

THE HEARTBREAKING REALITY OF PERIOD POVERTY IN LEBANON

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“TODAY, I PAY MORE THAN 100,000 LEBANESE POUNDS FOR SANITARY PADS WITH MY VERY LIMITED INCOME. I USED TO PAY 30,000 LEBANESE POUNDS PER MONTH IN THE PAST AND NOW SUFFER FINANCIALLY AND MENTALLY FROM HORMONAL PROBLEMS THAT ARE EXAGGERATED BY MY INABILITY TO SECURE MY NEEDS IN TERM OF MENSTRUAL HYGIENE,” A RIGHT HOLDER SAID WHILE PICKING UP A HYGIENE KIT BOX.

PADS AND TAMPONS HAD TURNED POLITICAL IN LEBANON IN 2020. ACCORDING TO PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S LATEST STATISTICS, THE COST OF PERIOD PRODUCTS HAS INCREASED BY MORE THAN 500% IN A YEAR, LIMITING 66% OF YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS LIVING IN LEBANON FROM BUYING THEM. AN AVERAGE PERIOD LASTS ABOUT FIVE DAYS NOW COSTS UP TO 15,000 LBP A MONTH FOR TAMPONS AND PADS.

THIS COMES ALONG WITH A GROWING BODY OF EVIDENCE THAT SUGGESTS THAT LEBANON'S CURRENT SITUATION MAKES WOMEN AND GIRLS FEEL INSECURE ABOUT THEIR CURRENT LIVING CONDITIONS. LEBANON IS REELING FROM AN ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRISIS EXAGGERATED BY THE PANDEMIC AND A MASSIVE EXPLOSION THAT DESTROYED PARTS OF THE CAPITAL ON AUGUST 4TH, 2020.

IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC, A RECESSION, POLITICAL INSTABILITY, AND LINGERING EFFECTS FROM THE AUG. 4 BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSION, WOMEN AND GIRLS IN LEBANON ARE LEFT INCREASINGLY VULNERABLE.

AS A RESULT, THIS GROUP IS NOW MORE PRONE TO EXPERIENCING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, EXPLOITATION, AND ABUSE. THE PRICE OF PADS IS EXPECTED TO RISE EVEN MORE IN THE COMING MONTHS AS THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND HYPERINFLATION OF THE LEBANESE POUNDS CONTINUE.



AMAY, AN ETHIOPIAN LADY, EXPLAINED THAT NOT ONLY IS SHE NOT ABLE TO BUY TAMPONS OR PADS, SHE ALSO ISN'T ABLE TO AFFORD BUYING BASIC FOOD, "I TRY TO SLEEP MOST OF THE TIME SO THAT I DON'T HAVE TO GO OVER THE FEELING OF STARVATION," SHE SAID.

WHEN 30-YEAR-OLD SALWA GAVE BIRTH TO HER SON, IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE HAPPIEST TIME OF HER LIFE. HOWEVER, FOLLOWING COMPLICATIONS AFTER THE BIRTH, SHE FOUND HERSELF IN A SITUATION SHE'D NEVER THOUGHT SHE'D BE IN: SHE WAS UNABLE TO AFFORD THE SANITARY PADS SHE NEEDED.

SALWA EXPLAINED HER STORY TO ME: "IT WAS 18 MONTHS AGO THAT I STARTED REALIZING THAT I COULD NO LONGER BUY PADS, I'D HAD MY SON ON THE SEVENTH OF THE MONTH AFTER WE'D PAID ALL OUR BILLS, AND THEN HAD EXTRA BILLS TO PAY, SO I REALLY HAD NO MONEY TO ACTUALLY BUY TAMPONS AND PADS.

SADLY THOUGH, SALWA'S EXPERIENCE OF PERIOD POVERTY ISN'T UNIQUE. WHILE I WAS ON THE FIELD WITH FE-MALE FEMINIST COLLECTIVE, WE VISITED TWO PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS (BOURJ AL BARAJNE, AND MAR ELIAS CAMPS,) WE ALSO WENT ON MANY DOOR-TO-DOOR JOURNEYS IN THE LEBANESE COMMUNITIES TO PROVIDE WOMEN WITH HYGIENE KITS, AND IT IS DURING THIS JOURNEY THAT I CAME ACROSS MANY HEART-BREAKING STORIES ABOUT PERIOD POVERTY, AN ISSUE WHICH TOUCHES ON THE VERY CORE OF OUR HUMAN RIGHTS; DIGNITY.



NOUR, A 17-YEAR-OLD FROM PALESTINE TOLD ME THAT SHE MISSES A FEW DAYS OF SCHOOL EVERY MONTH BECAUSE SHE HAS NO SANITARY PADS TO USE DURING HER PERIOD. HER FAMILY COULD NOT AFFORD TO BUY THEM, SO HER MOTHER TAUGHT HER HOW TO USE PIECES OF CLOTH INSTEAD. IN SUCH CASES, PERIOD POVERTY AFFECTS BOTH GIRLS AND WOMEN'S RIGHT TO LIVE IN DIGNITY AS WELL AS THEIR RIGHT TO EDUCATION.

NOUR FACES A STARK CHOICE WHEN MENSTRUATING: ACCEPTING HUMILIATION OR SKIPPING SCHOOL.

NOUR, THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WHO CHOOSES TO STAY HOME DURING HER PERIOD, BELIEVES THAT STAYING HOME IS FAR BETTER THAN FACING THE HUMILIATION OF BEING AMONG HER SCHOOLMATES WITHOUT ANYTHING TO CONTROL HER MENSTRUAL FLOW. SHE RELIES ON CHARITIES AND NGOS' DISTRIBUTIONS SUCH AS FE-MALE'S' INITIATIVE..

“THE MENSTRUAL NECESSITIES YOU ARE OFFERING US IN THESE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS ARE VERY IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY SINCE WE ARE NO LONGER ABLE TO AFFORD THEM, WHICH PROMPTED ME TO USE KITS OF CHEAPER QUALITY AND PRICE. AS FOR MY DAUGHTERS, I COULD NOT CHANGE THE QUALITY OF WHAT THEY USE BECAUSE THEY SUFFER FROM ALLERGIES,” ONE OF THE RIGHT HOLDERS TOLD ME, WHILE I WAS DISTRIBUTING HYGIENE KITS.



THE ECONOMIC DOWNFALL IN LEBANON AND THE CONSEQUENT COLLAPSING CURRENCY PUT ESSENTIAL FOOD ITEMS BEYOND THE REACH OF MANY. AS A RESULT, INFLATION TRIGGERED A 400% PRICE HIKE ON FOOD ITEMS IN JUST ONE YEAR. ACCORDING TO THE CENTRAL STATISTICS ADMINISTRATION, HYPERINFLATION IN LEBANON REACHED 84.9% IN 2020, COMPARED TO 2.9% IN 2019.

BACK IN JUNE 2020, THE LEBANESE MINISTRY OF ECONOMY INTRODUCED A LIST OF SUBSIDIZED ITEMS TO REGULATE THE SKY-ROCKETING PRICES OF BASIC NECESSITIES. AMONG THESE ITEMS WERE RAZORS AND COFFEE CREAMER, BUT NOT SANITARY PADS FOR WOMEN.

THE MOVE HAS DRAWN UPROAR FROM WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS, WHO ACCUSE THE GOVERNMENT OF THROWING A LARGE PORTION OF LEBANON'S FEMALE POPULATION INTO PERIOD POVERTY.

HOWEVER, ACTIVISTS AND EXPERTS ALIKE SAY THAT THE PROBLEM MIGHT HAVE DEEPER STRUCTURAL CAUSES IN SOCIETY, AND COUNTERING THEM MIGHT REQUIRE MORE THAN ONE PIECE OF LEGISLATION. WOMEN'S "MONTHLY SHAME" NEEDS TO BE NORMALIZED AS BASIC HYGIENE AND PADS NEED TO CEASE TO BE ONLY A GIRL'S PROBLEM, THEY POINT OUT.

THIS CRISIS IS A HEAVY BURDEN ON VULNERABLE WOMEN IN LEBANON, MANY OF WHOM RESORT TO "IMPROVISED" ALTERNATIVES.

THE FIRST STEP WOULD BE FOR THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT TO PRIORITIZE THE NEEDS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS ESPECIALLY DURING A CRISIS. ASIDE FROM ADDRESSING ACCESSIBILITY, WE NEED TO CONTINUE TO PUSH FOR THE NORMALIZATION OF DISCUSSING PERIODS. THIS WILL REQUIRE MORE THAN LEGISLATION TO ABOLISH.



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