

# ERF Policy Brief

## Lebanon's Untapped Potential: The Persistent Challenge of High Economic Inactivity among Young Women

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### In a nutshell

- Unique data on young women in Lebanon is available through a recent nationally representative survey exploring their employment, education, migration and family outcomes and aspirations.
- The data reveals a substantial and rising proportion of young women not in education or economic activity, with the proportion increasing from one in four women in 2019 to about one in three in 2022.
- The highest rates of economic inactivity are observed among married young women, mothers, those having lower levels of education, and those who live in less affluent households.
- In terms of aspirations, the proportion of women who do not want to work remains persistently high.
- While the challenges faced by women in accessing employment opportunities are not new, most have been exacerbated by the severe economic crisis.
- There is an urgent necessity to prioritize and address this issue as an integral component of any comprehensive recovery plan for Lebanon.

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## Introduction

October 2019 represents a critical turning point in Lebanon, as the financial crisis became visible and tangible, marking the unfolding of an unprecedented economic and social collapse. This has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating Beirut Port explosion, leading to a brutal contraction, with the real GDP falling by more than 50% in just two years (World Bank, 2022). A sharp currency depreciation has fueled hyperinflation, disproportionately affecting the poor and the middle class. Unemployment, poverty, and massive migration have been on the rise (World Bank, 2021). The depression threatens to have long-lasting negative impacts on the Lebanese society and human capital which compromises the country's potential for recovery and growth.

Amid these crises, young women might face amplified hardships due to pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. To understand how they have been affected by the ongoing crises, a nationally representative survey has been conducted, in August 2022, with 1500 women aged between 18 and 35.6.<sup>1</sup> The survey delves into their socio-demographic situation in terms of employment, education, migration and family, as well as their aspirations and the barriers to achieving those at two points in time: (1) the eve of October 2019 (pre-crisis) and (2) August 2022 (34 months into the crisis). This effort addresses the general lack of socioeconomic data in Lebanon. The information collected provides in-depth insights into women's well-being at the individual level and the heterogeneity in their responses to the shocks. It thus can inform the design of policies and interventions that target women to limit the adverse effects of the shocks and improve their resilience.

This policy brief focuses on the employment dynamics revealed by the survey data and highlights notable transitions between different labor market statuses and aspirations between October 2019 and August 2022.

<sup>1</sup> For representative data, the sampling methodology was based on the geographical distribution of primary dwellings by governorate, district and "circonscription foncière" (i.e. the smallest official geographic administrative unit). GPS coordinates were provided to the surveyors to determine the survey locations. From the randomly chosen point, the enumerators approached the nearest dwelling unit. Since the respondents were women, the enumeration team was entirely female, experienced, and trained in this approach. A pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted to ensure the clarity and consistency of the questions and to test the performance of the surveyors. Following this test, 1501 volunteer women were interviewed in a 50-minute face-to-face session.

It draws attention to the substantial and rising levels of young women not being in economic inactivity or education, with the proportion increasing from one in four women in 2019 to about one in three. Additionally, it examines the characteristics of respondents to shed light on the profiles of those who are economically inactive and not in education. The descriptive analysis reveals that economic inactivity tends to rise with marriage and motherhood, and to decrease with educational attainment and wealth status. Furthermore, the brief underscores the key constraints that impede women's engagement in education and the labor market, emphasizing the urgent need to address these challenges as an integral part of fostering economic recovery.

## Important Shifts in the Labor Market Status of Young Women During the Period

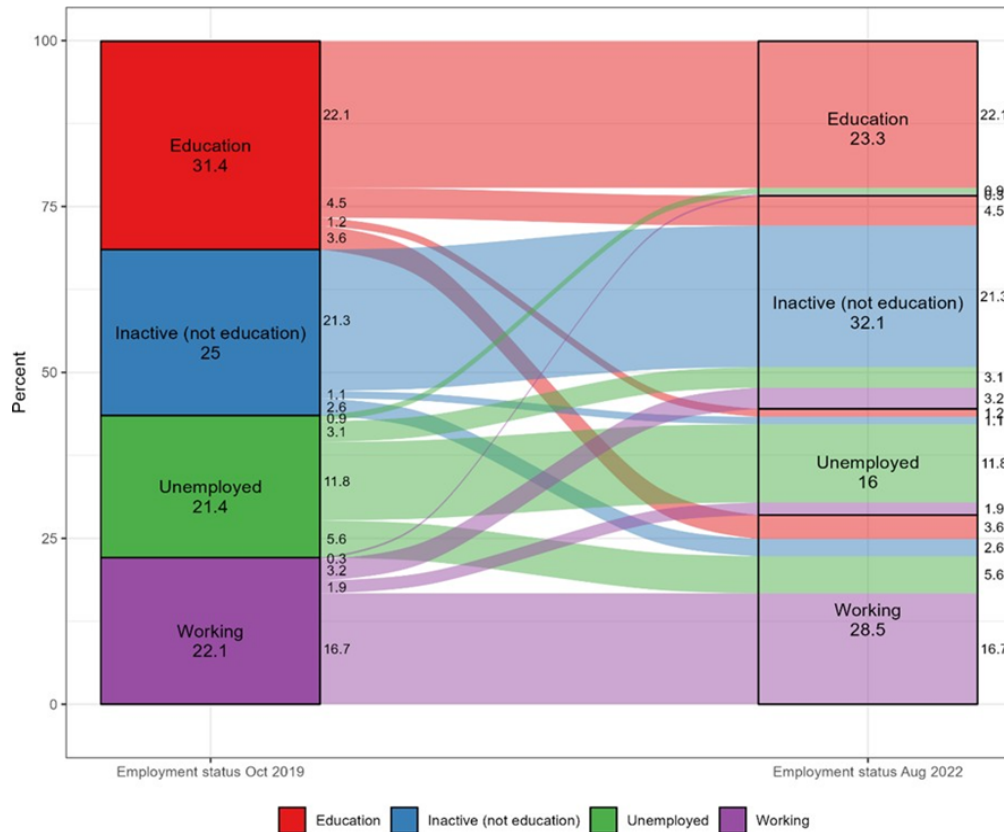
Between October 2019 and August 2022, about 72% of respondents maintained the same labor market status: 22.1% were still in education, 21.3% economically inactive (outside the labor force and education), 11.8% remained unemployed, and 16.7% continued to be working. The situation has however changed over this period for more than a quarter of the respondents. Figure 1 presents an alluvial diagram providing a visualization of the transitions between different labor market statuses.

The largest net increase is observed for inactive women outside the labor force and education. Only 3.7% of women left inactivity and entered the labor market: 2.6% became employed and 1.1% were searching for a job. By contrast, more than 10% of women became inactive (and not in education) in 2022: 4.5% transitioned from education while 3.2% and 3.1% transitioned from employment and unemployment, respectively.

The share of working women also increased with positive net transitions from unemployment (5.6% inflows - 1.9% outflows) and education (3.6% - 0.3%), despite negative transitions from inactivity (2.6% - 3.2%). The proportion of women in education and unemployment decreased with outflows transitioning mainly to employment and inactivity. While the transition away from education can be partly explained by the age structure of the respondents - they were interviewed in August 2022 and thus were around three years younger in October 2019 - it is notable that the largest share of outflows from education is towards inactivity.



Figure 1: Labor market transitions of young women in Lebanon between October 2019 and August 2022



Note: Share of women according to their labor market status in October 2019 and August 2022 and their transitions. Respondents are a representative sample of young women (age 18-35) in Lebanon who gave information about their labor market status at both time periods (N=1457). Interviews were conducted in August 2022 (see footnote 1).

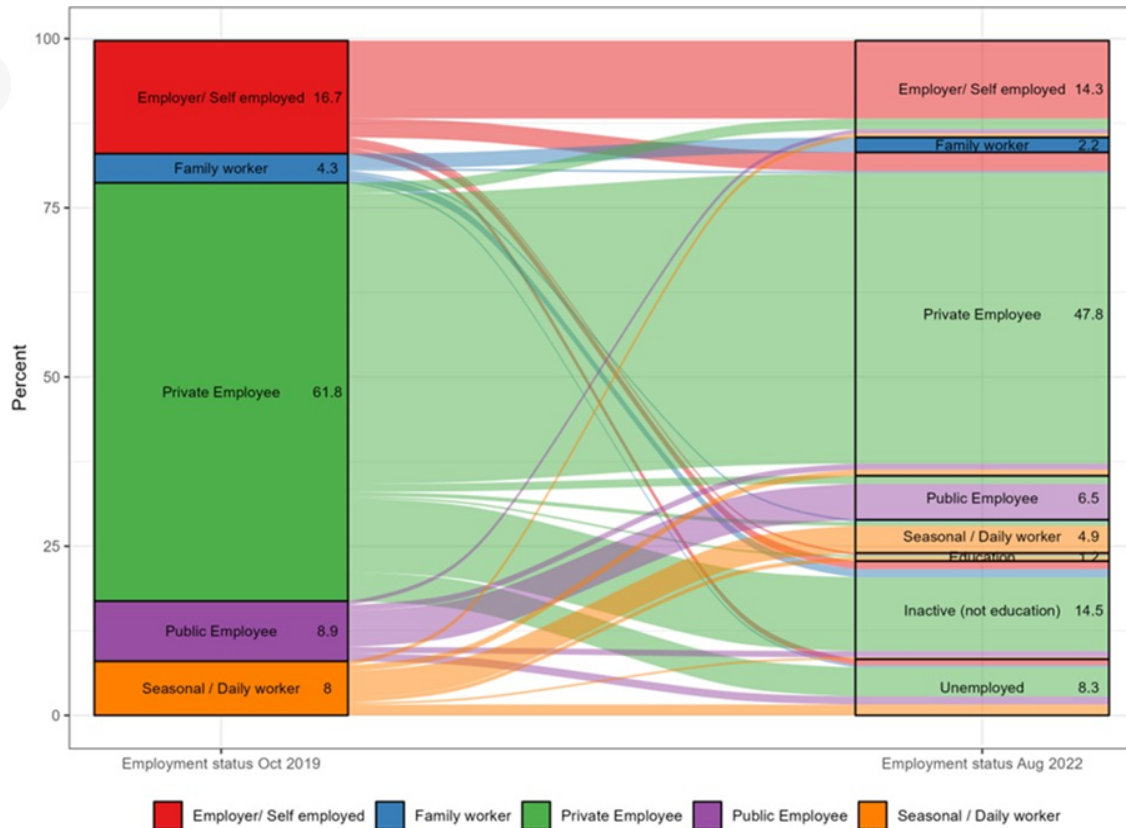
Strikingly, inactive women were the largest group in August 2022, with close to one in three women outside the labor force and education. This represents a significant increase from the one in four recorded in 2019 - only partly explained by a change in the age structure. This trend contrasts with the educational attainment of young women in Lebanon. About 80% of respondents have achieved at least a secondary level of education, and 37% hold a university degree.

### Marked transition from the private sector to inactivity

Figure 2 focuses on the young women who were working in October 2019 (22.1% of all respondents) and tracks the transitions they made by August 2022 in terms of employer and labor market status. Unsurprisingly, the

largest share of working women is employed in the private sector, which represents the country's major contributor to employment. This group has, however, experienced the greatest net decrease, declining from 62% in 2019 to less than 50% in 2022. The majority of those who exited private employment become inactive and not in education (14.5%) or unemployed (8.3%). These outflows, resulting from resignations or terminations, highlight the lack of stability and security in the private-sector jobs. Moreover, they reflect the contraction in the private sector, resulting in a decrease in its share of total employment from 86.3% in 2018-2019 to 81% in early 2022 (CAS & ILO, 2022). These figures also underscore the disproportionate impact of this contraction on young women, as they have experienced a larger decrease in private-sector employment compared to the decline in the overall private-sector employment.

Figure 2: Employment transitions of young women in Lebanon between October 2019 and August 2022



Note: Share of women in different labor market categories who were working in October 2019 and their labor market status in August 2022 (N=322). Respondents are from a representative sample of young women (age 18-35) in Lebanon who gave information about their employment at both time periods. Interviews were conducted in August 2022.

**A persistently high proportion of women who do not want to work**

Beyond providing insights into the state and evolution of the labor market for young women, the survey data enables an examination of their aspirations. It reveals how these have changed with the shifting circumstances between October 2019 and August 2022. This helps focus on what young women desire for themselves as it isolates some of the labor market constraints and the economic conditions that are beyond individuals’ control but that make it more difficult to find employment or to be in education.

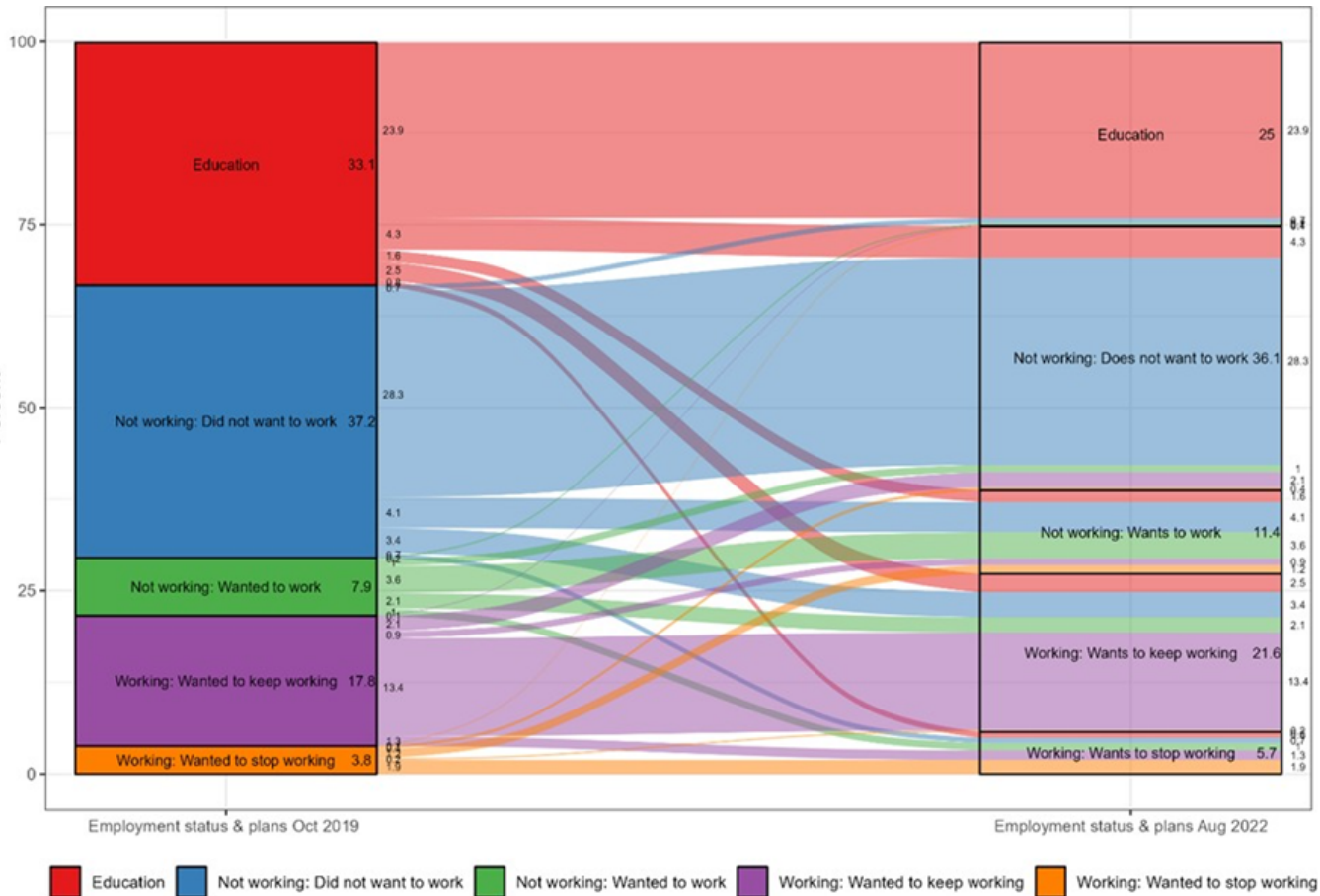
Figure 3 shows that at both points in time, the share of women who were not working (or in education) and did not want to work was the highest (37.2% in 2019 and 36.1% in 2022). It also reveals that the flows in and out of this category are the most important. 4.3% of respondents joined this category in 2022 while being in education in 2019, and 2.1% switched from working and wanting to keep working. These represent 13% and 12% respectively of those who were in education and

those who were working and wanted to keep working in 2019. Some of these changes might be due to changes in women’s aspirations when their family structure changes (such as getting married or having a child). Yet, these figures can also point to perceived difficulties and societal norms that dampen young women’s desire to work or continue working and prevent them from seeking employment and keeping their jobs.

Similarly, significant shares of respondents reported flowing out of this category. Among those who were not working (and not in education) and did not want to work in 2019, one in five adjusted their desire in August 2022. More specifically, 4.1% of respondents changed to wanting to work in August 2022 and 3.4% have become employed and wanted to keep working. A plausible interpretation might be that some were compelled to seek employment to support their families or supplement dwindling household income, in a context of soaring inflation and drastic loss in purchasing power.



Figure 3: Work aspiration transitions of young women in Lebanon between October 2019 and August 2022



Note: Share of women according to their labor market status and their aspiration to work in October 2019 and August 2022. “Not working” groups those who are inactive (and not in education) and unemployed. Respondents are from a representative sample of young women (age 18-35) in Lebanon who gave information about their labor market status at both time periods (N=1394). Interviews were conducted in August 2022.

### Socio-demographic profiles of young women: Who are those economically inactive and not in education?

The employment patterns and transitions observed above underscore the prevalence and the persistence of economic inactivity among young women, in terms of both actual status and aspiration. This trend is not surprising, as national estimates of women’s participation rate range between 22% (CAS & ILO, 2022) and 26% (World Bank, 2020, 2023). Such a low economic participation (among the lowest in the world) contrasts with high levels of educational attainment among women in Lebanon (Karam and Afiouni 2018; World Bank, 2020). This paradox raises questions about job market dynamics, societal norms, and women’s preferences.

Key socio-demographic and economic characteristics are explored in this section to elucidate their potential influence on employment and inactivity patterns.

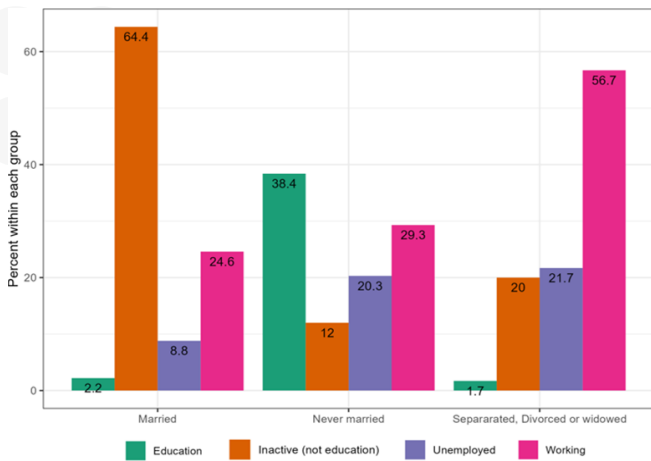
Specifically, the following figures allow visualizing the relationship between labor market status in August 2022 and factors such as women’s marital status, number of children, education, and wealth.

Figure 4 shows an association between marital status and being economically inactive (and not in education). Among married young women, inactivity reaches a striking 64%. This rate significantly decreases to 20% among separated, divorced, or widowed women, and further dwindles to 12% among those who have never been married.

A compelling correlation between motherhood and economic inactivity is portrayed in Figure 5. The majority of respondents with no children fall into two main categories: those who are in education (33,7%) or those who are employed (30,3%). Conversely, at least 60% of young mothers remain economically inactive and not in education, with inactivity rates rising further with the increase in the number of children.

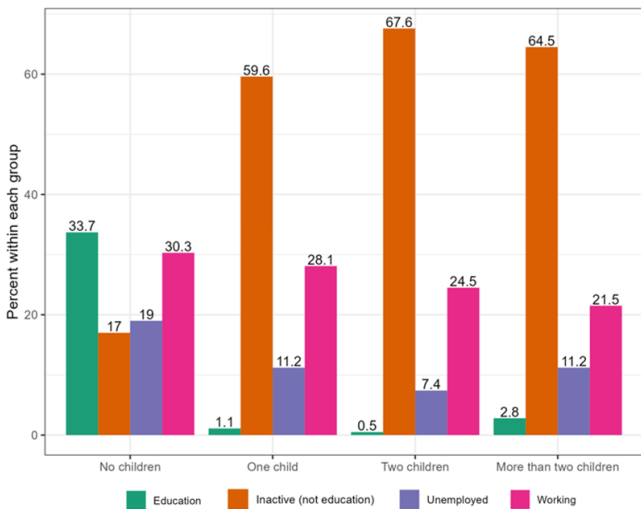


**Figure 4: Labor market status by marital status of young women in Lebanon**



Note: Distribution of women’s labor market status for each marital status in 2022. Respondents are from a representative sample of young women (age 18-35) in Lebanon who gave information about their labor market status and their marital status (N=1491; 39% married, 57% never married, 4% sep./div./wid.). Interviews were conducted in August 2022.

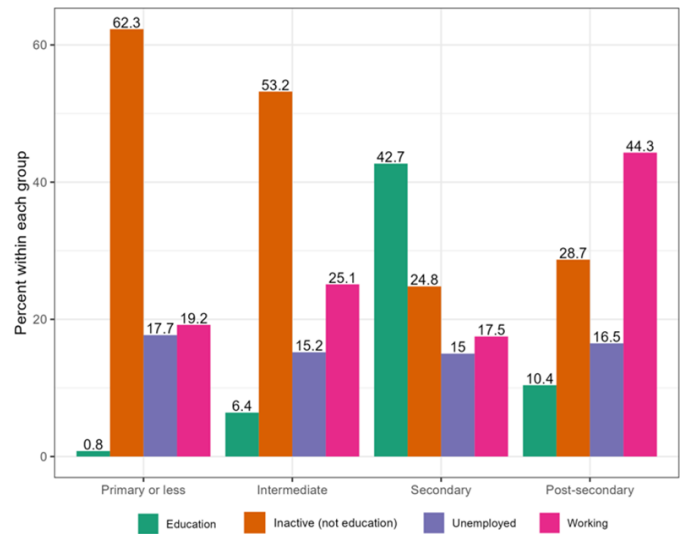
**Figure 5: Labor market status by number of children of young women in Lebanon**



Note: Distribution of women’s labor market status according to the number of children in 2022. Respondents are from a representative sample of young women (age 18-35) in Lebanon who gave information about their labor market status and the number of children (N=1491; 66.4% no children, 11.9% one child, 14.5% two children, 7.2% more than two children). Unmarried women were not asked the number of children (assumed to be zero). Interviews were conducted in August 2022.

Unsurprisingly, Figure 6 shows that inactivity rates reach substantial levels among women who did not complete secondary education and decrease with higher levels of education. Still, education does not guarantee protection against inactivity. At least one in four women who have completed secondary or higher education

**Figure 6: Labor market status by education level of young women in Lebanon**



Note: Distribution of women’s labor market status within educational categories (highest level of education completed) in 2022. Respondents are from a representative sample of young women (age 18-35) in Lebanon who gave information about their labor market status and their education (N=1491; 8.7% primary or less, 11.4% intermediate, 42.5% secondary, 37.5% post-secondary). Interviews were conducted in August 2022.

are inactive and not in education. This resonates with the high education/low economic participation paradox that characterizes Lebanon and the MENA region in general (Assaad et al., 2020).

Figure 7 showcases a clear inverse correlation between economic inactivity among women and their household wealth,<sup>2</sup> along with a positive association between wealth and education. Close to half of the respondents belonging to the lowest wealth quintile are inactive and not in education, and less than 10% are in education. However, as household wealth increases, the prevalence of economic inactivity declines, and education levels rise.

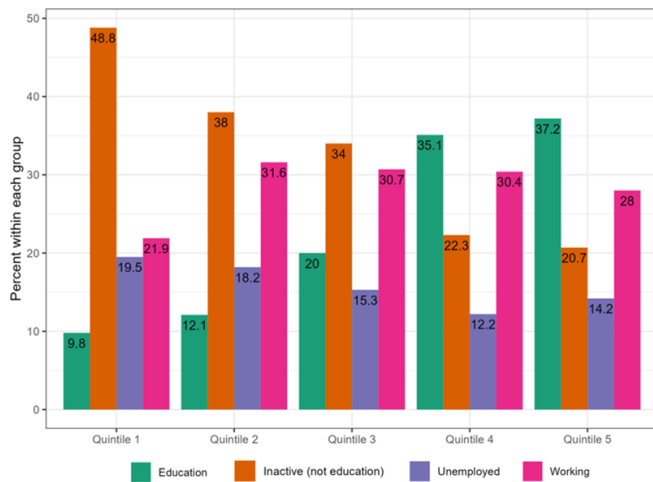
**Drivers of young women’s economic inactivity: What constraints do women face?**

The figures above provided insights as to who the inactive young women tend to be. They revealed that the highest rates of economic inactivity (and not being in education) are observed among married young women, mothers, those having lower levels of education, and those who live in less affluent households. The next question is why. What are the constraints that could be hindering women’s participation in the labor market and education?

<sup>2</sup> The wealth index is constructed on the household level using Principal Component Analysis. It includes information on key assets owned by the household (accommodation type and ownership status, car, phone type, electronic equipment, etc.) to divide the sample into five wealth quintiles following the “Wealth Index Construction” guidelines of the DHS.



**Figure 7: Labor market status by wealth level of young women in Lebanon**



Note: Distribution of women's labor market status within each wealth quintile in 2022 - quintile 1 being those with the lowest wealth and quintile 5 those with the highest wealth. Respondents are from a representative sample of young women (age 18-35) in Lebanon who gave information about their labor market status and their household assets (N=1491). The wealth index is constructed on the household level using Principal Component Analysis with information on household assets ownership, following the "Wealth Index Construction" guidelines of the DHS. Interviews were conducted in August 2022.

Several challenges, as well as the intricate interplay among them, might be influential factors contributing to the observed trends. Constraints could vary depending on women's socio-demographic status and major ones may include:

- **Traditional gender roles and post-marriage responsibilities:** In certain communities, traditional gender roles persist. Married women are expected to focus on domestic tasks and care responsibilities, and to prioritize family life over education or employment. In many cases, the husband's economic dependency is expected, with women completely relying on their husband's income. The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles can be direct with the husband or the family expressing disapproval of a woman working outside the home. It can also manifest in a subtle and indirect way. Societal views and expectations can influence the self-perception and aspirations of young women and significantly affect their decision to remain outside the labor market or never join it in the first place.
- **Childcare responsibilities:** Caring for children is time-consuming and physically and emotionally demanding. It may thus leave young mothers with limited time and energy to pursue education or work opportunities. The existing maternity leave policies in Lebanon fall short in providing sufficient support. Both women employed in the

public and private sectors are entitled to 10 weeks of paid maternity leave, which is below the minimum duration of 14 weeks set by the ILO. Furthermore, the coverage of maternity leave, including compensation and protection against dismissal, is limited to the public sector and the formal private sector, leaving informal private sector workers without adequate support (World Bank, 2023). What further intensifies the challenge is that childcare responsibility is often coupled with managing household tasks and, in some cases, even caring for elderly or disabled family members.

- **Accessibility of care services:** Utilizing external assistance, like housekeepers or caregivers, or enrolling children in care centers can alleviate some of the unpaid care responsibilities. It can thus potentially facilitate the labor force participation of young mothers or also enable them to continue their education. However, the availability of affordable and quality childcare options is limited. For many mothers, the cost of childcare services constitutes a sizable share of actual or potential income from employment. According to a study by the World Bank (2023), this cost exceeds the labor market earnings of women with lower education in Lebanon. The study also reveals that only 4.8% of children aged 0 to 3 are benefiting from formal childcare services and that these services tend to concentrate in more affluent areas where female labor force participation is already high (World Bank, 2023). The dire economic situation has heightened the costs of childcare services, placing an additional burden on families, and exacerbating the inequality in access to such services. Even when social security allowances are available and intended to provide some financial support to families with children, their value has significantly eroded over the years, a situation that has been exacerbated by the current crisis.<sup>3</sup>
- **Heightened discrimination and maternity leave penalty:** Married young women, and more so those having children, may face added bias in the labor market, thus making their employment prospects more challenging. In Lebanon, maternity leaves often

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the family allowance paid to employees affiliated with the National Social Security Fund - NSSF (i.e. employees in the formal private sector), which included an amount equivalent to USD 22 per child and USD 40 for the non-working spouse, has not been updated for years (ILO, 2020). Before 2001, the maximum total allowance for a family with five children and a non-working spouse used to be equivalent to USD 150 and represented 75% of the minimum wage. Following the minimum wage adjustment, in 2011, this maximum allowance represented just a third of the minimum wage. Clearly, the steep depreciation of the currency continued to erode the value of this family allowance, reducing it to less than USD 2.50, with the negligible amount of less than 50 cents per child.



impose a financial burden on employers, which can contribute to increased gender discrimination, particularly within the private sector (ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2023). Additionally, these women may be hesitant to enter or re-enter the labor market because of the perception that their skills or qualifications have become outdated or less relevant in the competitive job market, making it even more difficult for them to secure employment.

- *Lack of (decent) job opportunities for the skilled:* Even prior to the economic crisis, Lebanon has faced challenges in generating employment opportunities to keep pace with the number of skilled individuals entering the job market annually. To absorb the new entrants to the labor market, the economy needed to create more than 6 times the number of jobs it has been creating (World Bank, 2012). Structural issues, such as inadequate investment and low levels of economic diversification, along with the lack of growth-oriented policies, limited the expansion of job opportunities. The underdevelopment of sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and technology, which often drive job growth, has further exacerbated the situation. In this context, and with job openings becoming scarce and competition for available positions intensifying due to the crisis, women with higher education may be even more deterred from seeking suitable employment. The discouragement might be exacerbated by the lack of decent work conditions such as job security, fair wages, social protection, a safe working environment, or opportunities for career progression. Even before the crisis, a large share of employers were typically small-scale and informal businesses, which often do not offer such conditions.
- *Limited (decent) job opportunities in rural areas and remote urban areas:* Beirut and its surrounding suburbs account for a significant portion of the country's economic activity, hosting a majority of jobs, especially those in the formal sector. The result is a spatial disparity in employment opportunities, with limited job prospects available in other regions of the country. This issue disproportionately weighs on women, especially those who face hurdles related to cultural and social norms that discourage independent living for women. Moreover, the challenge is compounded by the inadequate transportation infrastructure and the financial burden associated with housing or relocating to areas where jobs are concentrated. Many women find themselves unable to afford the high housing costs or the expenses involved

in moving to urban centers. These challenges are further exacerbated by the economic crisis and heightened financial constraints, making the issue even more relevant and pressing.

- *Barriers to education for vulnerable groups:* While Lebanon generally has high levels of school enrollment, there are still barriers to education for some girls, particularly in marginalized communities. A study by the World Bank estimates that participation in education for children under the age of 13 exceeds 95%, but points to lower enrollment rates in preprimary and primary education for girls compared to boys (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine, 2020). Factors such as socio-economic status, geographical location, and cultural norms often determine access to and quality of education. For instance, in more impoverished urban areas or remote rural regions, resources for education may be scarce and school infrastructure may be inadequate. Children from low-income-level households tend to be enrolled in public schools, characterized by lower-quality education, whereas those from middle-income and high-income families are more likely to be enrolled in private schools.<sup>4</sup> The limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate infrastructure prevalent in many public schools pose significant challenges to children's learning experiences. These trends have only been exacerbated by the severe economic crisis with additional obstacles related to increased transportation costs. Even though the enrollment gap is reversed after age 13, with a much higher percentage of girls and young women remaining in secondary and tertiary education compared to their male counterparts, some still encounter obstacles to education. Despite the high-quality education offered by Lebanon's public university, geographical barriers can hamper access to higher education, especially for those residing in rural areas or regions with poor transportation infrastructure. These obstacles can intensify for women if safety concerns, or cultural norms limit their mobility. In certain conservative communities, societal or familial pressures, such as expectations to marry early or traditional beliefs about women's roles, can discourage women from pursuing higher education.

<sup>4</sup> A perception survey conducted in 2019 indicated significant transfers (involving 10% of children) from private to public schools, driven by cost-related concerns (Abdul-Hamid & Yassine, 2020).





## Conclusions

In Lebanon, the challenges faced by women in accessing employment opportunities are not new. They have persisted for a long time, with well-documented measures and policies to address them proposed by reputable international organizations (ILO, n.d, 2017, 2022; ILO & UN Women, 2022; World Bank, 2020, 2023). This policy brief does not aim to discuss these widely recognized policies. Instead, it seeks to highlight a crucial observation: an alarming increase in the level of young women who are economically inactive and not in education, despite - and because of - the acute economic crisis. Even when aspirations are considered, the proportion of women who did not want to work remained persistently high, despite substantial transitions between 2019 and 2022. Transitions into this category point at existing obstacles that prevent women from seeking or maintaining employment, while transitions out of it suggest the severe repercussions of the economic crisis, where the pressure to meet family's financial needs overrides previous work preferences.

These insights underscore the urgent necessity of prioritizing and addressing this issue as an integral component of any comprehensive recovery plan for Lebanon. It is not enough to focus on attracting investment to drive growth and create jobs. Equally important is ensuring that new jobs are diversified in terms of the type and level of required skills and not concentrated in specific areas. It is also crucial to implement targeted interventions that actively empower women and foster their access to quality education and their participation in the labor market. These include improving public transportation to enhance safety and connectivity within and between regions, investing in the care economy to improve household access to these services while generating new employment opportunities. Legal reforms are also vital to ensure equal access to jobs and to extend social protection to women including the enhancement of maternity protection in line with international minimum social security standards (e.g. protect pregnant workers and mothers from dismissal, enhance maternal and paternal leave provisions).

Investing in women's human capital and leveraging the potential of young women are essential for the overall progress and resilience of Lebanon. By doing so, Lebanon can pave the way for a more inclusive and sustainable economic future and social justice.

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**ERF at a Glance:** *The Economic Research Forum (ERF) is a regional network dedicated to promoting high-quality economic research for sustainable development in the Arab countries, Iran and Turkey. Established in 1993, ERF's core objectives are to build a strong research capacity in the region; to encourage the production of independent, high-quality research; and to disseminate research output to a wide and diverse audience. To achieve these objectives, ERF's portfolio of activities includes managing carefully selected regional research initiatives; providing training and mentoring to junior researchers; and disseminating the research findings through seminars, conferences and a variety of publications. The network is headquartered in Egypt but its affiliates come primarily from different countries in the region.*

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