



## WORKING FROM HOME IN A FAILED STATE: HOW COVID-19 THREATENS LEBANESE WOMEN'S PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS

### *Abstract<sup>1</sup>*

The COVID-19 pandemic became the predominant global reality in late January 2020. When the Lebanese authorities imposed social distancing measures and lockdowns in order to combat the virus and limit its proliferation in March 2020, the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) and the Title IX Office<sup>2</sup> at the Lebanese American University (LAU) conducted an online survey in an attempt to assess how these unprecedented government-imposed measures affected employed women who were obliged to work from home. In-depth interviews with women leaders in various sectors followed in order to gain further insights regarding the pandemic's direct and indirect repercussions on working women. Reflecting on the data collected reveals the increased burden on women as they struggle to balance between paid work consisting of their professional duties and the unpaid work of housework, childcare, as well as care for the elderly and sick.

### *Introduction*

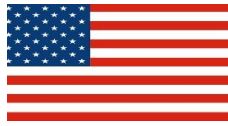
Lebanon's golden decades between the 1940's and the 1970's – before the onset of the 15-year civil war that further entrenched the country's sectarian and political divides – lifted its status to “Switzerland of the Middle East” given the unique democracy it enjoyed among the Arab states, its laissez-faire economy, as well as its developed educational sector and institutions. Moreover, the capital, Beirut, was dubbed “Paris of the Middle East” as it was a touristic hub, attracting internationals from across the globe. However, in 1975, Lebanon was engulfed by a civil war that lasted for a decade and a half, deepening its sectarian roots and paving a path for warlords to preserve their families' grip over power and ensure hereditary politics. The cessation of the war marked the beginning of an era plagued by foreign military occupation, a series of political assassinations and sporadic explosions, governmental deadlock, political turmoil and divides among the ruling elite, and most recently hyperinflation, mass protests, and severe devaluation of the national currency against the dollar. Moreover, the unforeseen magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent repercussions added fuel to Lebanon's fires thus engendering a double calamity: an economic crisis as well as a public health catastrophe. However, it was the tragic explosion in Beirut's port on August 4, 2020 – claiming the lives of over 200 victims, injuring approximately 5,000 others, and leaving nearly 300,000 homeless – that nudged Lebanon further towards collapse.

This combination of factors culminated in the World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor ranking Lebanon's financial and economic crisis in spring 2021 among the top ten – possibly third – most severe crisis the

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<sup>1</sup> This study was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of State. The opinions, findings, and outputs stated below are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Department of State

<sup>2</sup> Title IX is part of American civil rights law. The law protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive US government financial assistance. LAU, as both an American and Lebanese university, is mandated to comply with Title IX.



world has witnessed since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The Lebanese are now hostage to a failed state that cannot provide them with their basic needs including water, electricity, fuel, and medication as well as food items. The ruling regime tramples upon what remains of people's dignity and human rights, obliging them to queue for long hours in front of gas stations, bakeries, and pharmacies to secure the daily needs of their families.

### ***Data Sources: Survey and In-depth Interviews***

The research is based on two primary sources of data: an online survey and in-depth interviews with women leaders employed in various sectors. The Arab Institute for Women (AiW) and Title IX Office at the Lebanese American University (LAU) created and conducted the online survey, "Working from Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic," in April 2020 (See appendix 1 for the full survey). The purpose of the survey was to gather information about how the spring lockdown affected women, principally as it relates to their work. In particular, the survey investigated how the abrupt shift from office-based work to remote work due to the pandemic affected women who occupy paid jobs. The survey was circulated online to the Institute's contacts, as well as on its social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

As the survey was administered online, it has the strengths and weaknesses of a non-randomized sample. Among the respondents, there is not only a bias in terms of who has access to internet and who would access a survey in English, but also who might see the survey and who would take the time to complete it. In total, 274 respondents consented to fill the survey and thus take part in the study.

In order to complement the survey findings and fill the remaining gaps in data that the survey did not unveil regarding women's experience with the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly relating to work, the AiW and Title IX Office conducted a limited number of in-depth interviews with women leaders in various sectors (e.g., politics, higher education, private industry, etc.). These interviews figure prominently in the following discussion.

### ***Strengths and Weaknesses of the Survey***

Online surveys do not allow for representative sampling; as such, the survey is not reflective of the entire population of Lebanon. Rather, the survey data largely echoes the experiences and opinions of educated and employed women in Lebanon who have internet access and who are already familiar with the work that the AiW and Title IX Office conduct.

In addition, respondents reported formatting issues pertaining to two particular questions that required ranking the advantages and disadvantages of working from home, thus rendering the resulting responses unreliable. Analysis thus discarded the ranking and focused on the top advantages and disadvantages reported via the two questions coupled with the remarks that respondents shared at the end of the survey.

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<sup>3</sup> World Bank Lebanon Economic Monitor. (2021). *Lebanon Sinking (To The Top 3)*. Retrieved June 10, 2021, from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394741622469174252/pdf/Lebanon-Economic-Monitor-Lebanon-Sinking-to-the-Top-3.pdf>



The timing of the survey administration was at a critical juncture in Lebanon's history, as the country was facing the unprecedented and unforeseen consequences of the global pandemic, coupled with an economic crisis, the severity of which is still accelerating to date. However, the team ensured that all necessary steps were taken during the creation of the survey, including seeking and receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board<sup>4</sup> at LAU. Under better economic, political, health, and social circumstances, respondents would have had more time to reflect on the questions and the team on technical issues thus generating a better survey and improved results. Nonetheless, given the dearth of data on women and work during the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly in Lebanon, the survey partially fills an important gap. The processes of survey creation and analysis provided the AiW and Title IX Office with the opportunity to learn about the subject matter and to set the foundation for future surveys on issues relating to gender.

### ***Significance of the In-depth Interviews***

Given the survey shortcomings, gaps remained in explaining how the COVID-19 lockdown affected employed women in their professional and personal lives. As such, in-depth interviews were key to better understand how and when remote work could be an opportunity to promote gender equity in the workplace, how the burden of unpaid work affected women during the lockdown, and the specificities of the experiences of women working from home during that period. The team conducted interviews with five women who were experts in their fields. Each interview lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. Questions were shared with the interviewees ahead of the meeting; however, the interviews themselves were otherwise unstructured (See appendix 2 for the interview questions). The insights revealed by the experts bridged the gaps that were unanswered by the survey data and honed in on issues that were particularly important to the respondent and/or the interviewer during the interview itself.

### ***Survey Findings***

Before delving into the interview findings, it is important to lay a more general foundation about how women in Lebanon perceived and experienced work and life during the initial lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic as revealed through the survey data.

Of the 274 participants who partook in the survey, the vast majority of respondents, 87.23 percent (239 respondents), were women. Less than ten percent were men (27 respondents), and 3.92 percent (eight respondents) categorized themselves as gender-fluid or non-binary or preferred not to put a label on their gender. The respondents overwhelmingly (91.24 percent) resided in Lebanon. The data in this article pertains to the female respondents residing in Lebanon only (221 respondents). Seventy percent of the female respondents in Lebanon were between 25 and 44 years old. About 36 percent were 25-34 years old, 34 percent were 35-44 years, almost 6 percent under 24, and 24 percent were over 45.

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<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese American University (LAU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) is responsible for the review and approval of research projects involving human subjects conducted at LAU and the LAU Medical Center – Rizk Hospital (LAUMC-RH) or by its faculty, students and staff at outside locations. For more information, please visit: <https://gsr.lau.edu.lb/irb/>



### *Living Status of Respondents*

When asked about their living arrangements, almost 87 percent of the women who responded to the survey reported sharing living space with either family or others. More than half the respondents (53 percent) reported that their partner or spouse lives with them. Parents and migrant domestic workers lived with 33 percent and 18 percent of the respondents, respectively. Seventeen percent reported residing with their siblings and two percent with a roommate(s) or a flat mate(s). Finally, 49 percent of respondents stated that they currently have children (defined in the survey as people under 18 years of age) in their household.

In addition, for too many families in Lebanon, adequate housing is not readily accessible and lacking in the baseline quality needed for consistently productive remote work. Thus, a challenge faced by individuals working from home is where to work — especially when other household members are also working from home and/or going to school online. When asked about where the respondents work at home, 63 percent reported the living room/salon, 33 percent the bedroom, 29 percent a dedicated office or space, 27 percent the kitchen or dining room, 17 percent the balcony, and 7 percent the garden. Various respondents commented that in order for working from home to be successful, it is crucial to have a dedicated private space in which one can conduct all work-related tasks. Most of the respondents seemingly rotated among various places, trying to find appropriate space in which to operate.

### *Employed women are still not the norm*

Over 85 percent of participants were employed at the time the survey was conducted. This differs markedly from the majority of women in Lebanon, where the rate of female labor force participation was 29 percent in 2019<sup>5</sup> compared with 70 percent for their male counterparts<sup>6</sup>.

When asked to classify their employment status, around three-fourths of the respondents reported being full-time employees (78 percent), followed by 13 percent part-time employees, five percent consultants, and another five percent business owners.<sup>7</sup> Reported salaries ran from less than 1.5 million LBP (less than \$1,000 at the official exchange rate and unofficially less than half that amount when the survey was conducted in March/April 2020) per month through over 10.5 million LBP per month with a plurality earning between 1.5 and almost 3 million LBP per month.

The income reported by the respondents contrasts sharply with women's income in Lebanon as a whole. Looking at gendered differences in income between the public and private sector, 26 percent of employed women have a monthly income that is below \$300 and 61% below \$500. Even though there is no difference in earnings between employed men and women in the public sector, men in the private sector have significantly higher wages as compared to women. This poses a challenge as 86% of all workers are in the private sector.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, comparing women's incomes across different education levels, 49% of those who have attained a university degree have a monthly income that exceeds \$700, whereas a mere

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?locations=LB>

<sup>6</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.MA.NE.ZS?locations=LB>

<sup>7</sup> Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

<sup>8</sup> Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa (SWMENA). 2021. *Economic Status – Lebanon*. Accessed on 17 March 2021 at <http://swmena.net/en/report/91>



21% of those with a secondary school degree make an equivalent amount. Moreover, more than 75% of women with a complementary school education or less make an equivalence of \$500 or lower.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding female respondents who were employed at the start of the pandemic, 95 percent reported working from home from the onset of the pandemic. Yet, only 35 percent stated that their employer enacted working from home policies before the pandemic, with 80 percent actually taking advantage of them.

### *The Unpaid Care Burden*

Unlike previous recessions, social distancing measures taken to combat the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a graver impact on women than men. The shutting down of daycare facilities and schools induced an immense increase in childcare needs, leaving adverse effects on employed mothers. Based on the distribution of the childcare duties in the bulk of families, this had a higher impact on mothers than fathers. Unfortunately, these severe economic implications of COVID-19 on working mothers exhibit a high chance of persistence post-pandemic due to the labor market's tendency to return to the status quo ante.

A particularly harried working mother from the survey noted that “I have to assist my children with online classes and homework, especially my youngest son with special needs to avoid any regression and [to] replace — as much as possible — all the specialists who take care of him on a daily basis, including his therapists and special educator at home. So, it is very hectic and I end up working long hours, after hours, on weekends and days-off.”

Due to the pandemic, women bore the most part of the unpaid care burden whether in the form of childcare including online learning, food preparation, cleaning, or emotional care. The unequal burden of unpaid care work was qualitatively supported by our respondents, many of whom underscored the multiple burdens they are enduring. One of the respondents stated that during the COVID-19 lockdown, there is no

“[A] work-family life balance.... is impossible to reach within the multi-functions and duties [of] a working mother and father. Being a full-time parent, worker, and teacher; [providing] psychosocial support, [doing] household chores, and performing new duties due to the inaccessibility to certain services, such as haircuts, electrician etc..... I am expected to put in a full day's work while also taking care of and educating a child.”

Indeed, a number of female respondents emphasized the increased workload, including housework, childcare, and caring for the sick and/or elderly, along with their professional jobs, with a particular emphasis on caring for children — some with special needs. The lockdown disrupted the little balance

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<sup>9</sup> These figures refer to the official Lebanese Lira to USD exchange rate. As just noted, in March/April 2020, the unofficial (i.e., real) rate was much higher, significantly reducing the value of salaries that are paid out in local currency, which is the majority. Hard data is often difficult to find as of summer 2021 due to a government crackdown on unofficial exchange rate information online, which is telling in and of itself.



that existed between personal life and professional life and has further added to women's unpaid care burdens.

However, other respondents praised the benefits of working from home for working mothers, with some caveats. "Working from home should be an option provided by employers. I would use this option for a number of days but not always as working from home all days is not healthy or sustainable for many people," noted one respondent, while another stressed that "I have worked from home before and it was a favorable experience. The current 'work at home' situation however cannot fairly be considered work at home. To make working at home successful, children need to be in school or daycare outside the home. And all teleworkers in the house need dedicated workspace with reliable electricity and internet infrastructure. In tiny Beirut flats this is not possible."

Repeatedly, respondents noted that the COVID-19 lockdown period was not a "normal" work from home experience as well as that their assessments of whether working from home was beneficial or not to working mothers included a number of factors, none of which could be looked at in isolation. For example, one working mother said that she "generally wouldn't mind working from home if the children are not around and if the connection is good enough. The nature of the job defines best whether working from home is better or not. My job requires more being present at the workplace and having personal interaction with colleagues." Another noted that her survey "responses are based on working from home conditions during the corona virus pandemic, which implies that the kids are at home and I have to home-school, [while] under normal circumstances, with kids being at school, occasionally working from home is a great advantage."

A particularly important aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis unequal care burdens has been the dramatically uneven susceptibility of different populations to the illness. In countries such as Lebanon, extended families live together or near each other (in the same apartment/house or the same building), and the elderly, disabled, and sick are much more likely to be taken care of at home by family (and foreign domestic workers) than in institutional settings. Data is lacking on the specific experience of grandparents taking care of grandchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon; however, it merits further investigation as there is also a gender dynamic at play here.

Several survey respondents noted that mental health issues were also essential to address when researching working from home during the pandemic lockdown as many viewed managing mental health in the household as another aspect of unpaid care work. Stress from the pandemic in Lebanon was coupled by political instability and an economic/financial crisis. One respondent concluded at the end of the survey that "it is very difficult for parents with young children to work from home. My productivity, sanity and well-being cannot be compared to those who are not living with young children." Indeed, some women noted that they had already been battling mental health problems such as depression and anxiety prior to the pandemic; the subsequent pressures of the lockdown only exacerbated their mental health challenges. In fact, one respondent wrote at length, stating that

"Many people do not live in stable households and their mental health problems might pose a stronger barrier to working productively. As a person who battles depression and anxiety, working from home (particularly back at my parent's house) has made me lose structure and the ability to maintain a routine. My working hours became stretched in order to compensate for my slow





progress which is consequently leading to more exhaustion and stress. The house dynamics are also not helpful as you have to accommodate for everyone around which is challenging especially in a small house with siblings and parents.”

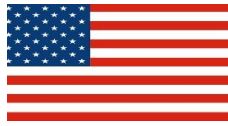
One last component of the unpaid care work debate is, for Lebanon especially, the outsourcing of previously unpaid care work to live-in paid foreign domestic workers, virtually all of whom are female. Lebanon has long been able to avoid renegotiation of the unequal burden of unpaid care work between men and women by paying foreign women low wages to do what remains seen as “women’s work”, thus allowing Lebanese women to pursue careers and/or more successfully fulfill highly traditional expectations of how wives and mothers should act. With the advent of a severe economic crisis starting in 2019, fewer and fewer Lebanese households have been able to afford foreign domestic workers, whose contracts are denominated in USD rather than the local currency, to facilitate the transfer of their wages to their home countries as remittances. Again and again, respondents stressed: “and I have nobody to help at home,” highlighting the new reality of the rare Lebanese home with a foreign domestic worker. To date, few studies exist regarding how households are dealing with the challenge of unpaid care work amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Our survey nevertheless further confirms the research that employed Lebanese women seem to be doing more care work than before.

Overall, women in Lebanon — much like women globally — have seen their unpaid care work burden added to from the start of the pandemic. The strength of pre-existing traditional gender roles in a patriarchal context and the continued deterioration of an already-ineffective state have left the Lebanese highly reliant on family (and other informal social safety nets) to meet their needs. Women have been and remain the critical component of this family care system — women in Lebanon are the society’s social safety net.

#### *Employers Still Expected the Same Results*

In terms of work productivity, survey respondents were almost equally divided between those whose productivity remained unchanged (47 percent) and those whose productivity was affected (53 percent). There was also an almost equal split among the latter group: while 48 percent reported to be less productive, 52 percent reported more productivity. One respondent commented that “working from home/outside of the regular formal office setting should be a policy adopted by most employers, as productivity increases and distractions from colleagues decrease.” In contrast, other respondents attributed productivity problems to all household members being stuck under the same roof, rendering long hours of uninterrupted work nearly impossible, coupled with weak connectivity and electricity access. The words of one respondent were echoed by others when she noted that “the issue of limited productivity is due to outputs (such as research and writing) that require me to work uninterrupted, but everyone is home so this is impossible.”

Although half of respondents were as productive, only 25 percent reported working an equal number of hours. A slight majority (51 percent) reported working more hours, and 24 percent reported working fewer hours. Respondents explained working more hours because employers and other colleagues assume that they are available at all times to answer their queries and perform tasks, even on holidays and weekends. One woman commented: “Very stressful situation. Way more than working during regular



times. Very demanding indeed. Way different than I anticipated.” Another noted that “colleagues do not respect the fact that [if] you are at home, [it] does not mean that you are available to work 24/7.”

Nonetheless, even with the challenges described, 66 percent stated that they would continue working from home if given the opportunity, while 33 percent preferred going back to their workplaces.<sup>10</sup> A hybrid or a smart working week is the ultimate model that respondents felt that employers should implement and follow. This implies that employees work from home during one or two days of the workweek and physically go to work on the other days as personal and professional interaction is necessary and irreplaceable. Indeed, one woman wrote that “it would be great to have 1 to 2 days a week as smart working,” while another commented that “working from home is a right and a necessity for short periods of time and ‘urgent tasks’ that require long working hours, flexibility and comfort.” But again, many respondents included a variation on the caveat articulated by one respondent: “Other than [for specific reasons, working from home] is burden[some] and not sustainable.”

In fact, respondents report that they would only accept hybrid working weeks or working from home if employers are willing to institute policies, benefits, and facilities after the pandemic and if, as one respondent noted, “I had a private working space at home and more cooperation from family members.” Furthermore, another respondent commented, “the willingness to work from home after COVID-19 depends on the benefits and the tools the employer provides.” They expressed that working from home during a pandemic is not a standard to assess whether working from home is efficient. In normal circumstances, children would be in school or daycare, and employees need speedy internet and consistent electricity. Also, they noted that employees’ stress, related first to the dangers and the fast intensification of the pandemic and second to the economic and financial crisis dominating Lebanon, would, ideally, be non-existent.

Some respondents provided anecdotal evidence that employers do not compensate them for internet purchases and that the weak internet infrastructure was an impediment to optimizing work productivity. Lebanon’s notoriously inadequate electricity infrastructure further compounds this challenge, as emphasized in the survey. One respondent expounded on this, writing “I have the maximum output of internet allowed by my service provider, and it is still slow because of traffic in the building over the internet that reduces the speed of my connection. At times I have to use [mobile phone service] for work because of internet and electricity problems. My employer does not compensate for data costs despite connecting for work online and by phone.”

### ***In-Depth Interview Findings***

As noted previously, the survey data revealed a number of issues that warranted further investigation. Thus, the team resorted to conducting in-depth interviews to gain a full understanding of the issue at hand. The interviews focused on the following six themes: the greatest challenges faced by women during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020; unpaid care work; mental health during the period under scrutiny; productivity; the impact of infrastructure (private and public) on women and work during the lockdown; and the gendered impact of the lockdown.

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<sup>10</sup> Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.





*What were the greatest challenges faced by women during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020?*

One professional in municipal government stressed that working mothers bore the greatest burdens, having to balance between their unpaid work (taking care of their husbands and children) and their paid work demands. There were no “dividing lines between work and home/family life”, she said. Many working mothers she heard about felt they had to put the “needs of children first”.

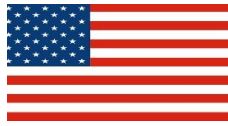
The interviewees underscored a combination of stressors, ranging from fear of the then-unknown consequences of COVID-19, financial pressures brought upon by Lebanon’s economic crisis, homeschooling, poor infrastructure with poor access to electricity and internet services, and work demands. Yet, for the most part, women (and men) felt that they had to perform. One manager noted that it was hard at first to get into the “online work mindset”. It was challenging to find so abruptly dedicated space at home to work, particularly for women with children. She further noted that it was difficult to work from home in the same way as when home and office are separate. She noted that a number of her friends and colleagues resorted to taking important calls in the bathroom as all other spaces were already occupied or were too prone to interruptions. This led to what an independent researcher called the “confusion” of the early COVID-19 period in Lebanon vis-à-vis women and work. There was a need to make a “very radical shift” in the ways that women were supposed to conduct themselves professionally. As all members of the household were forced to be at home, she concluded, “No house is large enough to hold schools, offices, and different [life] activities.” Indeed, in her words, “many women suffered merging home and work spaces.”

The different roles that women had to juggle were exacerbated by the fact that many foreign domestic workers left the country either voluntarily or involuntarily, because of the economic crisis that forced employers to reduce their salaries or even let them go. In the words of one interviewee, it was (and is?) a “full juggle” to adapt to so much and to be required to do so much. Yet, all agreed that the greatest challenge for women — both working and non-working — was stress itself. Working mothers with young children were the most strained as online schooling was particularly demanding.

Due to the economic crisis, women (and men) needed to preserve their jobs and secure a guaranteed income no matter what. There was a general feeling among the interviewees that the former middle class in Lebanon now constitutes the “new poor” and that mostly everyone is worried about and experiencing becoming poorer.

Beyond the stress of trying to balance between different roles, one interviewee noted that there is also the guilt of not working, homeschooling, and managing the house as much as one would have hoped and liked. Many noted that the homeschooling system implemented by schools assumes that parents are operating under normal circumstances. It fails to take into account that working parents have back-to-back meetings, an increased load of emails to attend to, and longer and irregular working hours. Interviewees reported that more time is now dedicated to work, as employees require no commute and prep time (dressing up, hair, etc.). The irregularity of working hours stretched to the extent of committing time to finish professional demands on weekends and holidays.

Most distressingly, a few interviewees emphasized that the COVID-19 lockdowns further exacerbated domestic violence. Everyone interviewed had seen data demonstrating the alarming increase in domestic



violence (particularly intimate partner violence) globally and in Lebanon. This seems to be correlated with financial pressures, anxiety, and fear of loss of masculinity on the part of men, among others. Poverty has definitely increased substantially. One interviewee was shocked that women started to reach out to her in her role as a municipal leader regarding intimate partner violence (IPV). Women told her that the IPV resulted from a conflict between home and work responsibilities. Moreover, these women confessed that before COVID, “work used to be a refuge” but then, in our interviewee’s words, “home wasn’t a safe place during the confinement, as it should be”.

#### *Unpaid care work dominated (almost) everything else*

Overwhelmingly, the interviewees noted that the amount of unpaid care work that they suddenly had to provide was significant. One estimated that there was “double or triple the amount of care work” during the confinement/lockdown due to everyone being home all the time as compared to normal circumstances. Overall, paid work time was greatly disturbed due to unpaid care work; as such, women focused on their professional duties very early or very late in the day. While men took on more responsibilities in many cases, they also seemed to expect more from their wives, even if their wives continued to be employed during the lockdown.

Previously, the majority of Lebanese households had heavily relied on foreign domestic workers whose duties include housework, childcare, and elder care work. Foreign domestic workers are paid in US dollars, and their salaries range between \$150 and \$500 per month. However, with the onset of the economic crisis and the consequent deterioration in the value of the Lebanese Lira, foreign domestic workers became increasingly expensive to employ as many Lebanese are paid in the local currency. The pandemic further exacerbated the situation and by spring 2020, many foreign domestic workers were sent home or were put out on the streets. Given the patriarchal roots that are deeply entrenched in Lebanese society, domestic work falls on the burden of women and as such, women were automatically forced to do more.

With fewer and fewer families having the ability to hire household help, things became “super hectic” for many balancing between working full-time and managing the household. Therefore, some women decided to leave their paid work. Even though men have increased the amount of unpaid care work they engage in, there has yet to be a substantial cultural shift and men are not yet comfortable with others knowing that they are performing this type of “women’s” work..

Furthermore, the interviewees, and their female colleagues and friends, saw an increase in their childcare responsibilities, particularly in school support. Online learning at home was stressful and tiring on top of paid work. One interviewee described some of the strategies that she heard women using to get their paid work done during the lockdown. For example, some employed women with young kids who could not yet read would make “color coded signals” to tell children “mom was doing her work and couldn’t be interrupted”.

Moreover, women had to take care of elderly family members. Elderly care was cumbersome because of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Many had to rely on neighbors to help when people could not reach their parents and other relatives. In addition, some women risked their health taking care of other household members sick with COVID-19, as was the case with one interviewee whose husband had to be hospitalized (he has since fully recovered).



Beyond the physical work that is required in housework (cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.), there was the psychological/mental burden of juggling the household, the kids, the elderly and sick, and their work. Unpaid care work is varied and significant, and even more so during the pandemic lockdowns.

*Mental health took a blow, but was also more openly discussed*

One interviewee noted that “so many colleagues and friends are talking about anxiety, stress, depression...” however, this started before the pandemic and is strongly tied to the “incertitude of the situation [i.e., the political/economic/social crises of Lebanon]”. Another interviewee said that she heard about many people suffering from insomnia due to the increased stress, particularly because they were confined to the same environment, performing domestic and professional duties.

While seeking therapy for mental health issues has long been taboo except in some small communities, more than one interviewee noted that friends and colleagues were actually going to therapy – and some had their children enrolled in therapy as well. In effect, according to one interviewee, discussing mental health was mainstreamed during this period. Yet, the reality is that anxiety and depression remain significant challenges in Lebanon. The stress and the ‘all work, all the time’ schedule has led to a lot of physical and mental burnout and exhaustion, emphasized an interviewee who works with an international organization in the country.

As another interviewee shared, spring 2020 was one of the “toughest periods in [her] life”. She states that she probably was “depressed” but it went undiagnosed. This could have described the experiences of many others in Lebanon. Given the poor financial situation, limited number of therapists in the country, and, of course, the lockdown, it seems that many tried to be proactive with their mental health, “engaging more in sports, cooking, hobbies, etc. to deal with the stress” and uncertainty.

*Women had to perform, no matter what*

There was no consensus among the interviewed experts regarding the impact of the lockdown on their productivity. Some noted that it was negatively affected, due to the nature of their work, stress, the demands of unpaid care work, and lack of the necessary infrastructure at home and in the country – especially the poor yet expensive internet network. Indeed, all of the interviewees remarked on the lack of and therefore the need for the adequate tools to work from home effectively, including hardware (laptops, tablets, printers, etc.), a powerful and reliable internet connection, and consistent electricity.

Others noted that they remained productive because they had to. In fact, some interviewees stated that they were engaged in multiple jobs before and during the pandemic in order to make ends meet financially or to create a possible ‘exit plan’ abroad in case the situation in Lebanon further deteriorated.

Regardless of how their productivity was impacted, all conceded that a key challenge for employed women during the pandemic has been employers’ unrealistic expectations of being able to reach them at all times even on weekends and during holidays. The dire economic situation and instability in the country obliged women to meet the demands of their employers and to perform lest they lose their jobs.



Those who occupied management positions also faced productivity challenges. One interviewee who works for an international organization shared that she has been ambivalent regarding productivity during the lockdown. Even though she did not want to pressure those who report to her, she nonetheless knew that “we had to deliver...we had to keep our funding”.

Moreover, a few noted that they felt that their productivity is strongly tied to the events unfolding in the country, regardless of whether the right infrastructure to work from home is available or not. In other words, when things are going badly, productivity suffers.

Furthermore, some reported that even the necessary technological tools can't make up for a lack of time, space, and focus. An independent consultant noted that “home is no longer what it used to be” and it's more difficult for her to get work done mainly because she is so rarely alone. “I need time alone to get work done. [Without time alone], productivity is affected.”

On a more positive note, the lockdown proved that work can be performed remotely. One interviewee noted that this finding is advantageous in the long-run but not in the short-run given the demands being made by employers. As significant research demonstrates, remote work can be good for women, facilitating their inclusion and retention in the paid workforce.

#### *Working from home requires public and private infrastructure that many struggled to secure*

As reported by the interviewees, productivity is strongly linked to the availability and quality of internet, conducive to providing the right environment for working from home. Even though there was a global increase in demand and reduction in supply of computers and tablets needed to facilitate working from home and online education, the economic crisis made the situation much worse in Lebanon. More than one interviewee noted that working from home and online schooling require that “each kid has their own laptop, decent internet connection, separate room, electricity – [and] many families are missing one or more of these components”.

One of the most cited challenges of working and studying from home during the COVID-19 lockdown was limited and poor internet access. A few interviewees noted that they had to reschedule their own work meetings to accommodate online school for their children or competing demands from other members of the household due to limited internet supply. In sum, while there is indeed a movement toward a more flexible, inclusive, and diverse workforce and work, there is also a need for private support and public infrastructure to make this a reality – especially in Lebanon, a country notoriously bad at providing public goods.

#### *Women and men experienced the COVID-19 lockdown differently, in general and not just in terms of work*

As will surprise no one, interviewees in various ways noted that women and men seemed to experience the COVID-19 lockdown differently.

One narrated an interesting anecdote about the reallocation of domestic chores in her own household. One of her two sons was responsible to hang up the newly laundered clothes. While he was performing his assigned chore, his girlfriend called. As such, he told her that he had to call her back because he had



to hang out the clothes. However, she didn't believe him. After he finished the chore, he told his mom that his new chore was either going to make his girlfriend love him more or, the complete opposite.

Interviewees discussed unpaid work at length, focusing on who was and was not doing it, and who was and was not expected to do it. While most thought that men and women shared more unpaid care work, one thought that this "was happening but only in the middle class" while another noted that data show that men have increased the amount of unpaid care work they engage in but aren't yet comfortable with being seen in public doing it. A few agreed that data was still scarce on this issue. One interviewee made the interesting observation that men have become "women in disguise", wanting to know all of the details of how the household is run but yet only helping out a bit more. This has been tiring to manage for women, as they now have to share all this knowledge, but not enough of the work, with their husbands, in addition to all the rest of what they have to do.

An interviewee who works in a municipality shared a particularly depressing but not surprising view based on her interaction with constituents. She surmised that families who are facing financial hardship are already choosing to put resources behind boys' rather than girls' education if they can't pay for all their kids' schooling. While such trends are amply backed up in the research globally, for a country that has long prided itself as an education leader in the region and beyond, this is a stark reminder that Lebanon is indeed falling behind on a number of standards of living and development indicators – and ones that most definitely have gendered impacts.

Echoing an earlier point that the experience of remote work during the lockdown proved to employers that work could be performed outside the realm of the office, an interviewee noted that the ability for the world to transition to an all-online environment is a "breakthrough" for virtual working, an important milestone for women. This entails that there is now a "mentality that can include more people" in paid work. This enlargement of how one can do work has a "major and significant impact on working that will be felt for a long time," she stressed.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon was unparalleled as it coincided with historical milestones that will define the course of the country's future. The proliferation of the virus was coupled with mass uprisings calling for toppling sectarianism, in addition to hyperinflation, unemployment, and blast that claimed the lives of over 200 victims, injured 5,000 others, rendered 300,000 homeless, and destroyed the capital and surrounding swathes. In addition, the country is facing the third worst economic crisis the world has witnessed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as food, electricity, fuel, and medication shortages. As such, the abrupt shift to working from home imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be analyzed in isolation but must account for the stress brought upon by the above amalgamation of factors. Even though the sample in the study was wealthier, more likely to be employed, and more educated than women in general in Lebanon, the study depicts the experiences of a subset of women in Lebanon vis-a-vis employment, unpaid care work, the experience of working from home, and their employers.

Despite the fact that the respondents to the survey were privileged — particularly in that over 80 percent of them were employed at the time of the survey — when compared with most women in Lebanon, the



female respondents still found themselves facing additional unpaid care burdens, multiple challenges to productive work from home, and unclear future repercussions to work-from-home dynamics during the lockdown. As such, undoubtedly, most women in Lebanon found themselves in even more difficult circumstances — without the benefits of independent income, employment, and education. Even though the sample is limited in what it reveals about women in general in Lebanon, it helps to highlight the broad spectrum of women’s experiences, skills, and realities in the country, especially during the early COVID-19 pandemic period.

The initial COVID-19-induced lockdown largely exacerbated unequal and unpaid care burdens and highlighted insufficient infrastructure to meet the needs of a profitable work-from-home environment. Furthermore, the unseen burdens of anxiety regarding the pandemic and concomitant economic and political crises seem to weigh heavily on the women who participated in the survey, mirroring women globally. Indeed, as UN Secretary General Guterres remarked in August 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic may turn back the clock on women’s empowerment by decades, noting that “without a concerned response, we risk losing a generation or more of gains.” For Lebanese women, their hard-won, though small, gains could be far too easily lost.





### ***Appendix 1: Working from Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic***

The Arab Institute for Women and Title IX Office at the Lebanese American University would like to invite you to participate in a research project by completing the below online survey. The study aims to collect insights on working from home policies that have been enacted nationally as well as globally in light of the novel corona virus pandemic.

There are no known risks, harms, or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in normal daily life. In addition, you will not directly benefit from participation in this study. The information you provide will be used to assess working from home and inform better policies in times of pandemics. The survey is brief and will not necessitate more than ten minutes of your time.

By continuing with this online survey, you agree with the following statements:

1. I have been given sufficient information about this research project.
2. I understand that my answers will not be released to anyone and my identity will remain anonymous. My name will not be written on the questionnaire nor be kept in any other records.
3. When the results of the study are reported, I will not be identified by name or any other information that could be used to infer my identity. Only researchers will have access to view any data collected during this research, however data cannot be linked to me.
4. I understand that I may withdraw from this research any time I wish.
5. I understand that my refusal to participate will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which I otherwise am entitled.
6. I have been informed that the research abides by all commonly acknowledged ethical codes and that the research project has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Lebanese American University.
7. I understand that if I have any additional questions, I can ask the research team listed below.
8. I have read and understood all statements on this form.
9. I voluntarily agree to take part in this research project by completing the following online survey.

If you have any questions, you may contact:

Name: The Arab Institute for Women

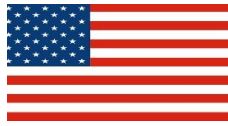
Phone number: 00 961 1 786456 ext. (1103)

Email address: aiw@lau.edu.lb

or

Name: Institutional Review Board Office

Phone number: 00 961 1 786456 ext. (2546)



Email address: [irb@lau.edu.lb](mailto:irb@lau.edu.lb)

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or you want to talk to someone outside the research, please contact the:

Institutional Review Board Office,

Lebanese American University

3rd Floor, Dorm A, Byblos Campus

Tel: 00 961 1 786456 ext. (2546)

[irb@lau.edu.lb](mailto:irb@lau.edu.lb)

Given the above, do you consent to participate in this study?

- Yes
- No

### **Demographics**

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say
- Other

What is your age?

- Between 18 and 24 years
- Between 25 and 34 years
- Between 35 and 44 years
- Between 45 and 54 years
- Between 55 and 64 years
- 65 years and above

In which country do you currently live?

Do you live by yourself?

- Yes
- No

### **Living Arrangements**

Whom do you live with? (Please select all that apply)

- Parent(s)
- Sibling(s)



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- Partner/Husband/Wife
- Son(s)/Daughter(s)
- Friend(s)
- Roommate(s)/Flat mate(s)
- Migrant domestic worker(s)
- Other

How many people under 18 years of age currently live with you?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8 and above

#### Age of Minors

Please write down their ages. (Round up to the nearest year. For example, if someone is 3 months old, write 0; 6 months old, write 1; 2 years and a month old, write 2; 5 years and 7 months old, write 6).

#### Employment Status

Are you currently employed?

- Yes
- No

#### Employment Details

How much, on average, is your monthly salary?

- Less than LBP 1,500,000
- Between LBP 1,500,000 and LBP 2,999,999
- Between LBP 3,000,000 and LBP 4,499,999
- Between LBP 4,500,000 and LBP 5,999,999
- Between LBP 6,000,000 and LBP 7,499,999
- Between LBP 7,500,000 and LBP 10,499,999
- More than LBP 10,500,000

How would you describe your employment status?

- Employer
- Full-time employee



- Part-time employee
- Consultant
- Intern/trainee

What is your current title at your job?

Given the novel corona virus pandemic, are you currently working from home?

- Yes
- No

### **Working from Home Policies**

Prior to the novel corona virus pandemic, did your employer implement work from home policies?

- Yes
- No

### **Taking Advantage of Working from Home Policies**

Have you taken advantage of those policies?

- Yes
- No

### **Assessment of Working from Home**

Where do you work at home? (Please select all that apply)

- Dedicated office/space
- Bedroom
- Living room
- Kitchen/dining room
- Balcony
- Garden

How would you describe your productivity at home?

- I am more productive working from home compared to my workplace
- I am as productive working from home as I am in my workplace
- I am less productive working from home compared to my workplace

How would you describe your working hours?

- I work more hours when working from home compared to my workplace
- I work as many hours when working from home compared to my workplace
- I work less hours when working from home compared to my workplace

Please rank the following advantages of working from home (1 being the most important and 8 being the least important).



	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Flexible working hours								
More time to spend with partner/children								
More time to spend/take care of parents/relatives								
Increased productivity								
More time to focus on hobbies								
Saved time from not commuting to work								
More time to finish household chores								
Ability to dress comfortably								

Please rank the following disadvantages of working from home (1 being the most important disadvantage and 8 being the least important).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Prolonged/unstructured working hours									
Interference of children/partner/parents/relatives									
Decreased productivity									
Internet problems									
Loss of personal interaction with colleagues									
Loss of personal time									
Loss of professional status									
More household chores									
Increased distractions (television...)									

Following the novel corona virus pandemic, would you continue working from home if your employer offered you the possibility?

- Yes
- No

If there is anything else you would like us to document, please share it below.

**Thank you for your time!**



## ***Appendix 2: Questions Guide for the In-depth Interviews***

1. What were the greatest challenges of your employees/colleagues during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in spring 2020?
2. Did your organization have to lay off employees and/or reduce hours or pay?
3. How did your employees/colleagues address 'unpaid care work'? Did many seem to retain a foreign domestic worker/helper during the period or did many stop having one?
4. What did your employees/colleagues do about childcare and/or elder care responsibilities?
5. What did you hear about employee/colleague mental health during the period?
6. Was productivity affected during the period? Did it go up or down? Why?
7. Was electricity and/or internet connection [general infrastructure] a problem(s) during the initial lockdown?