Who Protects the Protector? Displacement and Men's Changing Understandings of Masculine Responsibility in South Lebanon

This thoughtful, moving article examines how internal displacement from South Lebanon unsettles men's own understandings of masculine responsibility, particularly around provision, protection, authority, and care. Drawing on qualitative, trauma-informed interviews conducted between 2024 and 2026, it explores what happens when war removes the material and social conditions through which men have understood themselves as responsible fathers, husbands, providers, and protectors.

Loss of land, livelihoods, income, and community position generated not only economic insecurity, but a disjuncture between what many participants believed was expected of them as men and what displacement actually allowed them to do. While some responded by holding more firmly to familiar forms of household authority, others began to broaden their understanding of responsibility through care, emotional presence, and shared household roles. The article argues that gender-responsive displacement policy must therefore engage men as gendered subjects in their own right, without treating masculine expectations as fixed or universal.

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Introduction

"I try to make them feel safe even when I am not sure myself."

A 45-year-old father displaced from Bint Jbeil used these words while describing his children during displacement from South Lebanon. Before

the war, he told us, he had understood his responsibilities as a father and husband largely through provision and physical protection. Working, supporting his household and keeping his family safe were not simply things he did. They were among the ways he had learned to understand whether he was fulfilling his "role as a man".

Displacement made that understanding much harder to sustain. *"When we left, my children were afraid all the time,"* he explained. *"Before, I thought my role was to provide and protect physically. Now, I see that protection is also about how they feel."*

His words point toward a dimension of internal displacement that receives comparatively little attention. We routinely ask what displaced men need: shelter, employment, cash assistance, healthcare, documentation. We ask much less often what happens when displacement removes the conditions through which some men have come to understand themselves as responsible husbands, fathers, providers or protectors.

This is not to suggest that men share a singular understanding of masculinity, in South Lebanon or elsewhere. Nor are provision, authority or protection inherently or exclusively masculine practices. Women provide, protect, lead households and sustain communities, often while their contributions remain socially or economically undervalued. Masculine expectations also vary considerably across class, generation, occupation, locality and household structure. What matters here is something more specific: how men themselves interpret the expectations attached to being men, and what happens when displacement makes those expectations difficult or impossible to enact.

Research and humanitarian programming have rightly documented the disproportionate burdens that conflict and displacement place on women and girls. But recognising those inequalities should not require treating men as if gender somehow stops operating when the displaced person is male. Men also enter displacement with ideas about who they should be, what they should contribute, and what other people should be able to expect from them. Some of those expectations are externally reinforced; others have become deeply internalised. When their material foundations collapse, the effects can travel into men's understandings of

themselves, their relationships and the ways households negotiate displacement and return.

In ongoing research with internally displaced men from South Lebanon, my colleagues and I have been examining precisely this process. Between 2024 and 2026, we conducted trauma-informed qualitative interviews with 65 men between the ages of 35 and 55 from communities across Bint Jbeil, Marjayoun, Tyre and Nabatieh. Participants differed considerably in occupation, economic position, family structure and displacement trajectory. Their accounts were not uniform. Yet one recurrent pattern was the importance many attached to being able to contribute materially to their household, protect family members and remain someone on whom others could depend.

For these men, displacement disrupted not only what they could do. It also unsettled how they judged whether they were still adequately fulfilling the roles they associated with being "men".

When Providing Becomes Impossible

For many participants, the first rupture was economic. Livelihoods in South Lebanon are often strongly rooted in place. Agricultural work depends on access to land. Shops rely on village economies and established customers. Tradespeople work through local networks built over years. Displacement does not simply move a worker from one labour market to another. It can remove the infrastructure through which work, social recognition and household responsibility were previously organised. One 47-year-old farmer from Bint Jbeil described the difference between life before and after displacement: *"Before, everything was clear. I knew what I had to do. I woke up early, I went to the land, I worked, and at the end of the day, I came home with something."*

After displacement, that predictability disappeared. Work became irregular. Some days he found something; others he spent waiting. *"My children still need the same things,"* he said, *"but I cannot guarantee anything."* The final part of his account was particularly revealing: *"It's not just about money. It's that I don't know how to be in this situation."*

The distinction matters.

Loss of employment is an economic vulnerability. But for this participant, it was also experienced through a gendered understanding of responsibility. Work had previously given structure to how he saw himself within his household. He worked, contributed and understood himself as meeting obligations that he associated closely with being a father and a man. Displacement fractured that relationship.

A 52-year-old shop owner displaced from Marjayoun described having run a small business in his village. The shop was modest, but he was economically independent. His customers knew him. He contributed consistently to his household. After displacement, rent and living expenses increased while stable work disappeared. For the first time, he sometimes had to borrow money or depend on help. *"This is the hardest part,"* he explained, *"not the work itself, but needing others."* Then he described what that dependency meant to him: *"A man is supposed to stand on his own. When you cannot do that, you feel like something is broken inside you."*

The phrase "a man is supposed to" is important precisely because it tells us about his understanding of masculinity, rather than an objective description of men's roles. We do not have to endorse that expectation to take its effects seriously. If someone has spent decades judging his adequacy partly through his capacity for economic independence, sudden dependency may be experienced as more than loss of income. It can produce shame, frustration or a sense of having fallen short of one's own expectations. Humanitarian responses therefore need to distinguish between recognising a gendered expectation and reproducing it.

Supporting displaced men does not require restoring a model in which male breadwinning is treated as the natural basis of household life. But neither should policy assume that the social meanings attached to provision disappear simply because displacement has made them impossible to sustain.

The Perceived Responsibility to Protect

Provision was only one part of what participants described. Many also spoke about protection. Again, protection should not be understood as a naturally masculine responsibility. Rather, several participants had

learned to understand successful fatherhood or husbandhood partly through an expectation that they should be able to keep those around them safe. War exposes how impossible that expectation can become.

A father cannot stop an airstrike. He cannot make an evacuation route safe. He cannot guarantee that a house will remain standing, that a village will remain accessible or that the place to which his family flees will itself remain safe. Displacement therefore confronts some men with a profound mismatch between the responsibility they feel and the power they actually possess. This distinction helps explain why successfully evacuating a family may not necessarily produce a subjective sense of having protected them.

A man may have done everything practically available to him and still feel that he has fallen short because his children remain frightened, his family is financially precarious, or he cannot tell them when they will go home. The 45-year-old father from Bint Jbeil described this shift particularly clearly. His children were anxious after leaving home. He could not promise that they would return soon, or that the war would end, or that their house would remain untouched. What he could do was sit with them, explain what was happening and attempt to remain calm. *"You carry things inside you so that your family doesn't feel it,"* he told us. And then: *"Maybe this is also part of being a man, but in a different way than I understood before."*

That "maybe" is analytically important. It captures hesitation rather than transformation completed. The men we interviewed did not simply abandon one model of masculinity and adopt another. Many remained strongly attached to ideas of provision, physical protection and responsibility even while experimenting with other ways of understanding what those responsibilities could entail.

Protection could begin to include calming a frightened child. Responsibility could include emotional presence. Contribution could involve forms of care that a participant had not previously recognised as central to his own role. These were often additions to men's existing understandings of masculinity, rather than replacements for them.

When Uncertainty Enters the Household

Not all renegotiations moved in the same direction. Our interviews also suggested that when men lost control over work, income, mobility and place, some became more invested in maintaining authority inside the household. A 43-year-old participant from Tyre described how family decision-making changed after displacement. Before the war, he had worked and generated much of the household income. He remembered decision-making as relatively straightforward. After displacement, economic instability required much greater negotiation between him and his wife. He noticed himself reacting differently. *"If I am not providing,"* he asked, *"then what is left for me? [...] So I hold on to what I can."*

Again, his account should not be read as evidence that displaced men inevitably respond to economic loss through increased control. Other participants described more collaborative decision-making, and household dynamics varied considerably. What is revealing is how this man connected authority to his own perception of masculine adequacy. He was not simply losing income. In his account, several things he had previously understood as mutually reinforcing—earning, responsibility, decision-making and being relied upon—were coming apart. The household became one of the remaining places where he could attempt to preserve continuity in how he understood his role.

This does not excuse controlling behaviour. But it does help explain why gendered household relations cannot be understood separately from economic displacement, social position and men's changing interpretations of themselves.

Humanitarian programming often separates these domains institutionally. Livelihoods sit in one program. Mental health and psychosocial support sit in another. Gender-based violence prevention sits elsewhere. Family support may fall under another sector entirely. Inside displaced households, however, these processes intersect: Loss of work may change someone's sense of contribution. Dependency may affect how he interprets dignity. Loss of community position may intensify the importance attached to authority elsewhere. Financial stress may become relational stress. Understanding those links offers more possibilities for intervention than simply categorising men as either providers or perpetrators.

Masculinity is Also Situated in Place

The interviews also reveal something spatial about men's own understandings of masculinity. Several participants described who they were through relationships to particular places. They talked about land they cultivated, shops they operated, homes they maintained and villages in which other people knew them. Their sense of responsibility was socially recognised because it existed within networks of relatives, customers, neighbours, farmers and workers.

This does not mean that South Lebanese masculinity is inherently rooted in land or village life. Experiences differ substantially, particularly across class, occupation and generation. But for many of the men in this particular study, place formed part of the social environment through which their roles became intelligible to themselves. Displacement disrupted that environment. A man may remain inside Lebanon, sometimes only tens of kilometres from his village, while losing much of the everyday context in which he previously understood his own contribution. One 50-year-old participant from Nabatieh put it simply: *"In the village, people know you, your role is clear."* After displacement, he said, *"everything is uncertain."*

This is one reason return may carry meanings beyond recovering property. For some men, going back also means attempting to recover a version of themselves that was organised through work, place, routine and recognition. The farmer does not simply return to a field. He returns to a setting in which he once understood his contribution to his household. The shop owner does not simply reopen a commercial space. He may recover independence, customers and social recognition. A man repairing a damaged house may similarly understand that labour through a broader sense of responsibility to family and place.

Yet return does not necessarily restore these roles. Land may remain inaccessible. Shops may no longer be economically viable. Families may be scattered. Another displacement may remain possible. Men can therefore return geographically while the social conditions through which they previously understood themselves remain unsettled.

When Care Becomes Recognisable as Responsibility

Perhaps the most interesting shift in the interviews appeared among men who began recognising forms of care they had previously treated as peripheral to their own responsibilities. A 39-year-old participant from Marjayoun explained that before displacement, he understood his role largely as something performed outside the house. *"I worked, I provided,"* he said. Household life was primarily organised by his wife.

After displacement, unstable employment meant that he spent considerably more time at home. For the first time, he said, he became more conscious of the daily pressure his wife carried. He became increasingly involved with his children and their schooling and tried to support them through the anxiety produced by displacement. *"At first,"* he explained, *"I felt like this was not my role."* That changed gradually. *"With time, I started to feel that this is also a responsibility."*

Again, we should resist turning this into a simple story of progressive masculine transformation. Conflict does not liberate gender relations. Nor should unpaid care become a substitute offered to men excluded from meaningful employment. What the account shows is more subtle. The participant's understanding of masculine responsibility became more capacious. He did not stop wanting to work or provide. Instead, practices that had previously fallen outside his own understanding of his role became newly visible as meaningful contributions. Care became recognisable as responsibility. Emotional reassurance could be understood as protection. Presence could become a form of contribution.

This may be one of displacement's less visible gendered effects: it can unsettle the boundaries through which people decide which forms of labour, responsibility and care count as part of who they are.

Why Displacement Policy Should Take Men's Gendered Self-understandings Seriously

There is a practical reason for making this distinction. Gender-responsive displacement policy cannot mean programmes directed at women alongside supposedly gender-neutral programmes for everybody else. Men are also gendered subjects. But engaging men as gendered subjects should not mean assuming that all men share the same masculine ideals, or treating patriarchal expectations as culturally fixed.

A better starting point is to ask: *What do men themselves believe is expected of them? How do they evaluate whether they are meeting those expectations? What happens when displacement makes doing so impossible? And how might those expectations change?*

Those questions have practical implications. Livelihood programmes can recognise that prolonged exclusion from work may carry consequences for identity, dignity and household relationships in addition to income. Psychosocial interventions can create room for men to discuss fear, inadequacy, dependency and responsibility without assuming that masculine distress will necessarily present through conventional mental-health language. Gender programming can engage men not only as potential sources of harm or as instruments for achieving outcomes for women, but as individuals actively negotiating their own gendered expectations.

At the same time, programmes can encourage and validate shared caregiving, collaborative decision-making and wider understandings of contribution without depicting them as evidence that men have somehow ceased to be masculine. This becomes particularly important where displacement is repeated. Roles adapted during one period of displacement may be disrupted again by return, renewed violence and another departure. Men's understandings of themselves are therefore not transformed once and permanently. They are continually negotiated against changing material possibilities.

Who Protects the Protector?

There is a tendency in discussions of war to allocate people familiar positions. Women and children often appear as vulnerable civilians. Men appear as fighters, breadwinners, heads of household, decision-makers—or simply as an unmarked category of adults. The men in our research complicate that picture.

They were fathers worrying about school fees, farmers separated from land, shopkeepers uncomfortable with dependency, husbands renegotiating decisions with their wives, and men trying to reassure frightened children while privately uncertain about what would happen next.

The point is not that these men should simply be reclassified as vulnerable. It is that gendered expectations themselves can become sites of vulnerability under displacement. A man may believe that he should provide while having no meaningful access to employment. He may feel responsible for protecting his family while possessing no power to stop the violence threatening them. He may believe that others depend upon him to provide certainty at precisely the moment when displacement has stripped certainty from everyone.

The resulting tension is not evidence of a universal "crisis of masculinity." It is better understood as a disjuncture between how men have learned to understand responsible manhood and what the conditions of displacement actually allow them to do. Different men respond differently to that gap. Some hold more tightly to familiar forms of authority. Others widen their understanding of contribution. Many do both unevenly, depending on the moment.

What displacement reveals, then, is not simply what happens to men. It reveals how ideas about masculinity are tested when the material conditions required to enact them disappear. And perhaps one of the most important possibilities in the accounts we heard is that protection does not have to mean possessing the power to guarantee safety. Sometimes it means earning and providing. Sometimes it means repairing a damaged home. Sometimes it means taking responsibility for difficult decisions. But sometimes, as one father discovered while trying to reassure children whose future he could not control, protection means remaining emotionally present when certainty itself is impossible. For him, that too became a way of understanding what it meant to fulfil his "role as a man".

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