

# The Unsung Heroes and Heroines of Lebanon's Healthcare System

The Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) is launching a series of four mini policy briefs based on interviews with experts in the fields of health, psychology, education, and economics in order to address the major repercussions of the economic and public health crises dominating Lebanon. The insights revealed in these concise briefs serve as a potential precursor to prompt action in support of Lebanon's healthy recovery.

This is the first policy brief of the series, that tackles the ramifications borne by Lebanon's nursing sector amid the twin crisis. The brief is based on an interview conducted with Dr. Myrna Abi Abdallah-Doumit, Associate Professor at LAU and President of the Order of Nurses\* in Lebanon\*\*.

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\*The Order of Nurses in Lebanon was created based on Article 28 of Law number 479 dated 12/12/2002. The Order is composed of a Council headed by Dr. Myrna Abi Abdallah-Doumit; a Disciplinary Council; a Pension Committee; a Continuing Education Board; a Management Committee; a Committee of Social and Public Relations and the Media; a Scientific Committee; and a Financial Committee. <http://www.orderofnurses.org.lb/>

\*\*The opinions expressed in this brief are those of the interviewee solely and do not reflect the position of the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU).

On May 24, 2019 and during the 72nd World Health Assembly in Geneva, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that 2020 would be the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife. This unprecedented commitment seeks to extol the sacrifices and contributions of nurses and midwives over time, and to address the shortage in the sector's workforce, in order to attain universal health coverage by 2030<sup>1</sup> – an estimated 9 million more nurses and midwives are crucial to achieve this goal.<sup>2</sup> As if to further corroborate WHO's declaration, the global pandemic COVID-19 put health teams, in particular nurses, on the frontlines of hospitals flooded with highly contagious patients, thus risking the mental and physical health of the same nurses that governments have pledged to commemorate in 2020 and accentuating the inimitable responsibility that these heroes and heroines shoulder.

Globally, nursing is a highly gendered profession whereby around 90% of the nursing personnel are females.<sup>3</sup> However, men occupy most leadership positions in the sector. Lebanon conforms to the global trend. Exploring the profile of nurses in Lebanon in 2019, data reveals four major insights.<sup>4</sup> First, the nursing sector predominantly attracts female workers whereby 79.52% of nurses associated with the Order of Nurses are females. Second, the highest proportion of nurses, 23.23%, is aged between 31 and 35 years. Third, 70.95% of nurses are working in Lebanon, with the remainder either not working or retired, working abroad, or unauthorized. Fourth, 84.45% are working in hospitals, as opposed to health centers or clinics, companies, schools or nurseries, nursing institutes, nursing schools, insurance companies, long-stay hospitals, home nursing, or other miscellaneous workplaces.

Lebanon's nursing sector has faced trials and tribulations before the promulgation of the public health crisis brought about by COVID-19. Recently, the country has been battling political and economic deadlock engendered by more than three decades of the same ruling elite, a devaluation of the Lebanese currency that has lost more than 50% of its value, unprecedented inflation, in addition to an economic recession that has forced the closure of many businesses and the lay-off of employees. Thus, citizens resorted to mass protests on the streets on October 17, 2019 to demand political and economic

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1. International Council of Nurses (ICN). (2019). *International council of nurses and nursing now welcome 2020 as international year of the nurse and the midwife*. Retrieved June 1, 2020, from <https://www.icn.ch/news/international-council-nurses-and-nursing-now-welcome-2020-international-year-nurse-and-midwife>

2. World Health Organization (WHO). 2020. *Nursing and midwifery*. Retrieved June 1, 2020, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/nursing-and-midwifery>

3. World Health Organization (WHO). (n.d.). *The global health observatory*. Retrieved June 1, 2020, from <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/health-workforce>

4. Data is based on statistics conducted by the Order of Nurses and retrievable from their website: <http://www.orderofnurses.org.lb/Statistics>

reforms. The nursing sector suffered due to the economic crisis with hospitals reportedly closing units, dismissing a number of nurses, and reducing the salaries of others to half while altering their working hours. Before the October 2019 uprisings, the Order of Nurses called for a salary scale adjustment; however, hospitals did not respond to the plea. The dire conditions in Lebanon and the ensuing financial stresses have moreover provided incentive for the youth across different specializations to seek employment abroad. The nursing sector is no exception as it is also combatting a drain in its workforce. As such, there exists a problem in retention rather than availability of nursing personnel: even though around a thousand nurses graduate annually from Lebanon's universities<sup>5</sup>, a significant number is pursuing and accepting offers outside the country.

On February 21, 2020, Lebanon joined the list of countries plagued with COVID-19 and fell hostage to a twin crisis: an economic crisis further exacerbated by a global public health calamity. Health teams were at the forefront, organizing and managing hospital wards and treating patients, while risking their health and that of their loved ones. Nurses – the majority of whom are females – have to be in constant contact with patients, as telenursing remains an unattained phenomenon. However, doctors can enjoy the privilege of telemedicine in order to minimize contact with infected patients. As such, nurses were in the vanguard of the battle fighting an unfamiliar virus, and hence attesting their vital presence at the heart of the healthcare system.

Prudently, the Order of Nurses succeeded in placing the nursing sector as well as nurses at the national decision-making table, whereby it was represented in the national emergency committee for COVID-19, with the purpose of combatting and containing the virus. Prior to the announcement of the first confirmed COVID-19 case in Lebanon, the Order of Nurses provided nurses with the appropriate training. Moreover, the Order's Council took charge of the Ministry of Public Health's (MoPH) hotline for around a month and a half to cater daily to people's concerns and queries. The Order also took the lead, along with the Lebanese Army, and assessed more than a hundred isolation and quarantine sites spread all over the country. The Order deployed nurses at the airport, as flights to ensure the safe return of Lebanese expats have been scheduled during the pandemic, and is now deploying others at isolation and quarantine centers with the support of WHO's Beirut office.

With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses faced intensified financial and health pressures. In addition to working at reduced salaries, nurses were

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5. Number reported by Dr. Myrna Abi Abdallah-Doumit on April 30, 2020.

forced to take unpaid vacations. Some hospitals resorted to illegal practices, abstaining from paying nurses altogether or compelling them to sign pledges giving up a percentage of their salaries. Moreover, a number of hospitals substituted Lebanese nurses with foreign ones, as they would incur less costs in terms of salary provision. In addition to strenuous financial burdens, nurses face threats pertaining to their health. As COVID-19 is highly transmissible and the means of infection are still not discovered and proven, nurses operating in open units are at a high risk of contagion as every patient is considered a potential COVID-19 patient. In fact, incoming patients infected an estimated thirty nurses working in open units.<sup>6</sup> Units equipped to treat COVID-19 patients put nurses at a minimal risk of infection. However, as safety equipment implies higher expenditures, hospitals are trying to minimize costs. For example, surgical masks can be worn between twenty minutes and three hours; some hospitals nonetheless are providing nurses with new masks every eight hours, jeopardizing their health and increasing their probability to contract the virus.

Unlike many countries that witnessed cases of suicide committed by nurses due to the mounting pressures of working amid a global pandemic, nurses in Lebanon demonstrated – and continue to demonstrate – extraordinary courage and strength in dealing with the status quo. Most Lebanese acquired this resilience as they have witnessed varying catastrophes over time ranging from a 15-year long civil war, to assassinations and explosions, foreign military occupation, sporadic uprisings, political void, and economic turmoil. As such, they have almost never lived at ease but have become accustomed to accommodate to difficult circumstances and endure pressures.

As the country is now in the final phases of resuming normal operation, the risk of experiencing a second wave of infections is heightened despite the relatively good precautionary policies applied by the government. Underscoring prevention measures and awareness of the virus' risks, in addition to soliciting people's wise decisions are important in order to ensure that the infection rate remains under control and that hospitals are not inundated with patients. In addition, hospitals are responsible for providing nurses with all the necessary equipment to operate in open and closed units safely as they are crucial in successfully overcoming this battle. Moreover, in order to maintain the availability of nursing personnel and to retain them as part of the Lebanese labor force, especially in times of emergencies, it is important that universities provide incentives for school graduates to pursue

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6. Number reported by Dr. Myrna Abi Abdallah-Doumit on April 30, 2020.

nursing as a career, such as offering tuition reductions or ensuring internship and employment opportunities during and after graduation.

COVID-19 upheld the essential presence of nurses in hospitals and at the core of the world's healthcare system. Success stories amid the virus are substantially owed to the teams of nurses who courageously fought at the forefront of the battle. As such, they deserve recognition and appreciation for defending the health of the world's population. Lebanese nurses have been struggling to attain their rights – including the right to work in a safe space, the right to obtain competitive salaries, and the right to access healthcare... The Order of Nurses has been adamantly persevering in order to get hold of these rights via strikes and meetings with decision-makers such as ministers and members of parliament, in addition to continuous consultations with nurses at the Order's premises. A first step towards showing nurses gratitude would be for the government, based upon the recommendations of the Order of Nurses, to grant them their full rights. Without them, our healthcare system would not even exist.



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