

"Everywhere the bombing followed us"

Forced displacement and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas
Perspectives of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon

Based on a survey of 205 Syrian refugees in Lebanon and in-depth interviews with 14 Syrian women refugees¹ originally from different towns and cities in Syria, and additional research, this study confirms that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas drives multiple forced displacements and induces a pattern of displacement that increases the vulnerability of civilians.

Main findings

Quantitative data collected during the survey confirms the correlation between multiple forced displacements and the use of explosive weapons, as **almost half of all respondents had been internally displaced prior to seeking external refuge in Lebanon, with an average of 3 internal displacements within their own city.**

In addition to displacement experienced within their own city, the majority (some 133 respondents) had been displaced between 1 to 3 different Syrian cities prior to seeking refuge in Lebanon. The women interviewed highlighted the deprivation induced by forced displacement. They described the loss of all their belongings, destroyed by the bombs or abandoned on their way to safety; how they had to flee, sometimes walking, in harsh weather conditions, wounded or ill and with no access to basic health care; the state of constant fear in which they moved from city to city.

When asked about the catalyst for their forced displacement, the most common reply by men and women alike is bombing and shelling (36% of all respondents). Among respondents with bombing-related disabilities, an even higher percentage (45%) identified bombing and shelling as the driver for their forced displacement.

The study also reflects the considerable harm caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas in terms of socio-economic vulnerability, linked to the loss of livelihood and the disruption of civilian infrastructure, as well



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as the long-term impact on mental health. Dire social impacts were emphasised by respondents, namely aid dependence and new restrictions encountered by people living with disabilities, along with a loss of personal dignity, as well as the loss of education for Syrian children.

- **44% of all respondents had their own homes destroyed due to the use of explosive weapons.**
- Disaggregated analyses show the specific impact on women due to damage to physical security measures (e.g. destruction of homes, breaches in walls/doors and windows, damage to perimeter barriers), increased challenges in resisting criminal perpetrators, and societal disarray in the aftermath of such events and during displacement.

1. The testimonies are all available in full length on our blog: <http://blog.handicap-international.org/influenceandethics/>

- **36% of respondents directly linked the use of explosive weapons to the destruction of civilian property other than homes;** especially significant in collected testimonies was the destruction of health services. Women were also affected by the scarcity of reproductive health services.
- **83% of the respondents who sustained bombing-related injuries resulting in disability are men.** Meanwhile, a higher percentage of female respondents (10% higher) referenced explosive violence causing injury to a family member or friend, highlighting the higher probability of women taking up the role of caregivers for injured family members, especially in the absence of adequate health structures.
- **44% of all those surveyed asserted that they had their livelihoods destroyed because of explosive weapons use and explosive remnants of war.** It is worth mentioning that persons displaced multiple times likewise experienced loss of properties and livelihood opportunities multiple times. Women were even more affected by the loss of livelihoods, with 54% of female respondents reporting such a loss.
- **The combination of fear, stress, and distress was identified as the third most important collective effect of explosive weapons use in Syria.** For women, it is the second most significant effect of explosive weapons use. Female interviewees also consistently mentioned the long-term impact of fear on themselves and their children.

Bombing and shelling in populated areas

Findings from additional research based on case studies highlighted how the use of explosive weapons in populated areas drove forced displacements in different types of local contexts. In both instances, the case studies clearly show that **the use of explosive weapons in populated areas produces causal effects associated with forced displacement:**

- **Personal injury or death;**
- **Destruction of residences, which is particularly widespread in densely-populated semi-urban districts;**
- **Destruction and disruption of critical infrastructure and services,** with the destruction of health services and the disruption of livelihoods particularly significant in suburban areas.



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The particular vulnerability of the previously displaced was clearly highlighted. Bombing and shelling of settlements of previously displaced persons were definitely a consistent aspect of the analysis, with stress on the need for civilians to relocate multiple times in search of safety.

Key recommendations for the warring parties and the international community:

Handicap International calls on the international community to end the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.

Protection and access to humanitarian assistance must be ensured to those affected by the crisis, including women, persons with injuries, persons with disabilities and the most vulnerable.

The rights of all victims of explosive weapons from all impacted areas must be recognised.

Furthermore, all forcibly-displaced people must be given a haven, and in the long run, a durable solution that fully respects their dignity must be found.