Where Return Is a Beginning: Female-Headed Households and Gendered Struggles for Recovery in South Lebanon

This short article spotlights what the authors introduce as "the feminization of recovery" of internally displaced communities in Lebanon's southern border with Israel, where women's unpaid and unrecognized efforts sustain reconstruction in the absence of formal systems following the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah one year ago.

The October 2023 conflict along Lebanon's southern border displaced thousands, with female-headed households (FHHs) among the most affected. Returning after the 'ceasefire,' many women faced destroyed homes, scarce livelihoods, and gender norms privileging male breadwinners, all compounded by Lebanon's refusal to recognize internally displaced persons (IDPs). Without legal acknowledgment or state support, women relied on informal networks, care work, and community solidarity to rebuild. Drawing on qualitative research (2023-2025), this commentary examines how FHHs transform survival into agency, turning daily labor and mutual support into the backbone of recovery. Recognizing their roles demands a policy shift from short-term aid to gender-sensitive livelihoods, housing repair, psychosocial support, and municipal funding that affirms women not as victims of war, but as architects of post-conflict renewal.

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Introduction

The October 2023 escalation of conflict on Lebanon's southern borders between Israel and Hezbollah has added yet another layer of displacement and precarity to a country already grappling with overlapping political, economic, and humanitarian crises. Thousands of

residents from southern villages were uprooted amid intense bombardment and insecurity, seeking refuge in safer areas across Lebanon. While displacement is not new to the Lebanese context, and particularly its South, the 2023 escalation has brought longstanding vulnerabilities back into sharp focus, particularly for women who head their households. As the ceasefire prompted a gradual process of return, many of these female-headed households (FHHs) encountered not only the material devastation of war but also structural and gendered barriers that shape their ability to reintegrate and rebuild.

Return, often portrayed in policy and humanitarian discourse as a natural endpoint to displacement, is rarely linear or equitable. For women-led families in post-conflict settings, it unfolds within the constraints of patriarchal norms, weakened state structures, and limited access to livelihood opportunities. In South Lebanon, where local economies rely heavily on agricultural and informal labor historically dominated by men, the absence of male household members, whether due to death, migration, or marital separation, translates into profound socioeconomic marginalization. FHH returnees find themselves negotiating survival within systems that continue to privilege male breadwinners as the default. Yet, amid these constraints, they also exhibit remarkable resilience, mobilizing social networks, informal economies, and community-based solidarity to sustain their families.

Despite Lebanon's long history of displacement, the gendered dimensions of return remain critically underexamined in both scholarship and policy. Existing research tends to subsume women's experiences within broader analyses of post-conflict recovery or displacement, obscuring the specific intersectional challenges that FHHs face. The neglect of this demographic is not merely an academic gap; it has tangible implications for humanitarian programming and reconstruction efforts that continue to operate on gender-blind assumptions. This commentary seeks to address this oversight by foregrounding the lived realities of FHH returnees in South Lebanon and situating them within broader theoretical and policy debates on gender, displacement, and post-conflict reconstruction.

For FHHs in South Lebanon, coming home after displacement often means navigating social expectations, limited livelihoods, and the absence of the men whose labor or protection systems once structured their communities. These challenges are compounded by Lebanon's legal and

political stance: the state does not formally recognise internally displaced persons (IDPs). As a result, women returning to their villages do so without any official acknowledgment of their displacement or the protections that such a status would ordinarily entail. This absence of recognition renders their experiences invisible to the very institutions responsible for supporting them, forcing them to rely on informal networks, family, and humanitarian actors. Yet within these constraints, women continue to adapt, rebuild, and support one another through care, persistence, and creativity. Their stories expose the blind spots of most recovery efforts, which still assume that men lead households and make decisions.

By centring these women's experiences, this commentary joins wider conversations about how gender, class, and displacement shape the realities of return, and how women's everyday acts of survival and care are themselves forms of resilience and quiet resistance.

The Gendered Burdens of Return: Navigating loss, displacement, and economic insecurity

For many FHHs in South Lebanon, the so-called "return" amid the ongoing and escalating armed conflict has been less a restoration of normalcy than a re-entry into the absence of kin and friends, of livelihoods, of security, and of belonging. The act of going home often meant confronting physical ruins and emotional voids that redefined what "home" itself could mean. The process of return, as articulated by several women, was filled with contradiction: the deep longing for familiarity and rootedness colliding with the crushing awareness that the life they once knew could not be recovered.

As one woman, AA, explained, *"It was not easy at all to go back to a normal life, missing so many people who were murdered and were always there as part of your daily routine. There's an empty space in the heart filled with memories and their pictures we're placing all around."* The landscape of return, then, was not only one of destroyed homes and infrastructure, but also of fragmented communities and emotional devastation. The memory of those lost mothers, husbands and neighbours haunted the very spaces women sought to reclaim. LD articulated this sense of irreparable loss with clarity: *"My biggest loss after the war was losing my mother. I don't care if the house is destroyed*

or not. I don't mind destroying it myself if my mom is back there." Her words encapsulate the emotional dissonance of return: that the reconstruction of walls and roofs could not substitute for the loss of relational anchors that made home meaningful.

The psychological burden of return was further compounded by the social isolation and constrained autonomy women experienced both during and after displacement. AJA reflected on how dislocation had eroded her sense of purpose: *"Instead of an independent life, I lived in a crowded house. Instead of having a fruitful time working and studying, I isolated myself by playing games and watching online videos."* Upon returning, she described the struggle to reassert control over her life amid familial and social pressures: *"I had to struggle to find a balance between what I wanted post return and what made me feel comfortable, while at the same time dealing with my family's opinions that limited my independence."* This internal negotiation, between self-determination and social conformity, reveals how patriarchal expectations persist and even intensify in post-conflict contexts, where women's movements and choices are often reabsorbed into traditional moral economies of family and community.

For elderly women and widows, these challenges were magnified by acute economic vulnerability. SM lamented, *"I cannot even save for emergencies or for my old age."* Her words underscore a broader structural reality: that Lebanon's collapsing economy, compounded by war-related displacement, offers little protection for women outside male-centred income networks. The absence of formal employment opportunities and the rising cost of living meant that many FHHs were pushed further into precarity, relying on irregular assistance or informal labor to survive. As ASA observed, *"Being alone is tiring. Even if he is just working and not benefiting from an institution, a man's income could have made at least a bit of difference."* The statement captures both the economic and emotional weight of absence, where the missing male provider symbolizes not only financial strain but also social invisibility within systems that continue to define households by the presence of men.

Indeed, return itself was often a gendered risk. Driven by attachment to place and the exhaustion of displacement, some women made perilous decisions to go back even before conditions were stable. As ASA recalled,

"Even on the day they started negotiating the ceasefire decision, I returned so as not to stay internally displaced for a longer time. I ignored the risks and made a very dangerous decision." Her words reveal the emotional urgency of homecoming, as well as the determination to reclaim agency, however constrained, even at personal risk. Yet this agency unfolded within a context of structural neglect: destroyed infrastructure, limited humanitarian coordination, and few gender-sensitive recovery programs. Women's decisions to return were acts of both courage and resignation, shaped by the absence of viable alternatives.

The emotional toll of rebuilding from loss was echoed across narratives. FN confessed, *"The hardest part was feeling that all the effort and stability from before had vanished."* BR, who had returned to find her home in ruins, said, *"Even with everything we bought, we have not been able to cover everything we used to have previously in our house before the damage."* These testimonies speak to more than material deprivation; they articulate a profound sense of temporal dislocation, being severed from a previous life and forced to start again under diminished conditions. For many women, the notion of "return" was thus paradoxical: a movement toward home that simultaneously revealed how unrecognizable that home had become.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how gender, class, and displacement intersect to shape the lived realities of post-conflict return. The absence of male household members, whether due to death, migration, or separation, exposes women to new forms of social and economic exclusion. In Lebanon's patriarchal and informal labor market, where access to work and credit remains mediated by gendered networks, FHHs are structurally disadvantaged. The "feminization of poverty" is not merely descriptive here; it captures the institutionalized inequities that render women's return precarious and often unsustainable. Their experiences highlight the gap between global humanitarian narratives of durable solutions and the realities of gendered survival, where women's agency is exercised under conditions of constraint and exhaustion.

Coping, Care, and Everyday Resilience: Rebuilding lives in the aftermath

If the first stage of return was marked by loss and uncertainty, the next was shaped by the steady persistence of women working to rebuild their lives. Amid damaged homes and fragile infrastructures, FHHs in South Lebanon relied on faith, community, and creativity to recover. Their resilience was not heroic but practical: an everyday necessity in the absence of effective institutional support.

For many, faith provided the strength to keep going. As AA explained, *"Patience became our weapon, along with acceptance and the belief that life continues through the memory of martyrs and the good morals they planted within us."* SM echoed this: *"With God's power awarded to us, our days pass smoothly despite our financial insecurity."* Faith, for these women, offered a sense of continuity and moral grounding that made uncertainty bearable.

Community networks also became lifelines. ASA shared, *"To return to my normal life, I made visits to my neighbours to check on their situations and share experiences. This gave us space to speak up and share our worries."* Similarly, AJA found comfort in friendship: *"I trusted speaking openly with my close friend just to breathe and reduce my mental struggles."* These small gestures of connection turned everyday interactions into sources of healing and solidarity.

Resilience often meant improvisation and physical labor. GN described her efforts to repair her workplace alone: *"Since there were no workers, I came daily to clean the broken glass, sort papers, and prepare everything myself. I could have waited for assistance, but I needed to act, even if individually."* Her determination reflects a form of agency grounded in action rather than rhetoric: women taking on rebuilding when institutions fell short. FN shared a similar resolve: *"After returning, I decided not to be weak or give up, but to be resilient and strong."*

Such efforts echo what feminist scholars describe as *everyday agency*, small acts of care and repair that create dignity within constraint. BR captured this balance simply: *"Taking baby steps is the best option to handle big challenges."* For others, resilience also meant reclaiming belonging. DN noted, *"We decided that even if the war happens again, we would not leave our village house again."* Her words turn endurance into a refusal to be permanently displaced.

Some women saw these hardships as moments of redefinition. AK reflected, *"We reached a time where a woman can stand on her feet and continue her life independently without asking for a man's shade behind her back."* For her, strength was both moral and practical: *"I must stay strong for my children and for myself, because no one else will."* Yet she also reminded that resilience cannot replace structural support: *"What we need is respect, steady work, and stability [...] not just short-term help."*

These layered forms of coping (spiritual, social, and material) are the backbone of community recovery in South Lebanon. They show resilience as an evolving process rather than an innate trait, one sustained by networks of faith and care as much as by individual will. Yet they also remind us that endurance alone is not enough. Women's resilience fills the gaps left by state and humanitarian neglect, even as it exposes the injustice of systems that depend on their quiet strength.

Beyond Survival: Reimagining return, agency, and gendered futures

The return of FHHs in South Lebanon following internal displacement is not a single moment of homecoming but a drawn-out negotiation of loss, the burdens of new responsibilities in reconstruction and caregiving, and the struggle for recognition within social and policy spaces that often render women's labor invisible. As the immediate shock of displacement gives way to daily rebuilding, women move from endurance to transformation: redefining how homes are repaired, families are held together, and communities regain their footing. In doing so, they challenge policy frames that cast displaced women primarily as recipients of care rather than as the people sustaining it.

This transformation often begins with a deliberate rejection of dependence and a practical reclaiming of autonomy. The absence of men through death or separation creates gaps in income and decision-making; yet it also opens space for women to assume visible leadership in household budgeting, repairs, and neighbourhood coordination. Recovery here is incremental and intentionally paced: small fixes, restored routines, reopened shops, and revived social ties. Progress is measured less by large projects than by steady, repeatable acts that make homes liveable and futures imaginable.

Reconstruction is also profoundly material. Infrastructures are patched, documents are replaced, and work is reorganized around new constraints. Where public services stall, women coordinate transport, organize childcare, and broker access to aid or informal credit. These practices exemplify *everyday agency*: not spectacular gestures, but the consistent labor of making life work amid uncertainty. Such emotional, domestic, and communal labour underwrites the moral economy of return, even when it remains undervalued in policy.

Rootedness is another register of agency. Decisions to stay, despite ongoing risk, assert belonging and contest the normalization of cyclical displacement. Remaining is not simply a lack of options; it is often an affirmative strategy to preserve social networks, maintain access to land and memory, and prevent another break in children's schooling and care. In a context where the state does not formally recognize IDPs, this rootedness doubles as a claim to visibility in systems that otherwise render women's displacement administratively invisible.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest what we introduce as a *feminization of recovery*: women's roles as caregivers, workers, organizers, and custodians of social life form the backbone of reconstruction. But resilience must not be mistaken for a substitute for rights. When recovery depends on women's unpaid and largely unrecognized labor, inequality is reproduced even as communities heal. The lesson is clear: dignity and inclusion, not charity, should orient the design and delivery of assistance.

A policy reorientation follows from this. Humanitarian programming must treat FHHs as central actors, not exceptional cases. Concretely, that means: (1) livelihoods support tailored to women's sectors and schedules; (2) affordable, accessible care services that free time for paid work and civic participation; (3) gender-sensitive housing repair and documentation services; (4) integrated psychosocial support embedded in community spaces; and (5) municipal-level funding lines that can be activated without requiring national recognition of IDP status. Monitoring and evaluation should count the unpaid care and coordination that currently go unseen yet make formal interventions viable.

Finally, centring FHHs changes how we understand both displacement and return. It shifts attention from the moment of crossing the threshold

back into a damaged home to the long, gendered work of making that home function again. It reframes women not as symbols of resilience but as planners, negotiators, and builders whose choices shape collective recovery. Post-conflict Lebanon will not be measured only in reconstructed walls, but in whether the women who held communities together are recognized, supported, and able to build more stable futures for themselves and those in their care.

In this sense, return is a beginning. It is where grief meets governance, where private labor sustains public recovery, and where the prospect of a more equitable future depends on whether policy finally catches up to practice.

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Ethical note/disclaimer: *Women quoted in this commentary are residents and returnees from various areas across South Lebanon, primarily within the Saida district. All participants were above the age of 40 and provided informed consent to participate in the interviews. They explicitly requested that no identifying information, including precise locations, names, or personal details, be disclosed. To ensure confidentiality and respect participants' preferences, only acronyms approved by the interviewees are used throughout this piece.*

This commentary draws on qualitative data collected as part of a broader ongoing study conducted by the Institute for Migration Studies and

graduate students at the Department of Communication, Mobility and Identity at the Lebanese American University (PI/Supervisor: Dr. Jasmin Lilian Diab), which examines patterns of internal displacement and return across and beyond South Lebanon between 2023 and 2025.

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