



# BEARING WITNESS

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The Palestinian Refugee  
Camps in Lebanon

Interpal Women's Delegation  
February 2016







## THE DELEGATION

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### *About 'Bearing Witness' Programme*

Interpal's 'Bearing Witness' Programme sends delegates, volunteers and staff members to its areas of operation in order to witness for themselves the humanitarian situation on the ground and the impact of Interpal's projects in the region.

In line with this, Interpal organised a women's delegation to Lebanon from 14th-19th February 2016.

The delegates included Abeda Laher, Yvonne Ridley, Victoria Brittain and Naomi Foyle. Members of staff from Interpal accompanied the delegation.

The purpose of the visit was focus on addressing the particular struggles and

challenges faced by women and girls in and around refugee camps, and the contributions that women are making to their communities.

The delegation visited a number of institutions and projects aided by Interpal and visited the homes of families that the charity supports.

This included visits to the Women's Community Programme, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Al-Shifaa for Medical Programmes and the Zakat Fund.



## INTERPAL IN LEBANON

*What are doing on the ground*

Interpal is a British charity providing humanitarian relief and development aid to Palestinians.

Founded in 1994, Interpal works in the occupied Palestinian territories and in the refugee camps across Lebanon and Jordan.

The charity has worked in Lebanon for twenty years. It has supported various humanitarian projects and provided education and medical aid as well as child sponsorship funds.

Interpal's aim is to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people through immediate relief and long term development programmes.

The charity strives to counteract the hardships faced by hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees.





## Interpal's interventions in Lebanon are in four key areas:



### Humanitarian aid

(including sponsorships, emergency and water aid)



### Medical aid



### Education aid



### Community development

Our projects respond to needs on the ground. The Lebanon Field Office carries out needs assessments, meets with local stakeholders and implements and evaluates projects.

## Interpal's work in Lebanon includes:

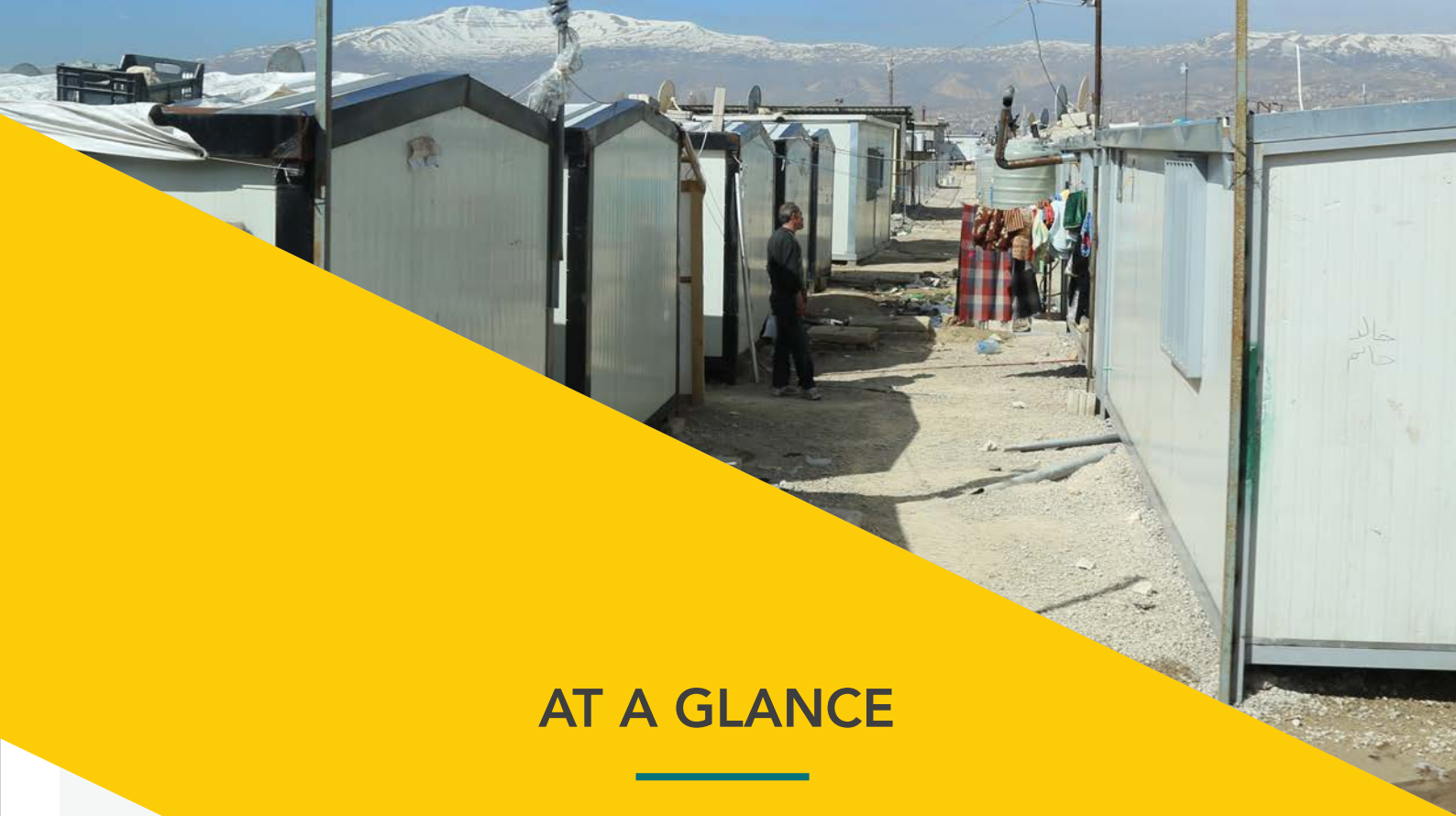
- Distributing regular and seasonal financial aid to thousands of families.
- Supporting UNRWA in providing assistive devices to refugees with special needs.
- Establishing kindergartens, health and community centres in refugee camps.
- Providing school fees for hundreds of vocational students and schoolchildren from refugee backgrounds.
- Training social workers from the camps, alongside supporting employment for young people.
- Providing valuable support for educational institutions working with children with special needs and newly-arrived Syrian refugee children.
- Distributing toys, uniforms and safe school transportation for thousands of children across the camps.
- Providing invaluable medical equipment, funding mobile clinics and subsidising medical fees for impoverished patients.

Lebanon has hosted Palestinian refugees since 1948.

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There are currently twelve recognised Palestinian refugee camps in the country.





## AT A GLANCE

### *Refugees in Lebanon*

There are an estimated 450,000 Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. There are also a number of unregistered refugees, as well as many unofficial “gatherings” where refugees reside. The conflict in Syria has compounded an already dire situation. UNHCR estimates there are over 1 million Syrians and over 100,000 Palestinians who have been ‘doubly displaced’.

Lebanon has experienced civil war, Israeli invasions and ongoing political strife within the past few decades. Palestinian refugees have had a turbulent history within the country and are denied many civil, political and economic rights.

Palestinian refugees are unlikely to seek or receive protection from the Lebanese authorities. Within the camps, Palestinians rely on their own forms of governance.

Palestinians are barred from a number of professions, they cannot own property and cannot attend Lebanese schools. They are also not eligible for the social security system and their mobility is curbed due to their refugee status.

According to UNRWA, Lebanon has the highest percentage of Palestinian refugees living in abject poverty.

The populations in Lebanon's camps have grown while the camp's perimeters have stayed the same, causing mass overcrowding, inadequate housing and poor infrastructure. Many camps get less than 12 hours of electricity a day, and it is common to see water pipes and electrical wiring entwined dangerously within reach of people in the camps.

Refugees living in the surrounding Lebanese towns tend to be better integrated, but they are still subject to discrimination, exploitation and limited opportunities.

Many Syrian refugees have sought shelter close to Palestinian refugee camps, or within the camps themselves. This has seen the population of the poorest areas explode, and puts further strains on NGOs and local economies.

Whilst many Palestinians have welcomed Syrian refugees, there is a growing tension due to competition for jobs and housing, and a reported increase in social ills such as crime, harassment and child marriage.

With conditions worsening and needs growing, the capacity of these groups and organisations to support Palestinians is diminishing. The dire situation of Palestinian refugees is at a critical point. Often referred to as the 'forgotten people', it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure a better future for as long as they remain in Lebanon.







## DAY ONE

### *Syrian Refugees in the Bekaa Valley*



The delegation to Lebanon began the visit on Monday 15th February 2016 with a visit to Syrian refugee camps. The Bekaa Valley is approximately 85km from Beirut, close to the border with Syria. The delegation visited Al-Aoudi and Al-Farah Camps, which are approximately 3km from the border.

Al-Aoudi ("The Return") is the only camp in the area recognised by the Lebanese authorities; more than 350 families live there. Al-Farah is an unofficial gathering housing 45 families.

Al-Aoudi camp contains a bakery, a hospital, an elementary school, a mosque and a small marketplace. There was also a generator to provide power for fans and fridges, as the summer months can be extremely difficult. There were also fire extinguishers in each home; fires and injuries related to diesel heaters are not uncommon. Wells have been dug, although as ground water is so contaminated, clean water is stored in water drums.



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We have an office in the camp, and the people come to us with their needs. We have some refugees who work with their community to find out what they need, such as when women had to make arrangements for going to hospitals to give birth.

Abu Obaida, Camp Organiser

The camp organisers explained the issues facing refugees and mentioned that with an estimated 410,000 refugees in the valley, NGOs in the area are stretched far beyond capacity.

## Medical care of refugees

Many of the families the delegation met with spoke of chronic illnesses and mental health issues.

Environmental hazards such as inadequate housing, extreme weather, overcrowding, flooding and a lack of clean water were cited as a health risk. Medicines Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that there was a 20% increase in morbidity in the summer of 2015, due to an unexpected heatwave,

whilst 52% of patients using its facilities suffered from respiratory infections due to environmental factors.

Amongst the many tragic stories, the visit to the hospital was an example of the resilience of refugees. Many staff are refugees working to help their community. The hospital has medical care facilities, including dental health, cardiology, A&E, obstetrics and a pharmacy. There is also an operational mobile clinic serving refugees across the valley.

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The clinic is visited by almost 200 people daily and we have treated over 25,000 patients since we were established. The need is huge, and the ten doctors are really working as hard as possible.

Director, Al-Aoudi Hospital

The hospital at Al-Aoudi is one of many facilities working to support Syrian refugees. UNHCR provides information to registered and unregistered refugees on how to access medical care. However insecure legal statuses and isolation leaves many suffering in silence.



MSF found that in the Bekaa Valley and Saida, 52% of refugees said that they could not afford treatment and 30% suspended treatment due to the cost.

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My wife is pregnant, but hasn't seen a doctor yet. She doesn't have papers, and we are worried what will happen when she has to give birth.

Mohannad, Al-Farah Camp

With over 410,000 refugees just within the Bekaa area, the ability of aid organisations to address even basic health needs is stretched. For marginalised groups such as women, the elderly or the disabled, this has catastrophic implications.

## Education and Employment

Poverty rates amongst refugees are extremely high and many families are entirely reliant on international assistance.

Many raised concerns about their children missing out on an education, and the lack of a future for them in Lebanon.

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My son works where he can... he helps us but he had to leave his education.

Amira, 38 year old mother of five

A lot of the men have moved closer to larger cities to earn money to send back to their families. However, as the

delegation learned when visiting these cities, the competition for jobs and the willingness of Syrian refugees to accept lower wages is causing tension between Palestinians, Syrians and the Lebanese.

Overall, job opportunities are severely limited and poverty is noted as a fact of life for the refugees in the camps. Various coping mechanisms such as selling possessions, not seeking medical treatment, eating less and taking children out of school and into work were cited.



Al-Farah Camp does not have a school so the children have to travel to Al-Aoudi Camp. There are no high schools in the area, leaving older children with little opportunity to continue their education. One mother told the delegation:

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My son isn't in school, he is fifteen. He just gave up after we fled, and now we are told he is too far behind to go back... he's lost his future.

Samiya, mother of three from Damascus

Despite many agencies setting up informal education hubs or activities, in reality there are millions of Syrian children missing out on an education.



The trauma or absence of fathers also means that children are required to support their families. This means that many young men and boys are working and girls are caring for younger siblings or getting married to ease the burden on their families. Effectively, the life choices of young Syrians are being limited as they focus on survival.

## Making plans for the future

In Al-Farah and Al-Aoudi Camps, the delegation spoke with families who reiterated their desire to go home.

What stood out above everything, was the sense of powerlessness felt by ordinary people, and the desire to gain some agency, either by going home or moving on to another country.

## Gendered experiences of refugee status

For women, the experience of displacement is compounded by the threat of sexual and domestic violence. Often women are unable to seek protection from within their own communities, leaving them doubly vulnerable.

The pressure on women to hold families together whilst coping with poor health or mental health issues became increasingly apparent.

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We don't talk about the four months my husband was detained. It upsets him and the children... But he is not like he was.

Fatima, from Daria in Syria

“

I think Turkey is better. People seem happier. It is worth risking drowning to end this suffering. The worst is that we don't know what will happen to us...

Huda, Palestinian refugee from Syria

Whilst a long term solution is needed, the struggles refugees face for dignity and security makes the current efforts of NGOs even more essential.

The chaos of displacement and trauma was shocking. It is difficult to comprehend the many levels of disadvantage facing Syrian refugees, alongside the years of armed conflict and the pessimism regarding a sustainable peace in the near future.



## DAY TWO

### *North Lebanon*

The delegation travelled to North Lebanon on the 16th February to visit two camps: Beddawi and Nahr el-Bared.

The local environment and politics have a heavy impact on refugees. Tripoli is very tense, with several armed factions operating around the city; sudden violence is a commonplace. The experience of refugees in the area is marked by conflicts such as the destruction of a camp in 2007.

Nahr el-Bared is secured by the Lebanese army. The camp was destroyed almost

completely in 2007 as a result of conflict between the Lebanese army and an armed militia group. Over 27,000 refugees were forced to flee and only half of them have returned. The estimated cost of reconstructing the camp is \$345 million, with only \$188 million being secured by UNRWA to-date.

Beddawi Camp is home to approximately 17,000 Palestinian refugees as well as thousands from Syria and Nahr el-Bared, who are not currently accounted for.





## Poverty and employment in the camps

Camp-based economies are essential for providing goods, services and jobs for local people.

The Norwegian Fafo Research Foundation study in 2007 reported that prior to that year's conflict in Nahr el Bared, 63% of employed people worked within the camp, and 57% of those in Beddawi worked within that camp.

The conflict damaged the local camp economy. UNRWA reported that unemployment rose in both camps after the 2007 crisis.

Interpal supports over 100 families with regular financial aid in both camps. A large proportion of these households are female-led, and many have a family member with a chronic illness or disability to support.

At the Women's Community Centre in Nahr el-Bared, the director spoke to the delegation of the dwindling opportunities for Palestinians.

For this reason, the centre focuses on helping women to learn computer literacy, cooking, hairdressing and sewing.

"Women can use the sewing machines at the centre, or we help them buy their own to work from home. The vocational training is very important as many of these women did not get higher education and earning money helps their families and empowers them" Director, Women's Community Centre.

The delegation heard that educated and economically active women are more likely to be employed.

“

We suffer many problems in Lebanon, but we can try to make things better in our camps. I want to help other children, like my sisters, who have special needs...

Social worker, Beddawi Camp

Men are more likely to be employed in construction, trade and restaurants, as these jobs were not barred for Palestinians. However, these jobs are also less secure and Palestinians are being edged out of the labour market by Syrian refugees, who are willing to work for lower wages.



## Supporting health and special needs

The delegation visited Al-Hanin Centre in Beddawi which supports over 250 young people across the two northern camps. Currently, fifty patients are guaranteed places at the centre due to financial sponsorships; seventeen of these are funded by Interpal.

The centre employs eight female support workers who are hearing impaired and have been specially trained to work with disabled children.

The delegation spent time with a few young women who were partaking in traditional handicrafts. The handicrafts are sold to generate income for the craftswomen and the centre.



Someone has come and trained the girls, and now they are very skilled. They make products for sale and use traditional Palestinian embroidery. They keep the profits of their sale, and this gives them the chance to earn, but also means they are not isolated at home.

Staff member, Al-Hanin Centre

The staff at the centre discussed the stigma around having a disability and the lack of education that parents may have about how to take care of a child with special needs.



When discussing the types and causes of disabilities in the camp, staff reported that they have seen an increase in babies born with disabilities resulting from a lack of oxygen during birth. This was explained by the lack of adequate medical equipment and training for medical staff during the delivery of the babies.



There is a lack of data relating to maternal health issues. However, what there is highlights the dangers faced by pregnant women and new-borns in the camps. Interpal's experience within the camps has also highlighted the particular vulnerabilities faced by pregnant women and Interpal has supported a maternal health programme in the camps, as well as supporting medical centres catering to women's needs.

Interpal Field Office, Lebanon

Al-Shifa Medical Centre in Nahr el-Bared Camp has been supported by Interpal

since 2013. It is only one of a handful of healthcare services for the Palestinians (and now Syrians). The only other established health centre is more than 6km away, making it difficult to get to during emergencies.

The delegation were given a tour of the facility, as well as the Interpal-funded ophthalmology and physiotherapy departments. The centre also provides medical services related to gynaecology and emergency care.

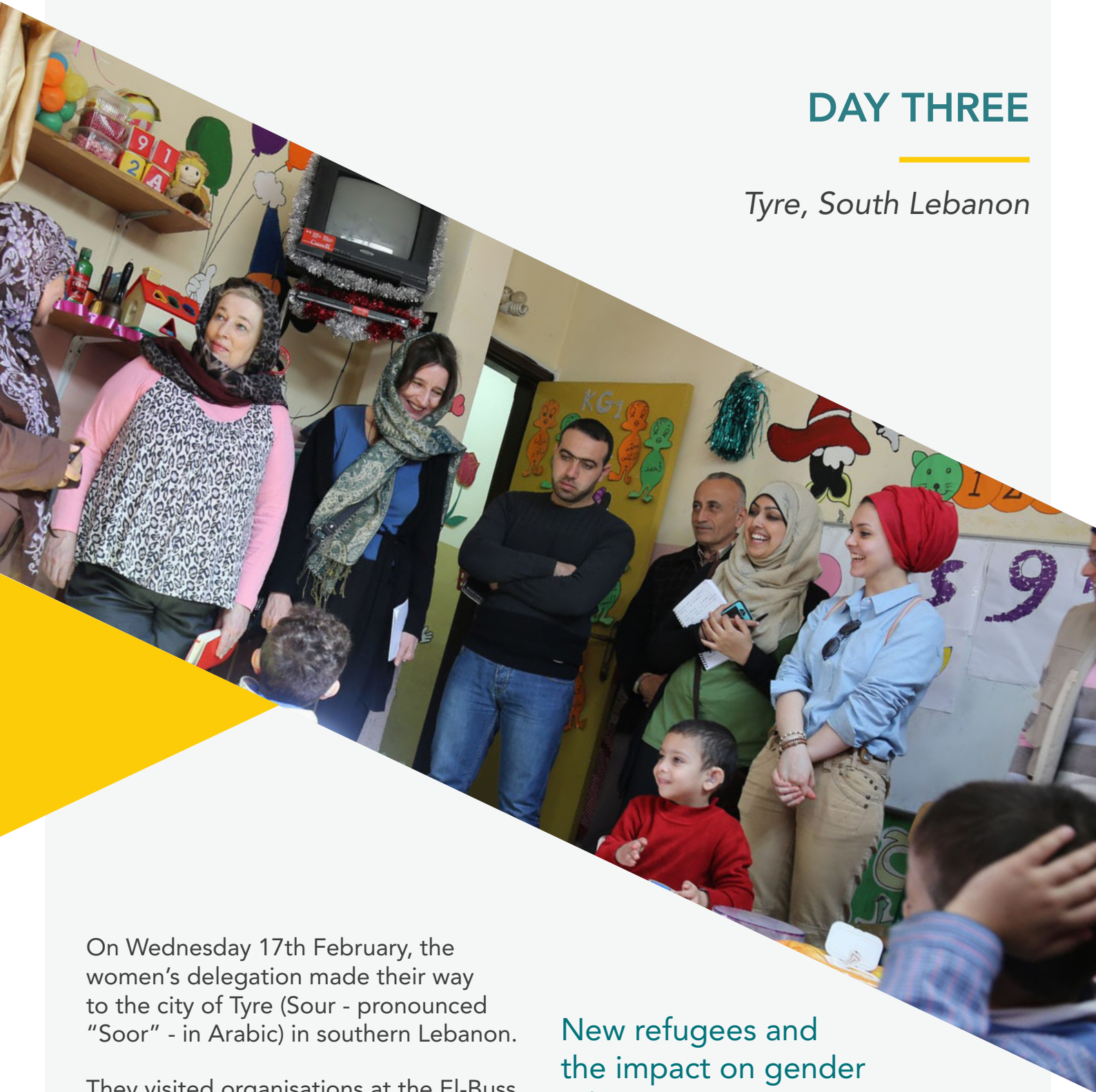
The doctors spoke of the increase from approximately 400 patients per month served by the centre in 2012 to 1,400 in 2015. This has been further exacerbated by the recent UNRWA funding cuts in healthcare.

Throughout the visit, reduction in support from UNRWA for healthcare was raised many times. The case of a man who had committed self-immolation due to the reduction in support for his treatment was brought to the attention of the delegation. This extreme and desperate measure highlighted the distress faced by Palestinians in Lebanon, and their reliance on international aid to achieve even basic human rights.



## DAY THREE

*Tyre, South Lebanon*



On Wednesday 17th February, the women's delegation made their way to the city of Tyre (Sour - pronounced "Soor" - in Arabic) in southern Lebanon.

They visited organisations at the El-Buss refugee camp, including the Women's Community Centre, the Sour Disability and Community Centre and the Nabil Badran Centre.

Home visits were also carried out at the Burj Shemali Camp, and the delegation were given an opportunity to discuss issues affecting refugees with five of Interpal's social workers.

### New refugees and the impact on gender relations

Hanaan Jadaar, supervisor of the Women's Community Centre in El-Buss Camp, explained that a lot of Syrian girls are being married off at a very young age, due to financial insecurities. In addition, there is a growing concern that Palestinian men are marrying young Syrian women/girls as their second wives.



Hanaan highlighted the vital work of the centre, recounting a recent case of a Syrian girl who ran away from home when she was being pressured into marriage. Consequently, the girl was detained by the Lebanese authorities due to her status as an ‘illegal’ and the centre was called in to help her by mediating with the family and obtaining assurances that she would not be married without her consent. Thankfully, she went on to complete a vocational course successfully and is now earning a living as a hairdresser.

This case highlights the way that the camp community comes together to address issues. Palestinians will only refer to the Lebanese police as a last resort, as protection is not guaranteed. This is hugely detrimental for women, who may be too isolated to find groups such as the Women’s Centre to support them.

Hanaan believes that both males and females should benefit from the Centre’s services.

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There are lots of groups working with women and children, as there should be, but for men... where can they go? And they face so many problems. We must tackle the issues facing young men in our camp too.

Hanaan, Supervisor, Women’s Community Centre

## Services within the camps for the most vulnerable

Having a disability or other special needs can place an emotional and financial strain on families living in such precarious situations, as well as limiting people’s quality of life.

The delegation visited the Sour Disability and Community Centre and the Nabil Badran Centre, both of which are



supported by Interpal. The Nabil Badran Centre originally offered nine children accessing educational support, and now has over fifty regular attendees.

The Sour Disability and Community Centre focuses much of its work on children and the elderly. The centre also supports the provision of assistive devices such as wheelchairs and hearing aids. The centre has also worked on supporting children's rights and facilitating mother's groups.

## Protecting children in a challenging environment

Creating and maintaining relationships with the families of children living with disabilities in the camp is essential for child protection. Interpal's social workers have also stressed that without the cooperation of families, interventions are unlikely to benefit the targeted group.

Hisham Al-Ali is the manager of the Sour Disability and Community Centre; he told the delegation that more often than not, the family of a disabled child tends to be uncooperative when they are first approached. There is still stigma attached to disabilities as well as a lack of awareness of certain. Despite this, most families do eventually accept advice and assistance.

Hisham explained that although not widely spoken about, child labour is typical of camp life; unfortunately, it has become a means of survival due to prolonged displacement and exhaustion of financial resources.

With the minimum working age set at fourteen, creating a safe environment for children means providing alternative options such as vocational training. The

Sour Centre has supported fees and training for children to access these routes, but for some children, working is seen as the only real option.



With the complete absence of state protection, the change-makers in the community take on the role of safeguarding vulnerable children through tactics such as mediation and negotiations with employers and families.

Interpal Staff

NGOs are also vital in intervening with matters at home, including abuse, neglect, and early marriages, which often go unseen.

Furthermore, Hanaan Jadaar, of the Women's Community Centre, informed the delegation that her staff recently identified seven Syrian children who are internally displaced persons (IDPs), all aged between 4 and 11 years. At the time they were working on the streets and sleeping in a deserted garage, forced to fend for themselves. Staff brought them to the centre and with the help of the Al-Waqfieh organisation, managed to find adequate housing. The boys are now supported by the Centre's social worker who visits on a regular basis.



## The Social Welfare Programme: Interpal's Social Workers

Interpal has responded to specific needs by employing social workers on the ground. Their local understanding and training makes them a valuable resource and a positive presence.

The delegation met with Interpal's social workers and discussed what life is like for the families they work with. The session provided valuable insights into issues such as domestic violence, abandonment by husbands, the impact of the Syrian crisis at a family level and mental health issues. The social workers highlighted the resilience, intelligence and spirit of Palestinian women. They all expressed

a deep dedication to their communities, an intelligent understanding of the issues facing them and positive ways to address these and build better lives for everyone.

“

When I first started working as an Interpal social worker I often became depressed. I used to cry after visiting families. Now, it is OK, I have become used to it. Now it goes to 'How can I help them?'

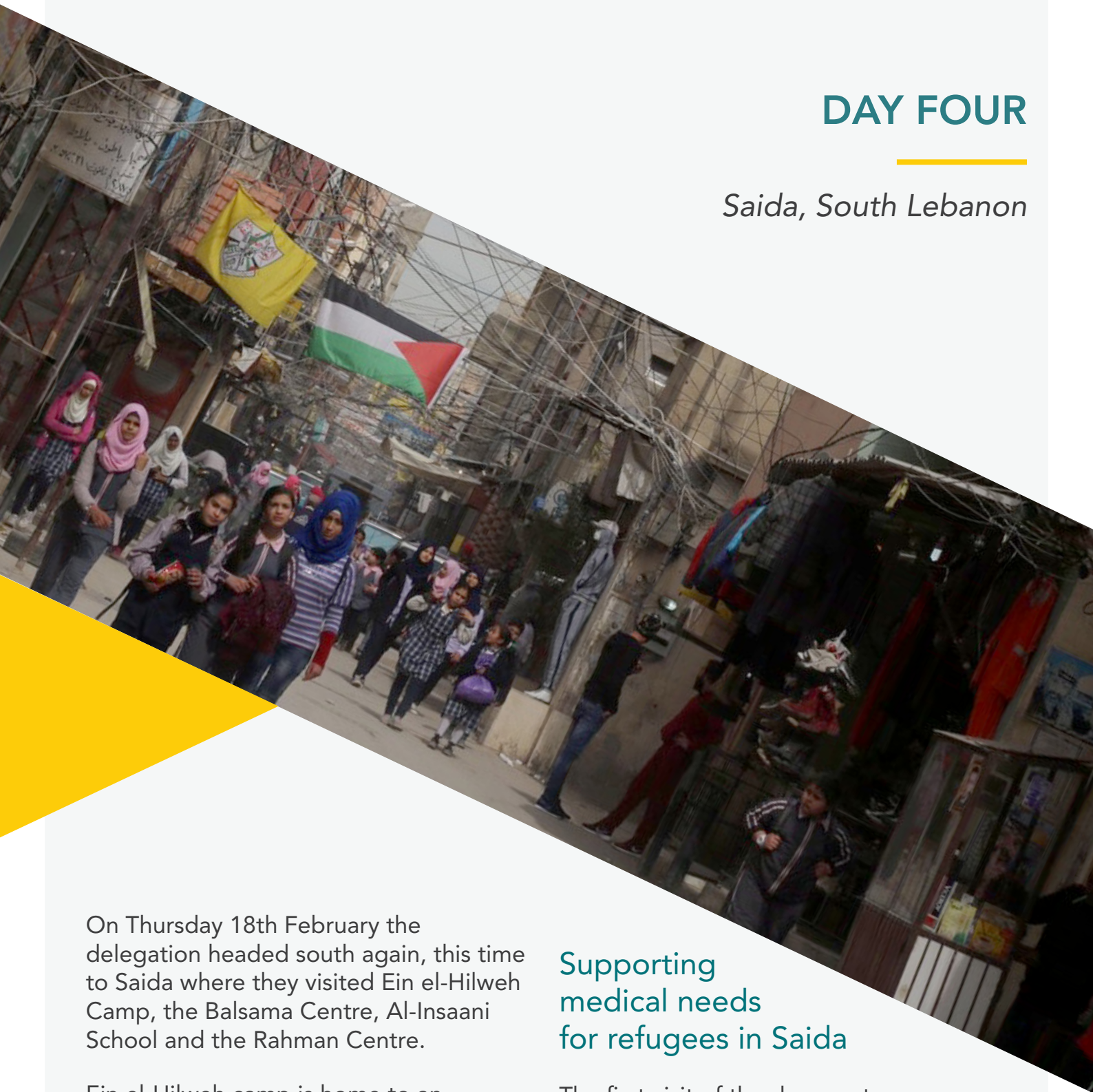
Aya Malak, Interpal Social Worker in Ein el-Hilweh Camp





## DAY FOUR

*Saida, South Lebanon*



On Thursday 18th February the delegation headed south again, this time to Saida where they visited Ein el-Hilweh Camp, the Balsama Centre, Al-Insaani School and the Rahman Centre.

Ein el-Hilweh camp is home to an estimated 80,000 Palestinian refugees, as well as around 30,000 Syrian refugees

Ein el-Hilweh is not only the most populated of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon but is also regarded as the most volatile. The delegation were provided with permits to enter by the Lebanese army and were escorted around by the local Palestinian police force.

### Supporting medical needs for refugees in Saida

The first visit of the day was to the Balsama Centre in Saida. The centre provides artificial limb fittings, rehabilitation and physiotherapy to patients and the staff showed an inspiring commitment to the care of their patients.

The centre highlights the gaps in care available to amputees and those with physical disabilities. The machines used at the centre to make and fit prosthetic





limbs were donated by German NGOs and Interpal has supported patients at the centre over the past two years.

"I worked with an autistic boy, and originally his mother didn't understand his condition and was reluctant to take him to a doctor. I explained to her what he needed, and after reassurance, he began speech therapy. In just six months he was able to speak, and this was a huge victory!" - Caroline, Speech Therapist, Balsama Centre

The delegation also met with doctors at the Khalid Bin Waleed Medical Centre in Ein el-Hilweh. The medical centre was set up with the support of Interpal in 1999, and the charity has also provided equipment and support for its ambulances.

The health profile of refugees in the camp is described as dire. Overcrowding, poor water and housing and general pollution have led to chronic illnesses, injuries and mental health issues. The influx of Syrian refugees has stretched services while UNRWA has reduced its support.

The director of the centre spoke of the many difficulties facing staff and patients. During sporadic conflict, many staff are unable to travel to work whilst patients struggled to obtain permits to leave the camp for treatment outside the camp.

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This tank of oxygen... we need a new one every four days, but sometimes it is very difficult to get permission to take the tank out to be refilled. It is seen as a potentially dangerous item. Even the bodies of the deceased are held at the military checkpoint.

Abu Hamza, Manager, Khalid Bin Waleed Centre

The staff also spoke of their concern that with the recent population explosion, disease epidemics are a disaster waiting to happen and an eventuality their services are ill-equipped to handle.



## Education and employment for young people

With unemployment so high and many professions barred to Palestinians, high drop-out rates at school indicate the lack of hope that young Palestinians have to break out of poverty.

The delegation visited Al-Insaani School and Al-Rahma Centre. Al-Insaani School supports over 200 students and employs Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian teachers. The school was set up in response to many Syrian refugee children being unable to afford an education and ending up in the streets or exploited in the labour market.

Interpal has been supporting the school since it was established in 2012, including providing a school bus and scholarships for students.

The principal explained that the Syrian curriculum is taught entirely in Arabic, whilst the Lebanese curriculum is delivered in English. The delegation heard that this makes teaching more challenging, as does the psychological stress faced by many of the children. Psycho-social activities including arts and crafts are provided to address this, which allow the children to express themselves.

“

**They left us homeless, but our hope is greater. We are losing our heritage due to extreme violence, but we hope we can return home.**

Yassine, 17 years-old, Student at Al-Insaani School

## Supporting families in Ein el-Hilweh

Interpal currently supports over 500 families in the Saida area through child sponsorships; almost 300 of these children live in Ein el-Hilweh. The delegation were shown around by Interpal's two social workers, both of whom live in the area and work with families in the camp.

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**In many of the families I work with, people are depressed or sick.**

Aya, Interpal Social Worker

During home visits and discussions with social workers, it became apparent that there is a “crisis of masculinity” facing Palestinian men, with many being unable or unwilling to fulfil traditional social obligations. For women, there is the extra pressure of holding together families in whilst having very little support for their own aspirations and needs.

In the cramped, one-bedroom home of Umm Ahmed, the delegation heard of her concerns for her son, who had taken up with a local gang after she had been abandoned by her husband. Her youngest child is unwell and Interpal provides the only support that she gets. She spoke about being depressed, but social workers informed the delegation that people are unlikely to seek outside help, turning instead to other coping mechanisms. It is a growing issue, and despite efforts to address it, reaching those in need of help is difficult in the absence of proper referrals and in the face of community stigma.

The strength and resilience of Palestinian women has to be praised but this should not ignore the fact that there are obviously limits to what anyone can cope with.

The delegation met a 60 year-old grandmother who had opened a small shop in her home and was able to generate an income for herself and her family. This enterprising woman displayed a sense of hope and optimism lacking in many of the younger residents of the camp, and she highlighted the need to reclaim people's lost sense of dignity.



...just today I've met a 60 year old woman who is becoming a businesswoman for the first time in her life. She's opened a mini-mart and, you know, it is baby steps for her and she is indicative of the amazing resilience of the Palestinian people.

Yvonne Ridley, Journalist

## Peer meeting: Palestinian women advocating for their community

The delegation finished the day at Ein el-Hilweh's makeshift park and zoo where they met young women working for the betterment of their communities.

Hiba Al-jindawi is 23 years old and works as a journalist for the online newspaper Al-Awda ('The Return'). She lived in Ein el-Hilweh with her family up until the age of 12 before moving to Abra, a district not far from the camp. She writes predominantly about refugees, (Palestinian and Syrians),

travelling to Europe and creative talents within the camps.

Yousra Khalaf is a full-time social worker and currently works for the Shaahid organisation, a rights-based NGO. The organisation's head office is in Beirut with a branch in El-Buss Camp. Most of her work revolves around advocating for the human rights of Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon.

Hanaan Mizaan is also a full-time social worker and acts as a private tutor outside of work hours. She studied business at university.

## Support services within the camps

As the delegation noted during their visits, men are at risk from addiction, gangs and mental health issues, and women often bear the brunt of subsequent frustrations. Whilst it is important to support women, it is also vital to support men and address gender issues in a holistic way.

Yousra and Hanaan also discussed promoting family planning. Their purpose was to speak with families and educate them on the long-term financial implications that come when raising a large family. The sensitivity of this was acknowledged whilst the younger generation are more receptive to this type of assistance.

It is clear that Palestinians in Lebanon are utterly reliant on charitable services. They are without the protection of a state and denied true refugee status in Lebanon, which makes it close to impossible to thrive as a community.



## Unemployment

The lack of employment opportunities entrenches generational poverty. This is causing many young people to discount the value of education, a departure from the traditionally positive view of education held by Palestinians in Lebanon.

Hiba also mentioned the growth of informal economies; in desperate situations, young men are falling prey to drug dealing and petty crime.

## Gender-based violence and vulnerable women

Whilst discussing the dire economic situation, the particular vulnerabilities of women were also mentioned. Domestic violence is seen as a symptom of a highly patriarchal and distressed population. Victims are unable to seek protection from the authorities; what support there is comes from non-governmental women's groups. The lack of employment opportunities leave women vulnerable to decisions made for them by their families relating to marriage.

It was also noted that men are more likely to fall victim to political violence and harassment. Many women asserted that to truly improve the situation of women, men needed to be reached and included in programmes and support.

## Depression and trauma

Centres offering psychosocial support are so stretched that their services cannot begin to meet the increasing demand nor the nuanced needs of Palestinians.

The three social workers also discussed the stresses facing them, as they tried to

address the plight of their people. They spoke of the need to be strong and the difficulty of remaining steadfast as the situation deteriorates.

## Syrian refugees

Whilst Lebanon has hosted refugees for decades, support has always fallen to civil society and NGOs. This remains true for the current influx of Syrian refugees. However, the unexpected length of the crisis has weakened the response over time.

There are many more issues when supporting people from Syria, who are suffering from war trauma. The issue of Palestinian men taking Syrian brides as second wives was raised as a growing concern. The desperation of Syrian families increases the likelihood of early marriage, pushing many into marrying women off advantageously. Ultimately, this erodes the rights of Syrian and Palestinian women.

The peer meeting offered an opportunity to discuss Palestinian traditions and the community spirit, support and commitment of charitable organisations. Interpal is grateful to the young women who and provided such a personal and informed insight into their community.




There is a lot of talent in the community, but it is not realised and people are unable to express it.

Hiba, Journalist







Interpal greatly appreciates the support of the women of the delegation and their compassion for the humanitarian crisis facing Palestinian and Syrian refugees. It is through such support that Interpal is able to continue its work, and those who witness our work are able to attest to the sincerity through which the charity operates.

The delegation was also a chance to hear directly about how people cope and survive. The delegation were able to speak with refugees, as well as local NGOs, UNRWA and Interpal's own field office, offering a comprehensive view of life within the refugee camps.

The visit exposed the ways in which the mass influx of Syrians is stretching

services and causing tension between communities. Despite efforts to support the new refugees, there are many falling prey to unscrupulous landlords, employers, authorities and damaging cultural practices.

For Palestinians, it is clear that a bad situation is only worsening. The condition of the camps has not improved in decades and the lack of hope amongst the younger population was expressed through high school drop-out rates and growing social problems such as gangs, violence and drugs.

Many refugees discussed how their basic rights and necessities such as education, healthcare, physical safety and housing are being denied or inadequately met.



## CONCLUSION

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### *Bearing Witness & Taking Action*

The delegation focused on women and girls, and this provided insights into the specific vulnerabilities of women. However, it also showed women supporting their communities. It was also emphasised by many that to truly improve the situation of women, there needs to be adequate support for men, who are also suffering, a phenomenon.

The multiple layers of disadvantage faced by Palestinian and Syrian refugees in an increasingly overwhelmed host nation emphasised the need for aid and development interventions. As the aid environment becomes more challenging due to security, banking restrictions and funding shortfalls, Interpal will continue to support the most vulnerable and raise awareness of the plight of refugees in

Lebanon.

Throughout 2016 Interpal increased its allocations for Lebanon and continued to develop its social welfare programme and support for local NGOs aiming to give hope to those trapped in displacement and poverty.

Interventions such as training female social workers, supporting health initiatives for women and increasing financial aid for families are aimed at helping alleviate the pressures facing refugees. Interpal is aware that the many needs of refugees in Lebanon need to be met quickly but also appropriately and will be present in the country for as long as it is required and beneficial.



## Afterword

It was an honour and privilege to be asked to represent Interpal's trustees on the Women's Delegation to Lebanon in February. I have visited before and was not only keen to see how Interpal's long-term projects have developed over the years - but also to see what effect the influx of refugees from Syria, including Palestinians, is having on the existing refugee population.

The delegation had a specific interest in how women and girls in the refugee camps are coping with the pressures of life under extraordinary circumstances. It is clear that they are not prepared to sit back and do nothing; their will to survive and raise their families is incredible, against all the odds. Nobody we met has given up hope, and that is hugely important.

I have heard it said that it is the women of Palestine who are holding the nation together; having seen and met many Palestinian women across Jordan, Gaza and Lebanon, I can attest to the truth of that claim. They are the backbone of the family and lead the way forward in communities shattered by war, ethnic cleansing and poverty.

Along with my friends and colleagues in the delegation, I salute them. After reading this report, I hope that you will too.

In conclusion, I would like to add my thanks and gratitude on behalf of the delegation to the members of Interpal's team in the UK and the Lebanon Field Office for their wonderful organisation and hospitality.

Abeda Laher,  
Leicester, April 2016









## Get in touch

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