

PROMOTING DIGNITY AND RESILIENCE:

# **The Importance of UNRWA**

## **Health and Education Services**

*to Palestinian Refugee Women and Girls in Lebanon*

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**Rebecca Roberts**

27 February 2019

النجدة  
**NAJDEH** 

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## Executive Summary

A qualitative study to assess the impact on Palestinian refugee women and girls from Lebanon and Syria (PRL and PRS) of current and potential cuts to UNRWA health and education services in Lebanon concluded that:

- Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in a difficult environment, unable to access their rights. Their own social networks and psychological strengths provide important coping mechanisms but access to UNRWA health and education services and the complementary services provided by NGOs have enabled Palestinians to invest in their future, maintain their dignity and reinforce their resilience. Gender, age, economic status, physical and intellectual ability, and location all affect resilience and access to services. Women and girls have less mobility than men and boys to access services.
- Funding for assistance to Palestinian refugees is declining. The United States has cut all funding to UNRWA, UNICEF has a fraction of the funding it had five years ago, and NGOs are struggling to mobilize funds. There are no reliable and affordable alternative healthcare and education services outside UNRWA. Access to Government services are restricted for Palestinians and private healthcare and education are expensive.
- UNRWA has responded to the financial crisis by suspending recruitment of new staff, increasing the responsibilities of existing staff and reducing health and education services. These are further cuts to services that Palestinian refugees already regarded as inadequate.
- Despite criticism of UNRWA's services, girls and women value their access to education and the possibility of attending university. Education improves women's equality alongside men, enables them to enter a profession, generate an income and become more independent.
- Without UNRWA education services, Palestinian women and girls become more dependent and vulnerable. If they do not attend school, girls have few opportunities to socialize, will be kept at home to help with chores and face early marriage. Without education, women have no professional employment opportunities so are vulnerable to exploitation in unskilled, low-paid work. They will struggle to access their rights, support their families, and educate their children resulting in generations of undereducated females with few em-

ployment options and personal choices.

- UNRWA pre- and post-natal care, funding for childbirth to take place in hospital, the childhood vaccination programme and free contraception are regarded as essential services. Without them maternal and child health suffer, childbirth will take place without medical support, and women will be unable to space pregnancies and limit family size. Having to cover more medical costs increases pressure on family finances as does having a larger family. Financial worries contribute to family tensions, potentially leading to domestic violence and family breakdown.
- The lack of clarity about the financial crisis and future of UNRWA is adding to the stresses on Palestinian refugees. Palestinians, including women and girls, should be consulted about the services they value most and how changes to them impact their lives so that the negative effects of any cuts or restructuring can be minimized.
- UNRWA, NGOs and other stakeholders should cooperate to identify how to maintain and improve health and education services to Palestinian refugees and to ensure that Palestinian refugee women and girls are able to maintain their achievements of the last 70 years.

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## Acknowledgements

Association Najdeh and Dr Rebecca Roberts wish to thank all those who contributed to this study, particularly the Palestinian refugee women and girls, from Lebanon and Syria, without whom this report would not have been possible. Thanks also extended to: Dr. May Hammoud, the Legal Officer of LPDC, Mr. Nazih Yacoub, Programme Specialist of Palestinian Programme in Lebanon at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Popular Committees in Beirut and Tyre camps, UNRWA camp directors in Beirut and Tyre camps, Dr. Ali Dakwar Director of Programmes of Medical Aid for Palestinians – MAP – Lebanon, Rita Hamadan, president of PARD, Olfat Mahmoud, president of PWHO, Najah Khamis and Nathalie Der Mesrobian from the Norwegian Refugee Council and Abu Wasim- the head of Al Houla center in Burj El Shamali. The collective inputs to this study through validation workshops from representatives of the following NGOs working with Palestinians in Lebanon should be acknowledged: Palestinian Students' Fund, Beit Atfal Al Smoud, Médecins Sans Frontières Mousawat, Nabaa, Right to Play, Tadamon, PRCS, PWHO. Without the contribution of all these individuals and organizations the findings of the study, would not be comprehensive and holistic. Therefore, this report is owned by all those who made contributions including collecting data, discussing findings and recommending future steps.

## Biography for Dr Rebecca Roberts

Rebecca Roberts has been working and living with Palestinians in Lebanon for over 20 years. Her Doctoral Thesis analysed the coping mechanisms of Palestinians living in camps and how these are impacted by assistance. The findings were published in 2010 in 'Palestinians in Lebanon: refugees living with long-term displacement.' In addition to her academic research, she has volunteered with NGOs working with Palestinian refugees, has conducted evaluations for international donors funding interventions for Palestinians, and has led research to inform responses that are sensitive to the complex needs of Palestinian refugees from Syria and Lebanon as well as Syrian refugees.

# 1.

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## Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of a qualitative study conducted in January and February 2019 to assess the impact on Palestinian refugee women and girls from Lebanon and Syria (PRL and PRS) of current and potential cuts to health and education services in Lebanon provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Unless otherwise stated, the information in this report is drawn from the respondents who participated in the study.

## Context

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon and from Syria, the vast majority of whom live in overcrowded official camps and informal gatherings, are prevented from accessing their rights fully, including the right to work, so are heavily reliant on UNRWA for basic services. Created in 1949 by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to support Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon Syria, Gaza and the West Bank, UNRWA was intended as a temporary measure until Resolution 194, stating the right of Palestinians to return home and be suitably compensated for the loss of land and property, was implemented. As the 'Right of Return' has not been fulfilled, seventy years after its creation, UNRWA continues to function on three-yearly mandates, which to date, have been renewed regularly by the UNGA, and to rely on donations from member states to fund its programmes. Its temporary nature and uncertain budget impede planning and, for decades, UNRWA has operated under severe financial constraints. In addition, UNRWA works in a region beset with crises and conflicts, the latest being the war in Syria which displaced thousands of Palestinians. Regional instability means that UNRWA is often responding to dynamic emergency situations alongside its ongoing development and relief programmes and is forced to launch emergency funding appeals to supplement its operational budget. Therefore, when the United States (US), for many years the largest single donor to UNRWA, announced a reduction in its funding from 350 million USD in 2017 to 60 million USD in 2018 and later the same year decided to cease funding the

Agency altogether, there was widespread concern among Palestinian refugees, organizations working to support them, as well as UNRWA and other member states about the future of the Agency's services and support for Palestinian refugees. In the wake of the loss of US funding, UNRWA announced significant cuts to its services although not all these were implemented as other member states increased their funding to cover the deficit.

## Rationale and Scope of Study

Despite additional funding in 2018 from other member states to cover some of the deficit caused by the US funding cuts, the future of UNRWA remains uncertain and, at the time of writing (February 2019) it had funding only until June 2019. Therefore, Association Najdeh, a local non-governmental organization (NGO) registered in Lebanon, in consultation with its partners, including local NGOs, decided to commission a study to assess how cuts to UNRWA services would affect Palestinian refugee women and girls in Lebanon and those currently displaced from Syria, whom it argues are the most disadvantaged groups among the Palestinian refugee population. It was agreed that research would focus on UNRWA health and education services used by women and girls living in official UNRWA camps and informal settlements. Although criticized, these services are valued by Palestinians and, unlike humanitarian assistance which is focused on sustaining life, health and education services enable Palestinians to invest in, and potentially ameliorate their future. The study was undertaken on a voluntary basis by Dr Rebecca Roberts who has been working with and conducting research among Palestinians in Lebanon since 1996. PRS and PRL women and girls from 15 years old to over 60 years old participated in the research and local and international organizations actively supported the initiative by attending and organizing focus group discussions and interviews. This report is the result of a collaborative effort intended to:

- Identify the current and potential impacts of cuts to health and education services on PRL and PRS women and girls;
- Identify the gaps in services which most affect or would affect PRL and PRS women and girls;
- Identify key issues related to potential reductions in health and education services to inform future strategies and advocacy campaigns;
- Identify potential opportunities for NGOs and other organizations to complement UNRWA services and ways in which UNRWA, NGOs and other organizations can improve their support to PRL and PRS women and girls.



## Methodology

The study draws on document review and qualitative research conducted in Lebanon from mid-January to mid-February 2019 through semi-structured, free-flowing individual and group discussions in Arabic and English. Over 30 meetings were held with PRL and PRS women and girls as well as with national and international stakeholders providing services to Palestinians. UNRWA declined the invitation to participate in the research. The Palestinian women and girls came from the official UNRWA-managed Bourj al-Barajneh camp in Beirut and Bourj al-Shamali camp in Sour and informal gatherings in the Sour and Beqa'a area. They were divided into three age groups to capture the different needs of women through their lives and their use of UNRWA health and education services. The three groups were: 15 years and over and in full-time schooling; women of reproductive age between the ages of 25 and 45; and elderly women over 60 years of age. The three groups included PRL and PRS to highlight any differences in their ability to access services.

The locations were chosen to capture potential differences in access to services and socioeconomic status between urban and rural environments as well as potential differences between official and unofficial settlements. Both official camps have been disproportionately affected by the Syria crisis as Bourj al-Barajneh hosts around 25,000 Syrian refugees which is more than its Palestinian population, and Bourj al-Shamali hosts the single largest group of PRS.<sup>1</sup>

Informed consent from all respondents was obtained during the research. Details of the various meetings can be found in Annex 6.3. The names of the PRS and PRL women and girls were deliberately not recorded but respondents representing organizations have been listed by name except the four who preferred to remain anonymous. No comments or information have been attributed to specific individuals.

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1 UNDP, 2018; UNHCR, 2016

# 2.

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## Palestinians in Lebanon

Palestinian refugee rights in Lebanon are restricted limiting their access to legal and fairly paid employment, the right to own property and the ability to move freely.<sup>2</sup> Palestinians are excluded from over 30 professions and require a work permit for others which can only be obtained with the support of the employer.<sup>3</sup> Some employers are unwilling to undertake the process or prefer to employ a refugee illegally on a lower wage than a Lebanese employee. PRS are more disadvantaged than PRL because their displacement from Syria has resulted in a loss of material resources and disruption of social support networks and establishing their right to stay in Lebanon can be bureaucratically complicated and expensive. Consequently, many PRS find themselves in Lebanon illegally and lack the finances to resolve their legal status or are unable or unwilling to approach the relevant authorities for help. For example, PRS may require additional documentation from Syria to present to the Lebanese authorities but fear detention in Syria if they return to obtain it. There are military checkpoints throughout Lebanon, including at the entrances to many of the camps, therefore, without legal residency and identity documents, the mobility of PRS is often severely impeded making it difficult to access employment opportunities and services.

The living conditions in the 12 official camps and 156 recognized gatherings are difficult.<sup>4</sup> They are overcrowded and noisy. The poorly constructed buildings are damp in the winter and humid in the summer because sunlight does not penetrate the narrow streets and the air cannot circulate. For decades, the Palestinians camps and gatherings have attracted economic migrants from other countries, other refugee groups and poorer Lebanese because they offer more affordable accommodation than elsewhere in Lebanon. The war in Syria has brought PRS and Syrian refugees to live in the Palestinian settlements, significantly increasing the populations of camps and gatherings and adding to the population density as well increasing pressure on the already overstretched and inadequate infrastructure. The extension of water and electricity sup-

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2 UNRWA, 2015; UNHCR, 2016

3 UNHCR, 2016; UNRWA, 2015

4 For more information about living conditions in the camps see: Roberts, 2010; UNHCR 2016. For more information about living conditions in the gatherings see UNDP, 2018. The gatherings are geographical areas outside official camps that contain a minimum of 15 Palestinian households (LPDC, 2018).

plies to meet the needs of the expanded populations has resulted in a network of inter-twined waterpipes and electricity wires overhead, blocking out the sun and, in the case of Bourj al-Barajneh camp, resulting in the electrocution and subsequent deaths of tens of people a year.

Unemployment rates in the Palestinian camps and gatherings are high although estimates vary depending on how employment is measured. PRS and PRL tend to estimate unemployment among their populations at over 50 percent which is the conclusion of a 2010 survey<sup>5</sup> although other surveys concluded that rates of unemployment are lower.<sup>6</sup> However, it is agreed that unemployment rates among PRL and PRS are higher than among the Lebanese and that Palestinians tend to be underemployed and more heavily reliant on uncertain daily-labour than the Lebanese. Consequently, poverty and levels of vulnerability are high among PRL and PRS. A 2015 survey concluded that among PRL poverty is at 65 percent and among PRS at 90 percent including '9 percent living in extreme poverty unable to meet their... essential food requirements.'<sup>7</sup> The influx of refugees from Syria has increased competition for available work. More refugees are opening small businesses in the Palestinian settlements, but the market is limited, and the profitability of such ventures is unclear. The inability of Palestinians to generate an adequate income to support themselves means that they are particularly reliant on UNRWA services, especially as Palestinian access to government services is limited and private alternatives are unaffordable for most refugees.

As a host country, Lebanon faces multiple challenges. Its economy is weak, inequality and poverty are rising, employment opportunities, particularly for the youth are limited, and the national debt is greater than its gross domestic product. The Syria Crisis has added to the economic strain in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> It hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world. According to UNHCR – the UN Refugee Agency which support all refugee groups except Palestinians - there are an estimated 1.5 million refugees from Syria plus a further 20,000 refugees of other origins.<sup>9</sup> UNRWA has registered almost 470,000 PRL in Lebanon although a survey conducted in 2017 estimates that less than half that number are actually living in Lebanon.<sup>10</sup> UNRWA calculates that for 2019 there are almost 29,000 PRS in Lebanon.<sup>11</sup> There is little state provision of services with the vast majority of Lebanese paying for private healthcare and education. The country's

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5 AUB, 2010

6 UNDP, 2018

7 AUB and UNRWA, 2015: 2

8 World Bank, 2018

9 UNHCR, 2019

10 LPDC, 2018

11 UNRWA, 2018

delicate sectarian balance has led to the creation of a complex political system to ensure the representation of the 18 different officially recognized sects which frequently delays the formation of the national level government and has resulted in policies and legislation being implemented differently from one municipality to another. Therefore, the assistance afforded to refugees, their freedom of movement and ability to access rights, varies throughout the country, and the international and national organizations supporting refugees must adapt operations to the local context.

The cessation of US funding in 2018 meant that UNRWA had a deficit of 300 million US dollars which amounted to around 'a quarter of its total essential funding requirements'.<sup>12</sup> For 2019, UNRWA needs 1.2 billion US dollars for its operational and emergency budgets throughout all areas of operations and some additional funding for emergency appeals.<sup>13</sup> Other member states covered the deficit for UNRWA in 2018 but it is unclear whether additional funding for 2019 will be forthcoming. To date (February 2019) UNRWA has funding to cover its operations until June 2019. UNRWA responded to the 2018 financial crisis by suspending recruitment of new staff and increasing the responsibilities of existing staff. It reduced vocational training courses; the percentage covered for hospitalization including childbirth; the number of healthcare facilities; types of medication available; and access to medical specialists. As the funding shortfall was covered, some of the plans to reduce costs such as closing and amalgamating schools were suspended. There is clearly a moratorium on staff recruitment and a reduction in some services although, as the budget deficit was apparently covered, it is unclear about how far UNRWA implemented its 2018 plans to reduce costs. UNRWA services have been underfunded for decades and the Agency has experienced numerous financial crises<sup>14</sup> so it is difficult to differentiate between the reduction in services caused by the loss of US funding and the gradual decline in services as a result of ongoing chronic underfunding.<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing (February 2019) UNRWA had not shared details of its budget in a way that external organizations can understand what funding is available and how potential shortfalls in funding for 2019 will be managed.

UNRWA is not the only organization providing services to Palestinians facing funding cuts. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that its 2019 planning budget for its Palestinian programme is at 20 percent of what it was in 2015. It acknowledges that it is facing budget shortfalls for other programmes in Lebanon but that its Palestinian programme has been the most badly hit. Furthermore, UNICEF's Palestinian programmes operate in the camps and gatherings so are accessed by non-Palestin-

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12 UNRWA, 2019

13 UNRWA, 2019

14 UNGA, 2017

15 Roberts, 2010

ians, as well as the Palestinians, thereby stretching the limited resources further. Many of the local NGOs report increasing difficulty in securing funding for their Palestinian programmes citing donor fatigue, the global economic downturn and the reallocation of available funding to support UNRWA, Syrian refugees and regional responses to the Syria Crisis.

Given the difficult environment for Palestinians in Lebanon, ongoing decline in services from UNRWA and other organizations, and the possibility that funding shortfalls could further limit services, it is important to understand how Palestinians have coped and what factors have helped to build and maintain their resilience. Doctoral research conducted in official refugee camps in 2001 and 2002 and updated in 2006 for publication, concluded that Palestinians' most important coping mechanisms are their social networks and psychological strength. There is a strong correlation between the size and diversity of an individual's social network and their socioeconomic status, so the larger the social network the higher the socioeconomic status tends to be. The determination, strong sense of identity and community belonging all contribute towards Palestinian psychological resilience.<sup>16</sup> Palestinians are not a homogenous group - differences in age, gender and physical and mental ability mean that some individuals and households cope better than others. Factors such as educational level, chronic health problems, geographical location, and living in a female-headed household all affect coping mechanisms and socioeconomic status.<sup>17</sup> Although Palestinians' own social and psychological strengths are their key coping mechanisms, research also suggests that health and education services, particularly those from UNRWA as the main provider, have been fundamental to the long-term development of Palestinians in Lebanon and enabled them to look to and invest in their future. Many Palestinians have been able to provide for their families and meet immediate needs such as food, shelter and clothing. However, they are unable to pay for private health and education services, especially as many are without the means to generate a proper income. Access to free UNRWA health and education services and complementary services provided by numerous NGOs, enhance Palestinians' future prospects, enable them to look beyond their immediate needs and have been fundamental to their resilience in Lebanon.<sup>18</sup>

Drawing extensively on the views of PRL and PRS women and girls, the report considers the role that UNRWA health and education services play in their lives. While these issues were being discussed, it came across strongly that uncertainty about the future

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16 Roberts, 2004 & 2010

17 Roberts, 2010; AUB and UNRWA 2015; UNDP, 2018

18 Roberts, 2004 & 2010

of UNRWA and its services is negatively affecting the mental well-being of Palestinian refugees. Respondents also expressed concern for UNRWA staff whom they feel are overworked, unable to fulfil their newly expanded roles and that job insecurity was affecting performance and causing stress. The tensions created are feeding into one another as, for example, children taught by anxious teachers unable to control their tempers, return home stressed from school and take out their frustrations on other family members. The cuts to UNRWA services do not happen in a vacuum; all have extensive consequences affecting all aspects of daily life.

# 3.

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## UNRWA Education Services

Palestinians complain that UNRWA education services have been in decline for years, so it is difficult to separate the impact of recent US funding cuts from reductions in services made in response to longstanding funding shortages. However, the main complaints among respondents about UNRWA education services were consistent among the PRL and PRS, the different age groups and geographical locations. The moratorium on hiring new staff means that class sizes are large, up to 50 pupils, and that staff, including the head and deputy teachers, are expected to cover classes for absent colleagues. For longer-term absences, extra staff are contracted on a temporary basis. Some teachers travel from one area of the country to another and pupils complain of a lack of continuity in teaching as different teachers cover the curriculum. The qualifications of the teachers and their educational skills are also perceived to be lower than in the past and teachers are taking classes outside their areas of expertise. In some instances, there are no teachers for key subjects which form part of the national examinations for 2019.

The large class sizes, which seemed to affect schools outside Beirut more than those in the capital, limit the time that teachers can devote to individual pupils so many questions go unanswered. Pupils explained that the large class sizes and cramped conditions mean that classrooms are noisy and teachers struggle to maintain discipline. There are vacant classrooms in some schools, but the lack of teachers means that these are not used. The large class sizes are one of the reasons that children give for dropping out of school. There is an increased reliance on private tutors to get children through their examinations to the extent that some UNRWA teachers are instructing pupils to direct any questions they might have about a lesson to their tutors. Children already complain about large amounts of homework so private tutoring further extends the study day and limits time to socialize with friends and family. Not all households can afford private tutors so children from poorer backgrounds are disadvantaged next to their more affluent peers. Concern was also expressed that families with limited financial resources would be more likely to focus on covering educational costs for their sons rather than their daughters.

Early in 2018, UNRWA announced plans to merge and close some of their schools to reduce costs. These plans were never implemented although Palestinians continue to worry that this might happen. Apparently, plans to build larger schools are also under consideration because it is thought that donors would be more willing to fund a building than cover ongoing costs. Larger schools would help to achieve economies of scale so would reduce UNRWA's overall education running costs. If children have to travel further to school, there are potential transport costs which some families may not be able to afford. Limited funds may force some families to choose which children to educate and many respondents felt that parents would often focus on educating their sons over their daughters. There is also a risk that girls from more conservative families will be prevented from attending a school that is perceived to be too far away from their homes. The AUB-UNRWA 2015 study concluded that for PRS the longer the distance between home and school the lower the enrolment rate, reasoning that cost of transport or restrictions on freedom of movement were preventing children from attending school.<sup>19</sup>

Lebanon is the only area of UNRWA operations where the Agency provides secondary schools as Palestinians are restricted from entering Lebanese government schools. Without these secondary schools, it is unlikely that many Palestinians would be able to secure a secondary education and therefore enter University. Those parents who can afford to cover secondary education costs may not be able to cover university fees in addition as any savings would already have been exhausted. As UNRWA's provision of secondary schools in Lebanon is an anomaly, there is speculation that, if further cuts are necessary, the secondary schools might be closed. If this happens respondents felt that they had no hope of entering university and would be lucky to complete their secondary education.

UNRWA has never provided university education directly but it has offered scholarships to the most academically able to attend universities in Lebanon. Over the years, the number of scholarships has declined. NGOs and philanthropic organizations also provide university scholarships. One NGO offering scholarships reports that just over half are awarded to women which, although positive, probably indicates that women are less likely than men to be able to travel outside Lebanon to attend university. It should also be noted that parents are more likely to invest in university education for their sons rather than their daughters. UNRWA also provides a limited number of places at Sibleen, its vocational training college in Lebanon, and supports some of these places with scholarships. However, the number of vocational scholarships has been in

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19 AUB and UNRWA, 2015: 10



decline and, in 2017, only 25 scholarships were awarded to PRS.<sup>20</sup> Sibleen has suspended its teacher training courses designed specifically for UNRWA schools because of the moratorium on hiring new teaching staff. In January 2018, UNRWA employed over 2,000 teaching staff in Lebanon and almost 60 percent of these were women so an important employment opportunity for Palestinian women has temporarily and potentially permanently disappeared.<sup>21</sup>

Female respondents valued the fact that UNRWA has given Palestinian refugee girls equal access to education alongside boys. Despite the obstacles in entering professional employment, many girls expressed a desire to complete their education and aimed to go to university in order to secure a profession and an income. They said that UNRWA education services made this a possibility and gave them hope. There was an overwhelming concern among women and girls that if UNRWA reduced or cut its education services completely, there would be a negative impact on both boys and girls. However, families with the ability to pay for their children's education would be most likely to focus on educating their sons rather than their daughters. If there are available places after all eligible Lebanese children have been enrolled, it is sometimes possible for a small number of Palestinians to attend Lebanese state schools. Therefore, without the opportunity to access education through UNRWA, girls and women would remain uneducated and there would be long-term social and economic repercussions. For girls, especially those from more conservative families, going to school is one of the rare opportunities they have to leave the home, to socialize and to make friends. If there is no school to go to, girls will stay at home and be expected to help with domestic chores. It is more likely that they will be exposed to early marriage, especially those from poorer households as early marriage will be viewed as a way of alleviating poverty. Without an education, women have no means of working to support themselves so marriage or remaining under the care of her parents are her only options. Respondents felt that uneducated women who become divorced would be particularly vulnerable as they would have no means of generating an adequate income to support themselves, they would be forced into low-paid unskilled work, such as cleaning where, because their options are so limited, they would be a risk of exploitation and abuse by employers. Alternatively, they could return to the family home but would be an additional financial burden to a household that might already be struggling to support its members. In the long-term women who are illiterate will struggle with daily life and to

20 UNRWA, 2018e

21 UNRWA, 2018a

access their rights. A 2011 study noted that children of mothers who had no education had a higher mortality rate than those whose mothers had secondary or higher level of education.<sup>22</sup> As children grow, mothers will be unable to educate them and support their learning resulting in generations of undereducated females with few employment options and personal choices.

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22 MAP, 2018

# 4.

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## UNRWA Healthcare

Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) states in a 2018 report that 'Palestinians in Lebanon have historically faced significant obstacles to their realisation of right to health'.<sup>23</sup> Ongoing chronic underfunding and overstretched UNRWA health services mean that additional cuts to services in 2018 further limited Palestinians' ability to access their right to health. Again, it is difficult to separate the impact of recent cuts on healthcare from reduction in services because of ongoing lack of funding. Of particular importance to women are UNRWA's pre- and post-natal care, which respondents considered to be good, the childhood vaccination programme provided in conjunction with UNICEF, and free contraception. Women expressed concern about the prospects for their own health and that of their children if these UNRWA services were to disappear.

In 2018 UNRWA reduced the number and types of childbirths it funded in hospital. Some of the decisions appear to have been reversed but there is a lack of clarity about which costs UNRWA covers and respondents in different parts of Lebanon described different entitlements. For example, UNRWA announced that only caesarean sections would be covered and not natural deliveries. Consequently, the number of women opting for caesarean births increased so UNRWA reversed this decision. In Beirut respondents reported that UNRWA has agreed to cover caesarean births, complex births and the first births in hospital but, elsewhere, respondents thought that UNRWA would cover all births in hospital. There was concern that without UNRWA funded deliveries, women would be forced to give birth at home without access to medical help in the event of complications.

The vaccination programme for children is considered particularly important, especially given the poor living conditions for many Palestinian refugees. UNICEF provides the vaccinations and is concerned about how these would be delivered to the children without UNRWA clinics. The only potential alternative for the delivery of vaccinations to Palestinians is the Palestinian Red Crescent Society (PRCS). Like UNRWA, PRCS is also chronically underfunded and over-stretched and does not have the same cover-

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23 MAP, 2018: 4

age throughout the country as UNRWA.<sup>24</sup> The UNRWA-UNICEF vaccination programme is considered a success with a reported 99.5 percent of children under five vaccinated throughout all UNRWA areas of operations in 2018.<sup>25</sup> Mothers are aware that the vaccination programme exists, and, as the statistics show, ensure that their children attend the UNRWA clinics for their vaccinations.

Access to free contraception allows women to plan and space their pregnancies although respondents complained that the types of free contraception that UNRWA provided was limited and not appropriate for all women. Respondents also noted that use of contraceptives was often dependent on permission from the husband. Without free contraception, or the ability to pay for contraception, women will be unable to plan and space pregnancies which negatively impacts on their health and that of their children. Unwanted pregnancies increase household costs and contribute to family tensions, potentially leading to domestic violence and family breakdown. Many NGO staff highlighted the already relatively high levels of domestic violence among the Palestinian population explaining that difficult living conditions and financial worries contribute to tensions in the home. Unwanted pregnancies only add to these tensions and the financial burden for a household. Respondents considered it unlikely that women would resort to aborting pregnancies and this is not currently common practice.

Respondents also noted UNRWA's lack of female doctors. They explained reluctance to discuss certain issues such as reproductive and sexual health with a male doctor so would delay or postpone indefinitely seeking professional medical advice. In some instances, male relatives prevent female relatives from consulting a male doctor. The number of mobile clinics provided by UNRWA and NGOs has been reduced in recent years due to lack of funds. Donors argue that the mobile clinics are unnecessary when static medical facilities are nearby. However, mobile clinics are particularly important to women and girls who may not be allowed or may be unwilling to travel to medical facilities unaccompanied. Mothers have domestic chores and children that they are unable to leave, or they may be living with their husband's family and want to consult a medical professional without anyone's knowledge.

The doctors at UNRWA clinics have an average of 2.5 minutes with each patient.<sup>26</sup> Respondents report that usually the patient explains the problem and tells the doctor what medication they would like so that the doctor can write the prescription. The UNRWA pharmacy does not always have the prescribed medication in stock so those that

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24 MAP, 2018

25 UNRWA, 2018c

26 MAP, 2018: 5

can afford it purchase it elsewhere; those that cannot, go without. Since the start of the latest financial crisis, patients noted that UNRWA has been prescribing medicines that are near or past their best before date. Patients also noted the lack of appropriate medical expertise available at the clinics with doctors often being required to work outside their specialist areas.

The percentage of the cost of treatment that UNRWA covers for complex and chronic conditions, including medication and hospitalization, is declining. For decades, Palestinian refugees have sought additional support to cover their medical fees from friends and relatives, particularly those living abroad, NGOs and political factions. The number of hospitals contracted by UNRWA to provide treatment has decreased so Palestinians with limited access to transport or lacking the appropriate papers to access a hospital in a different area may forego treatment. Respondents also criticised the quality of services available at UNRWA contracted hospitals arguing that they were incapable of providing more than basic medical help. Respondents reported going without treatment and, although all sectors of the Palestinian refugee population are affected, it was thought that women, particularly mothers, would be more likely than men to sacrifice their own needs to enable other family members to benefit from the limited family resources. The elderly are particularly affected by UNRWA cuts to health services for chronic and complex conditions. NGO staff noted that the percentage of the fees UNRWA covers for hospital treatment seems to decrease with the age of the patient. Respondents also note difficulties in accessing healthcare facilities whether they are located near or at a distance from their home. This is because the camps and gatherings have narrow and uneven streets seldom wide enough for a vehicle or even a wheelchair. Consequently, the elderly and the less physically able struggle to get to healthcare facilities and to access them when they get there as few are adapted for persons with disabilities. The overworked UNRWA staff also reportedly become frustrated with the elderly patients who are late, either because they were confused and were mistaken about the time and date of their appointment, or it took them longer than expected to travel to the clinic. Although reductions in UNRWA healthcare affect both elderly men and women, elderly women are expected to act as carers for their husbands and undertake household tasks whereas the men, if they have stopped working, have fewer responsibilities than their wives. Economic pressures have forced younger Palestinians to migrate. Consequently, many of the elderly cannot rely on younger relatives for help as they once might have done which has added to the workload for elderly women.

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## The Role of NGOs

NGO activities complement UNRWA services and are important to the PRL and PRS in camps and gatherings who recognize that their lives would be even more difficult without the work of the NGOs. Despite the essential functions performed by many of the NGOs, they are not in a position to assume responsibility for UNRWA's services. It is widely recognized, including by UNRWA, that the Agency operates as a quasi-government and, therefore, it is beyond the capacity of NGOs to fulfil such a role.<sup>27</sup> NGOs implement a range of education and health programmes some of which are funded because they are specifically designed to complement existing UNRWA services. UNICEF noted that funding for some of these complementary NGO programmes may be withdrawn if UNRWA services are further reduced or terminated because their value lies in the synergy created between UNRWA and NGO activities. Consequently, PRL and PRS could lose a range of NGO services as well as UNRWA services as a result of reduced funding for the Agency which would have a profound negative effect on the lives of Palestinian refugees. The NGOs provide employment opportunities for Palestinians, particularly women, so important income streams would be lost.

UNRWA's inclusivity policy means that its services are available to persons with disabilities but, to provide a wider range of services to persons with disabilities, the Agency works closely with the Disability Forum in Lebanon and NGOs to support both persons with disabilities and their families.<sup>28</sup> Services include the provision of assistive devices, rehabilitation and awareness raising of disability among the population. NGOs also provide important psychosocial support to persons with disabilities and their families. UNRWA estimates that 15 percent of registered Palestinians have disabilities throughout its areas of operation.<sup>29</sup> Persons with disabilities and their families are often marginalized and stigmatized, and face multiple vulnerabilities including poverty and lack of education. Persons with disabilities are more at risk of violence and abuse than other sectors of the population and women and girls with disabilities are generally considered to be more vulnerable than men and boys with disabilities.<sup>30</sup>

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27 UNGA, 2017

28 UNRWA, 2018d

29 UNRWA, 2018d

30 WHO & WB 2011

NGOs provide a variety of educational and psychosocial activities including kindergartens, after school programmes, summer activities, additional education support and vocational training. UNRWA has limited psychosocial activities and NGOs, based in the community, are probably more appropriate organizations to deliver these. They provide counselling, trips into the countryside and recreational activities. NGOs offer educational support to children who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out with the aim of supporting them to re-enter mainstream education or to identify a suitable vocation and access to appropriate training. Some NGOs fund additional teachers to go into UNRWA schools to provide extra support to children who are struggling in overcrowded classrooms staffed by overworked and overstretched UNRWA teachers. The Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP) have been important for PRS children who did not possess the foreign language skills to cope with the curriculum in Lebanon. The ALPs, delivered by NGOs, were designed to improve English language skills, provide teaching in core subjects to make up for the education children had missed while out of school, and provide psychosocial support to children and their families to cope with the trauma of the conflict in Syria and displacement to Lebanon.

NGOs supplement UNRWA healthcare by providing mobile clinics and home visits to the sick and elderly to monitor health problems, administer medication, change dressings and provide social care such as bed baths. NGOs also provide health education including information about reproductive and sexual health. Some NGOs may be able to provide small amounts of funding for medical treatments not fully covered by UNRWA. In addition, the PRCS operates five hospitals in Lebanon, some of which are contracted by UNRWA to provide hospital treatment, although with inadequate funding and resources, the capacity of PRCS hospitals is limited.<sup>31</sup>

NGO staff noted good cooperation with UNRWA in certain areas such as child protection and good relationships at the level of implementation. For example, some NGOs have access to UNRWA facilities for their own activities or, in the case of additional support teachers, NGOs being able to provide their services alongside UNRWA's. However, NGO staff reported that they are rarely consulted or actively included in planning processes, instead, they explained, UNRWA tends to inform NGOs of its decisions. The NGOs want a partnership and to be actively involved in strategic planning processes so that they can adopt a longer-term perspective and can plan accordingly as well as establish common policies and approaches to donors. NGOs also recognize that there are opportunities for improving cooperation among themselves such as agreeing a common curriculum for the kindergartens. The NGO pre-school education is important in preparing children for school and in providing childcare so that parents lucky

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31 MAP, 2018

enough to have jobs can go to work. As the majority of children will be attending UNRWA schools which follow the same curriculum it would be possible for NGOs to agree a common approach and objectives for their kindergarten.

The NGOs are important to PRL and PRS, but their numbers and range of services are more extensive in urban areas, particularly Beirut, than in rural areas. The availability of UNRWA services is also better in urban than in rural areas so Palestinians living in Beirut or other towns have more resources on which to draw than those in the countryside.



# 6.

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## Conclusions: Promoting Dignity and Resilience

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in a difficult environment, unable to access their rights. Their own social networks and psychological strengths provide important coping mechanisms but access to UNRWA health and education services and the complementary services provided by NGOs, have enabled Palestinians to invest in their future, maintain their dignity and reinforce their resilience. As a protracted refugee group, humanitarian assistance that encourages a dependency culture is inappropriate for large sectors of the population who are able to meet their basic needs but need access to services such as health and education to promote development. The decline in UNRWA health and education services, and potential future cuts, have far reaching social and economic consequences for women and girls that extend well beyond the withdrawal of a particular service or termination of a particular programme. The impact on women and girls depends on their own socioeconomic background, family attitudes towards woman, and physical and mental ability. Currently, PRS women and girls are generally in a more vulnerable position than PRL women and girls because they tend to be significantly poorer, their social support networks have been disrupted or destroyed and their residency status in Lebanon can be complicated or expensive to legalize. Respondents overwhelmingly believe that without access to UNRWA health and education services, the progress Palestinian women and girls have made in the last 70 years would be lost. Access to healthcare has improved their overall health and that of their families, enabled them to give birth with medical support and provided them with contraception to plan and space their pregnancies. Girls have had the same rights to education as boys. The provision of secondary schools has provided access to university, particularly if they secure a scholarship, and the prospects of having a professional career and generating an income. These benefits from health and education have a generational and wide-ranging impact as women pass on their knowledge to their children, contribute to the household income and are able to access their rights and services to support their family.

The uncertainty about the future of UNRWA is negatively impacting on the mental well-being of Palestinian refugees and UNRWA staff and the potential loss of UNRWA services could be catastrophic for Palestinian refugees:

- UNRWA should provide greater clarity about the financial situation and consult Palestinians, including women and girls, about which services are important to them and how they would be affected by the termination or reduction of certain services. In this way, the needs of Palestinians can be prioritized and the potential impact of cuts to services minimized as far as possible.
- UNRWA should expand its cooperation with NGOs to involve the NGOs actively in strategic planning to enable more effective complementary programming and provide a unified platform for resources mobilization.
- NGOs should maximize the impact of their work by improving coordination among themselves and, where appropriate, undertake joint programming or adopt a uniform approach.
- UNRWA and NGOs should continue to raise awareness among donors and the international community about the importance of UNRWA services to Palestinians in Lebanon to ensure they understand the socioeconomic repercussions of the loss of health and education services to all Palestinians and the specific impact of these losses on PRL and PRS women and girls.

# 7.

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## Annexes

### 7.1 Acronyms

ALP	Accelerated Learning Programme
LPDC	Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee
MAP	Medical Aid for Palestinians
PRL	Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon
PRS	Palestinian Refugees from Syria
PRCS	Palestinian Red Crescent Society
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

### 7.2 Resources Consulted

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- Roberts, Rebecca (2010) *Palestinians in Lebanon: refugees living with long-term displacement*, I B Tauris: London & New York
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- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2018) *Assessing Vulnerabilities in Palestinian gatherings in Lebanon: results of the 2017 household survey*, September 2018
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2016) *The Situation of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, February 2016
- United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (2017) *Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, Report of the Secretary General*, 30 March 2017
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2019) *Global Focus: Lebanon 2019* [http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2520#\\_ga=2.150683952.746510806.1548238905-368864316.1548238905](http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2520#_ga=2.150683952.746510806.1548238905-368864316.1548238905) (accessed 23 January 2019)
- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2015) *Labour Market Research and Development Committee, Professions of Restricted Access for Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, 12 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/20jg9wM> (accessed 22 February 2019)
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- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2018b)
- *Verification of Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon*, 4 October 2018
- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2018c) *UNRWA Lebanon Field Office Key Operational Achievements 2018*

- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2018d) *Disability and Annual Inclusion Report 2018*
- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2018e) *Annual Operational Report for 2017 for the reporting period 01 January 2017 - 31 December 2017*
- United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (2019) *UNRWA in 2019 – priorities and financial requirements*
- World Bank (2018) *The World Bank in Lebanon: overview*, last updated October 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview> (accessed 21 February 2019)
- World Health Organization (WHO) & World Bank (WB) (2011) *World Report on Disability*, World Health Organization & World Bank

## 7.3 Research Participants

Two members of political factions in Bourj al-Barajneh and two UNRWA staff members asked to remain anonymous.

### Individual Participants

Date	Name	Position	Organization
22 Jan 2019	Hosni Abou Takka	Head	Popular Committee, PLO, Bourj al-Barajneh Camp
24 Jan 2019	Yusef Badr Merhi	Head	Popular Committee, Bourj al-Barajneh camp
29 Jan 2019	Fathi Qasem Saed	Education Department Officer	Popular Committee, Bourj al-Shamali camp
29 Jan 2019	Waheed Mohammed Ahmed	Refugee Files officer	Popular Committee, Bourj al-Shamali camp
29 Jan 2019	Mohmoud al-Juma'a	Director, Bourj al-Shamali	Bait Atfal Assmoud
30 Jan 2019	Fouad al-Hussein		Al Ghad
31 Jan 2019	Fadia Dahsheh	Coordinator of Empowerment Women Program	Popular Aid for Relief and Development
31 Jan 2019	Hiba Hamzi	Program Coordinator	Naba'a Organization
31 Jan 2019	KaFa Hourani	Health Educator	Naba'a Organization
1 Feb 2019	Najah Khamis	ICLA Coordinator-Palestinian Response	Norwegian Refugee Council
1 Feb 2019	Nathalie Der Mesrobian		Norwegian Refugee Council
2 Feb 2019	Dr Olfat Mahmoud	Executive Director	Women's Humanitarian Organization
5 Feb 2019	Dr Ali Dakwar	Director of Programmes	Medical Aid for Palestinians
5 Feb 2019	Nazih Yacoub	Head, Palestinian Programme	UNICEF
5 Feb 2019	Dr May Hammoud	Legal Officer	Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee
12 Feb 2019	Ali Hwedi	General Director	Elhayya 302

## Focus Group Discussions

Date	Group	Number of Participants
<b>Bourj al-Barajneh Camp, Beirut</b>		
24 January 2019	Women 25-45	6
24 January 2019	Women 60 plus	9
25 January 2019	Female students 15	7
<b>Bourj al-Shamali &amp; Sour Gatherings</b>		
30 January 2019	Association Najdeh Coordinators	5
30 January 2019	Women 25-45	8
30 January 2019	Women 60 plus	8
30 January 2019	NGO staff	4
30 January 2019	Female students 15-20	6
31 January 2019	Women 25-45 & 60+	6
<b>Beqa'a Gatherings</b>		
4 February 2019	Women 25-45	8
4 February 2019	Women 60 plus	6
4 February 2019	Association Najdeh staff	5
4 February 2019	Female students 15-17	8
<b>Education Committee, 6 February 2018</b>		
Name	Position	Organization
Zahr Abdullatif	Social Worker	Bait Atfal Assmoud
Jamile Shehade	Social Worker	Bait Atfal Assmoud
Intisar Abu Salem	Psychosocial Support Coordinator	Association Najdeh
Shahnaz Meri	Career Guidance Coordinator	Palestinian Students' Fund
Khalidat Hussein	Executive Director	Social and Cultural Solidarity Association
Malia Jebnan	Project officer	Right to Play

<b>Health Committee, 6 February 2018</b>		
Firas Khawaleed	Project Support Officer	Médecins Sans Frontières
Angela Brucata	Project Coordinator, Saida	Médecins Sans Frontières
Hanadi Ayoub	Accountant	Social and Cultural Solidarity Association
Hala Chaaban	Rehabilitation and Disability Officer	Mosawat
Ali Salam	Area Coordinator	Naba'a
Rita Hamdan	Executive Director	Popular Aid for Relief and Development
Jamile Shehade	Social Worker	Bait Atfal Assmoud
Intisar Abu Salem	Psychosocial Support Coordinator	Association Najdeh