

Research Briefing Notes

Crisis and Intersectional Justice in Lebanon and Sri Lanka

Summary

The project explores processes of marginalisation and social protection responses in the context of the intense economic and political crises that have enveloped Lebanon and Sri Lanka since 2019. The project explores how these crises have been experienced by marginalised women and sexual and gender minorities, how these groups have responded in the face of inadequate social protection responses, and how marginalised groups have negotiated with wider protest movements in pursuit of justice.

We address the following project research questions: How have citizen and resident perceptions and experiences of social welfare and social injustice influenced or been impacted by processes of violence and conflict in the MENA region? How can social policies be more inclusive of citizen and resident perspectives and aspirations?

Key findings are as follows:

- Marginalised women and sexual and gender minorities have faced severe economic hardships due to soaring inflation, currency devaluation, and unemployment. These crises have exacerbated existing inequalities, leading to increased violence, discrimination, and social exclusion.
- The impact of 'crisis' on marginalised groups is double-edged: on the one hand, these conditions can undermine mobilisation efforts and distract groups from targeting structural issues. On the other hand, they can provide opportunities and spaces for these groups to raise their profile, build new alliances and solidaristic relationships with other marginalised communities, and to pursue more transformational goals.
- Not all groups have been able to carve out agency. Those that struggle most are those that lack legal status and the wider social networks enjoyed by some other groups due to social exclusion and stigma.
- Legacies of conflict in both Lebanon and Sri Lanka have entrenched systemic inequalities and discrimination against marginalised groups.

Research Background

Economic and political crises have reverberated across the Global South in recent years, giving rise to waves of non-violent protests. Among the most impactful globally have been the protest movements in Lebanon (2019) and Sri Lanka (2022). In both countries, protests sought to transform political systems and had profound effects on the political landscape, leading to the resignation of the President (in Sri Lanka) and the Prime Minister (in Lebanon). Both protests emerged during protracted post-war transitions, characterised by sustained periods of political unsettlement, growing concerns about corruption, the cost of living, and the deterioration of public services.

Social protection responses to these crises have been broadly inadequate in both countries, marginalised women and sexual and gender minorities have been amongst the worst-affected groups. In both countries, this marginalisation is underpinned by long-standing legacies of economic and political inequalities left by long-running armed conflicts and in both countries, marginalised groups have mobilised in new ways in pursuit of intersectional justice.

The research was based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted in Sri Lanka and Lebanon in 2024 and 2025.

Key Findings

Marginalised women and sexual and gender minorities in both Lebanon and Sri Lanka have faced severe economic hardships due to soaring inflation, currency devaluation, and unemployment. These crises have exacerbated existing inequalities, leading to increased violence, discrimination, and social exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges, with both countries witnessing increased harassment, lack of access to essential services, and social exclusion for these marginalised groups.

The impact of 'crisis' on marginalised groups is double-edged. Many activists from both countries described how 'crisis' conditions force them to shift focus away from long-term campaigning towards a focus on meeting basic needs. Such responses can push marginalised communities into more atomised, siloed, and passive positions, which undermine solidarity between marginalised groups, and follow the priorities of international funders. Marginalised communities, however, emphasised that this passive and siloed stance was not universal or inevitable and there were many examples where groups were able to counter the depoliticising pressures that emerged from situations of crisis. Groups have achieved this by de-linking from established funders and by developing informal support networks. Marginalised groups have also engaged with wider protest movements, using protest sites as an opportunity to build connections with other activists, and to raise awareness of their priorities.

Not all groups have been able to carve out agency. Those that struggle most are those, such as trans sex workers or migrant domestic workers (MDWs), who lack legal status and social networks or have limited awareness of their rights and suffer from limited experience of organising.

Legacies of conflict in both Lebanon and Sri Lanka have entrenched systemic inequalities and discrimination against marginalised groups. In both countries, historical marginalisation and ongoing political instability have limited access to resources and opportunities for MDWs and LGBTQ+ communities.

Key Implications

The research highlights the need for governments and CSOs to carefully consider how social protection programmes may exclude the most marginalised communities, and how social stigma and lack of legal protections often drive processes of marginalisation.

The research highlights the double-edged nature of international engagement with marginalised groups during periods of crisis. While this support can provide valuable resources to support basic needs, it can also reinforce structural inequalities. The work highlights the importance of adopting intersectional approaches, which recognise and address overlapping forms of marginalisation, but also emphasises potential dangers if this is done superficially, including the risk that such work will undermine solidarities between marginalised communities and lead to the fragmentation of efforts. The growing prominence of informal support networks or mutual-aid strategies demonstrates that

marginalised communities are seeking to delink from international funding networks, with many prioritising organisational agency over the potential benefits of external funding. This trend should provoke deep reflection from international organisations and their existing modes of engagement and should encourage them to explore how they can move away from extractive partnerships to shift power towards local leadership in a more meaningful way. The examples explored in this research may provide models that CSOs in other contexts may learn from and adapt.

While marginalised communities are increasingly challenging western approaches, these organisations often find it difficult to articulate their experience and work. Work to share and preserve the stories, struggles and resilience of these groups may help to create a valuable resource for future generations of activists. Further research into how marginalised groups imagine and envision their struggles beyond dominant western frameworks could also support their efforts.

Key Policy Targets

Governments, civil society groups, international NGOs, international funders.

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