Respondents highlighted that some childcare essentials were overlooked, like providing meals to the children. An NGO childcare service provider mentioned that her organization procured fruit, bread, labneh, cornflakes and milk to serve to the children and that at some of the centres, hot meals were even prepared. This provider also noted the importance of asking about children's food allergies or needs at the beginning.

#### *Additional considerations:*

- **Intake process:** Assessing the number, age ranges, schedules and specific needs of the children at the beginning of the process will inform the exact parameters of the service. Ensuring that a sufficient intake process is in place will lead to smoother implementation.
- **Different age ranges of the children:** Supplies, staff qualifications and educational materials will vary based on the age ranges of the children who will be using the centre.
- **Ratio of children to facilitators:** Younger children will likely need a larger number of facilitators. One NGO provider mentioned assigning one facilitator per infant.
- **Coordination with other projects:** A number of NGO respondents noted the significant potential for childcare programmes to be coordinated and integrated with other programmes, namely child protection, awareness-raising, education and psychosocial support. In addition, the programme could serve the dual purpose of becoming an income-generating scheme for participants who could work as facilitators or managers.
- **Infants and children with specific needs:** Infants and/or very young children require more attention—possibly one facilitator per child. If the programme plans to offer services to women with young children, larger numbers of facilitators will be required. In addition, childcare services should endeavor to make the service accessible to women with children with physical and mental disabilities, including by having specialized staff who can supervise and work with these children. The number and nature of children with special needs should be assessed at the beginning and action taken to facilitate their access.
- **COVID-19 precautions:** Implementing social distancing with children is very challenging, but other precautions such as rigorous cleaning schedules, ensuring facilitators wear masks and limiting the number of children present in a given space are ways of mitigating the spread of COVID-19.

**2. Develop (or implement existing) learning curricula for children who are at the childcare facility.** One of the main added values highlighted by women who took their children to on-site childcare centres while they participated in livelihoods programmes was the education opportunities it afforded the children. Early childhood education curricula should be consulted and tailored to the time period, age ranges and learning abilities of the children and consistently followed.

**3. Ensure that the availability of childcare is included as part of programme outreach activities during women's enrolment.** The availability of childcare services could be a 'make or break' factor for women when deciding to participate in a given activity. At least one interviewee working for a large NGO mentioned that this is an important consideration: "If we are receiving referrals from other agencies, we inform the agency to inform these mothers and fathers that this service is available. ... We spread this [information] in any induction: phone, face to face, through other agencies. The [programme participants] tell one another too, since they know that this is a main factor for many who join, [so] they emphasize this aspect." Knowing whether childcare is available from the beginning is therefore a critical factor in attracting women participants.

**4. Ensure that a referral system for out-of-school children, cases of child abuse and responses to sexual and gender-based violence against the mothers is in place.** NGO service providers noted the importance of ensuring that appropriate referral pathways are in place for issues that may arise during livelihoods programmes and childcare services, particularly for mothers with children who are out of school and for mothers and children being subjected to violence at home.

**5. Provide transportation stipends, especially for participants in on-the-job training, cash-for-work initiatives and job placements.**

NGO providers and programme participants who participated in programmes that entailed going ‘off-site’ mentioned how the logistics of dropping children off and picking them up could be expensive and time-consuming. Including stipends for women to access the type of childcare they need is an important way of mitigating these costs and encouraging women to use formal services.

**6. Include counselling services at the end of women’s participation in the programme to strategize individual childcare plans for longer-term workforce engagement.**

Considering the persisting low WLP rate and the proportion of women who do not end up joining the workforce following engagement in livelihoods programmes, providing guidance on how to secure longer-term and consistent childcare situations could be an important entry point to more sustainable employment options for women.

**Strengthen and support the sustainability of childcare services at SDCs with the Ministry of Social Affairs**

In Lebanon, women’s economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes are often provided in SDCs, along with cross-sectoral programming, and should be complemented by childcare service provision as a best practice. Working with SDCs is an important modality, as they support the longer-term objective of developing sustainable and quality childcare services across Lebanon to populations most in need. Therefore, the following actions should be considered:

- Capacitate SDCs to include childcare facilities, as most do not currently have spaces that can be used to provide childcare services. This could be done by rehabilitating existing rooms in the centres or by constructing new ones.
- Prior to beginning programme activities, identify existing staff who could work in the childcare centre and provide them with any necessary capacity-building.
- Prior to implementing activities, evaluate the SDC to ensure that it is equipped with the necessary supplies needed to run the centres, listed above.
- Work with the MoSA to monitor compliance with guidelines from the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education regarding the quality of the childcare provided.
- Look for opportunities to coordinate SDC capacity development with other economic empowerment programme providers, as multiple actors could be interested in working in the same centre. Such coordinated efforts have the potential to provide comprehensive capacity-building and contribute to sustainable change.

**Provide cash grants or childcare vouchers to participants in the programme**

<b>Pros</b>	Provides participants with greater flexibility and control over the exact type of childcare they want
	Offers home-based or community-based options that are more COVID-19-friendly
	Could possibly be easier for programmes where women work ‘off-site’ (and not in an NGO-affiliated space) due to transportation and time management issues
	Is simpler to implement
<b>Cons</b>	Poses challenges with monitoring whether cash grants in fact go towards the intended purpose, and assumes that participants will prioritize securing childcare over other potentially more pressing needs, such as food or households’ basic needs
	Makes it more challenging to monitor the quality and safety of childcare
	Unsustainable in the medium and long-term

Providing stipends was not as common among the NGO providers that participated in this study. For the two organizations that mentioned providing cash grants for childcare, the following was suggested:

**1. Clearly outline the purpose and parameters of the cash grant in the beginning stages of the project as intended to be used for childcare.** One of the organizations had included a stipend for a vocational training course that was meant to cover all extra expenses, but this had not been explained to the participants; they therefore did not understand that it was also meant to cover childcare.

**2. Ask women what their childcare plan is prior to providing the grants or voucher.** Accompanying the cash grant with a short meeting to understand who will receive the money, how the grant would be spent and/or whether the participant would in fact be able to access and feel comfortable using a voucher-supported site is one way of possibly monitoring how the assistance will look.

**3. Ensure that proper protection mechanisms and referral pathways are in place.** As with any cash assistance programme targeting women, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, providing cash grants has the potential to lead to protection issues, such as family members attempting to control the money.

**4. Have cash grants as a backup for women who are unable to bring their children to on-site locations.** Flexible programmes that are able to combine a number of options are often able to reach higher numbers and more varied profiles of women.

Other options: Cash grants and on-site programmes should not be considered the only options when it comes to childcare. For example, smaller NGOs in Beirut have explored community-based solutions like setting up rotating shifts of women who live in existing networks and alternate taking care of one another's children and working. More information is needed to understand what alternative childcare systems have been established in the past and to learn from these experiences.

## Recommendations to Donors

**1. Require that NGOs applying for livelihoods funding work have plans in place to address childcare needs.**

The main reason provided by INGOs/NGOs for not providing childcare services for livelihoods programme participants was that such services were simply not included in the project proposal or budget. Donors can therefore play an important role in improving women's access to livelihoods services by requiring that childcare services be included as part of the programmes they fund.

**2. Provide funding to target men for greater involvement in care work.** Men's lack of participation in care work is a major reason for low WLFP and is a main reason why women need these services in the first place. One NGO respondent noted how the organization received "no requests from men livelihoods programme participants [for childcare services] because I guess the wife was at home with the children." Easing the pressure on women as the sole caregivers to children would therefore address an important root cause of low WLFP and promote more equality in the home.

**3. Work with relevant government agencies and humanitarian and development actors to enhance the capacities of SDCs in early childhood development.** Enhancing institutional capacity to provide childcare for low-income women is an important long-term strategic objective. This is currently being explored in depth by the World Bank; therefore, it is suggested that donors looking to become more involved in this field coordinate efforts with those of the Mashreq Gender Facility.

**4. Fund quality, long-term programmes that include childcare services in areas outside of Beirut where WLFP is particularly low.**

There is a need to address women's lack of economic participation and childcare access in more rural areas and/or smaller cities outside of Beirut. Consider funding longer-term childcare programmes as stand-alone income-generating schemes in underserved areas. Establishing longer-term community-based solutions could be one way of providing jobs for women while simultaneously facilitating greater economic involvement for others.

**5. Consider funding a pilot project on strengthening community-based childcare.**

Since many women feel comfortable leaving their children in the care of relatives, neighbours and friends, ways of involving immediate networks in childcare services could be a good option. New and creative ways of approaching this issue should be explored. For example, this could be done by training caretaker family members on basic childcare skills such as first aid, safety and education, or by providing training and funding for women who are interested in creating or enhancing existing childcare networks in their communities.

**6. Consider providing funding to develop a resource centre and/or community of practice around the provision of childcare services for livelihoods projects.**

This could be structured as a repository of documentation for projects that successfully included childcare services, anonymized monitoring and evaluation results, Terms of References for childcare centre workers, educational curricula, project evaluations, lists of items to include in a childcare centre, and so on. There is likely a significant amount to be learned from programmes specifically focused on education and child protection that can be leveraged to inform how effective childcare services can be run. This can also be an opportunity to gather information on alternative childcare options and to learn from programmes that successfully incorporated creative and/or community-based solutions.

# End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to the Labour Force and Household Living Conditions Survey, mostly middle-class women are in the labour force in Lebanon.
- <sup>2</sup> Arja and El Awady, forthcoming.
- <sup>3</sup> UN Women and World Bank 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> Arja and El Awady, forthcoming.
- <sup>5</sup> UN Women and World Bank 2021.
- <sup>6</sup> World Bank 2020b.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> UN Women 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> ILO 2018; UN Women 2020.
- <sup>10</sup> CAS and ILO 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> The labour force is defined as the sum of employed and unemployed working-age individuals. The labour force participation rate is calculated as the labour force divided by the total population aged 18+.
- <sup>12</sup> UN Women and World Bank 2021.
- <sup>13</sup> The MGF aims to provide technical assistance to the Mashreq countries of Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon to enhance women's economic opportunities as a catalyst towards more inclusive, sustainable and peaceful societies, where economic growth benefits all.
- <sup>14</sup> Government of Lebanon 2021. It should also be noted that according to the OECD, "economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth" (OECD n.d.). While economic empowerment and livelihoods programming address humanitarian needs and target both women and men, women's economic empowerment specifically seeks to increase women's "voice, agency and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions" (UN Women n.d.) and can also have a development focus.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> European Union and UN Women, 2021.
- <sup>17</sup> CAS and ILO 2019.
- <sup>18</sup> European Union and UN Women, 2021.
- <sup>19</sup> Elzir Assy, A. 2018. "Gender Technical Assessment." Unpublished background note produced for the Lebanon Jobs PforR project, cited in UN Women and World Bank 2021.
- <sup>20</sup> Mansour, Deneb and Brant 2017.
- <sup>21</sup> UN Women and World Bank 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> The MoSA has a care mandate over vulnerable, poor and marginalized groups and undertakes contractual agreements with NGOs for the provision of childcare. SDCs have been a feature of local-level service delivery in Lebanon since the late 1960s and constitute the most important local-level executive arm of the MoSA.
- <sup>23</sup> Arja and El Awady, forthcoming.
- <sup>24</sup> European Union and UN Women, 2021.
- <sup>25</sup> UN Women, UNHCR and ILO 2021.
- <sup>26</sup> The rate was reported in March 2021.
- <sup>27</sup> UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2020.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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