

Lebanese Women on Return, Insecurity, and Life After the Ceasefire



Introduction

Months after the announcement of the April 2026 ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon, thousands of displaced families have begun returning to towns and villages across southern Lebanon. For many, the journey home represented more than a physical return. It carried the hope of rebuilding homes, restoring livelihoods, reuniting communities, and reclaiming a sense of normalcy after months of displacement, uncertainty, and loss.

Yet for many women, returning has revealed a reality far removed from the promise of peace. Although the ceasefire created conditions for many families to return, humanitarian organizations and United Nations agencies continue to warn that the security situation remains fragile. Reports of continued military activity, drone surveillance, intermittent airstrikes, exchanges of fire, and other security incidents have underscored the persistent risks facing civilians attempting to rebuild their lives.

Across southern Lebanon, entire neighborhoods remain devastated by widespread destruction. Homes, schools, healthcare facilities, agricultural lands, roads, electricity networks, water infrastructure, and other essential services have sustained extensive damage. The presence of unexploded ordnance, damaged infrastructure, and limited public services continues to hinder recovery and restrict safe movement in many affected communities. While hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people have returned, many have found homes that are damaged, destroyed, or no longer habitable, forcing families to rebuild with limited resources and inadequate support.

For women and girls, return has not marked the end of the humanitarian crisis but rather the beginning of a new and deeply challenging phase. As primary caregivers and, in many cases, heads of households, women continue to shoulder the responsibility of caring for children, older relatives, and family members with disabilities while attempting to restore their homes, livelihoods, and community life. Women-headed households, widows, divorced women, elderly women, and women living in rural communities often face additional barriers in accessing reconstruction assistance, employment opportunities, healthcare, and financial support. Women-owned businesses, agricultural livelihoods, and local economies have been severely disrupted, further exacerbating economic insecurity during the recovery process.

Beyond the visible destruction, the war has left a profound psychological legacy. Humanitarian organizations continue to document significant mental health and psychosocial needs among conflict-affected populations, particularly women, children, and young people. For many women, returning home has not restored a sense of safety. The sound of aircraft, explosions, or unfamiliar noises continues to trigger fear and anxiety, while repeated displacement, the loss of loved ones, and the uncertainty of renewed violence have left many living in a constant state of

vigilance. The emotional burden of war remains deeply embedded in everyday life, long after families have crossed back into their villages.

At the same time, women have remained at the forefront of community resilience throughout the conflict and its aftermath. Women human rights defenders, journalists, healthcare workers, volunteers, and women-led organizations played a central role in documenting violations, supporting displaced families, coordinating humanitarian assistance, and helping sustain their communities despite experiencing the same violence, displacement, and loss themselves. Yet many continue to report significant gaps in protection, psychosocial care, reconstruction assistance, and gender-responsive recovery efforts.

This third dispatch centers the voices of Lebanese women who have returned to southern Lebanon after prolonged displacement. Their testimonies reveal that physical return does not necessarily translate to recovery. Instead, they describe lives suspended between hope and fear, rebuilding and repeated loss, resilience and exhaustion. Together, their experiences demonstrate that the consequences of war extend far beyond the cessation of large-scale hostilities. For many women, returning home has become another stage of the humanitarian crisis, one in which rebuilding requires not only restoring homes and infrastructure, but also recovering livelihoods, rebuilding trust, addressing psychological trauma, and ensuring lasting safety, dignity, and justice.



Intisar, 26, Zawtar El Charqiyeh, South Lebanon

"My name is Intisar. I am 26 years old, from Zawtar El Charqiyeh in southern Lebanon.

Since the beginning of the war, we have been displaced several times. Each time, we packed whatever we could carry, left everything behind, and tried to start over somewhere else. But the hardest moment for me came when the ceasefire was announced.

I remember that my mother and I went back to our house immediately. We did not wait even a single day. I was afraid the entire way, but when I saw that our home was still standing, despite the damage, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. We went inside and started cleaning and putting everything back in place. I kept telling myself, 'It's finally over. We can go back to our lives.'

But that feeling did not last long.

While we were at home, we started hearing gunfire and aircraft again. My mother looked around in fear and kept saying she could not bear it anymore. We left believing we would return within a few days. We took only a few belongings and left everything else exactly where it was, as if we would be back tomorrow.

We never returned. Days passed, and then we learned that Israeli forces had entered our village. At first, I could not process it. I thought about my home constantly. Was it still standing? Had anyone entered it? Were my belongings still there? I prayed that I would not lose it. But then another thought would come to me: if they were inside my home, then I would rather see it destroyed than remain in their hands.

For the first time, I truly understood what it means to be unable to return home. I had heard stories from people whose villages remained occupied, but now I was living that reality myself.

What hurts me the most is that our lives have simply stopped. Sometimes I feel like I have forgotten what life was like before the war. Did we really leave our homes without fear? Was the sky really once free of aircraft? Did we actually make plans for the future without wondering whether we would be displaced again?

Even now, when I think about returning, I do not think only about the house. I think about my mother. I think about how I could leave her alone while I go to work, constantly afraid that everything might happen again.

The war did not only take our homes. It took away the sense of safety we once believed was simply a normal part of life."

Lara, Adaiseh, South Lebanon

"My name is Lara. My family and I were displaced from Adaiseh in October 2023. We left our home and land and moved to Beirut, later settling for some time in a small house in Nabatieh. During displacement, I tried to build a new life and find work, while my father stayed at home, watching everything we had spent our lives building disappear before our eyes.

Whenever we had the chance, we returned to our village, holding on to hope. The first shock came when we learned that one of our houses had been destroyed. We still held onto hope that our second home in Wadi Hounine had survived. But after more than 500 days of displacement, we returned only to find it burned and completely destroyed.

Despite everything we lost, we refused to give up. We remained deeply attached to our land and our village. But even after returning, the fear never ended. We wake up at night to the sound of explosions coming from the eastern sector. Then one night we learned that the last remaining house we owned in the village had also been destroyed.

Today, we have lost all of our property, but we still have each other as a family. Every new displacement forces us to relive the same pain and the same memories. Fear now follows us with every unfamiliar sound, yet we continue trying to hold on to life and to hope.

When we returned after so many months of displacement, it did not feel like we had come back to the place we once knew. The roads had changed. The houses were in ruins. Every day we ask ourselves whether we will be forced to leave again.

For us, returning was not the end of displacement. It was the beginning of a new phase of anxiety and uncertainty."



Amal Salami, 44, South Lebanon

"From the very first moment, our sense of safety disappeared, and our journey of fear began.

We became afraid of everything: the sounds around us, what might happen to our families, what might happen to ourselves, and whether this situation would ever end. Today, what controls us most is fear of the unknown.

There are no guarantees. We have faced an enemy that has shown no limits in its attacks, targeting children, women, medical workers, journalists, hospitals, and even cultural and historical sites.

We managed to return to our land. Our homes were destroyed, and nothing was left. I had built my own business after my divorce. It was my dream and my way of proving I could support myself without relying on a husband, father, or brother.

Now I have returned, but there is nothing left. There is no support. I challenged many expectations throughout my life, but today the burden on my shoulders has only grown heavier. Women need strong support systems around them in times like these.

The large international organizations offered little beyond slogans. In the end, women were left to face an uncertain future without protection during the war, without meaningful support afterward, and without policies that could provide even basic shelter or financial assistance to rebuild a livelihood.

Returning to your village and your land is a blessing, but how are we supposed to meet the basic needs of everyday life?

Even living in a tent in your own village can feel better than remaining displaced somewhere else, but there is still almost no support. The war has been devastating in every possible way. We lost relatives. Entire communities were shattered. The destruction has set us back decades. Infrastructure is gone. Nothing remains.

I keep asking myself: what has this destruction achieved except more killing and devastation? We were living our lives peacefully. We had our work, our homes, and our future.

To all those who speak every day about human rights, development, and peaceful conflict resolution, where are those principles now? In the face of such brutality and the assault on our shared humanity, what role have they truly played?"

Karen Alhor, 19, Houmine El Fawka, South Lebanon

"I live in Houmine El Fawka, a village in southern Lebanon. I remained in the South for much of the war before eventually being displaced to Beirut after Israel suddenly threatened our village. Like many others, we left without knowing when—or whether—life would ever return to normal.

When we came back, our house had only minor damage, but the village and its people were no longer the same. The hardest part was realizing that even after returning, nothing truly felt over.

We are still living in survival mode. Our bodies are prepared to leave at any moment. Every unfamiliar sound can trigger fear. The sense of safety we once knew has not returned.

As someone who stutters, I was deeply affected by the war. My stutter became much more severe during this period. I found myself constantly monitoring my speech, thinking carefully about every word before saying it, and carrying a level of stress that made communication even more difficult.

I am also a psychology student, and this experience has shown me how long the effects of war stay with people, especially young people and women. We continue to carry the fear, uncertainty, and emotional weight of everything that happened. We returned home, but many of us are still waiting to feel at home again."



Amna Marwa, Zarariyeh, South Lebanon

"My name is Amna Marwa, and I am from Zarariyeh. I was one of those who could not bear the hardship of displacement, so I returned to my village.

At first, I would only go back during the day. But there was a group of elderly people living in my neighborhood, and I could not bring myself to leave them behind. I brought them into my home, and together we lived through the war.

That was only the beginning.

Soon, the airstrikes began landing near the house. The first attack targeted a young man. I remember thinking that it would be one of the hardest days of my life.

A few days later, another massacre took place in our neighborhood. Twelve houses were destroyed, and twelve people were killed. It was the first time I had ever seen the bodies of people being pulled from beneath the rubble. I imagined myself in their place.

That was when I finally left the village. But my heart remained there. I could not stop thinking about the elderly people I had left behind. I returned once again, even though the suffering became even greater.

Many people said I had surrendered myself to death. That was not true. I had simply placed my trust in God and chose to stay with my community.

The hardest moment for me, my family, and my village came during the third massacre, which took place in the village square. We were devastated. So many names were being announced that we could barely comprehend the scale of what had happened. We could only say, 'Praise be to God. What God wills shall happen. There is no escaping destiny.'

As the people of this village, our grief for those we lost is immeasurable. We also lost the places that held our memories, our stories, and our lives."

Conclusion and Demands

The testimonies presented in this third dispatch reveal that returning home has not meant returning to safety. For many women across southern Lebanon, the ceasefire marked not the end of the crisis but the beginning of a new phase of rebuilding amid destruction, uncertainty, and continued insecurity. Their experiences demonstrate that recovery is not measured by physical return alone, but by whether people can rebuild their lives with safety, dignity, and hope for the future.

Women continue to carry the burden of sustaining their families and communities while coping with the lasting consequences of war, including economic hardship, psychological trauma, and the loss of homes, livelihoods, and loved ones. Yet despite these challenges, they remain at the forefront of rebuilding their communities and preserving hope.

Their voices make clear that lasting recovery requires more than reconstruction. It requires sustained humanitarian support, gender-responsive recovery efforts, meaningful participation of women in decision-making, and accountability for violations of international law. Without these commitments, the cycle of displacement, insecurity, and vulnerability will continue long after the fighting has subsided.

Femena stands in solidarity with Lebanese women and women human rights defenders and joins their calls for urgent action:

- Ensure the full implementation, monitoring, and enforcement of the ceasefire, with effective measures to protect civilians and prevent further violations of international humanitarian law.
- Guarantee the safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable return of displaced populations, ensuring that civilians are not compelled to return before conditions permit their safety and well-being.
- Protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, including homes, schools, hospitals, agricultural lands, water systems, and essential public services, in accordance with international humanitarian law.
- Expand gender-responsive humanitarian and recovery assistance, ensuring women and girls have equitable access to housing support, healthcare, reproductive and maternal health services, psychosocial care, education, legal assistance, and protection from gender-based violence.
- Prioritize reconstruction and sustainable livelihoods, including targeted financial assistance, livelihood recovery, and economic empowerment initiatives for women-headed households, women entrepreneurs, agricultural workers, and rural communities affected by the conflict.

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- Increase investment in mental health and psychosocial support, recognizing the long-term effects of conflict-related trauma on women, girls, children, caregivers, and communities.
 - Recognize, protect, and support Lebanese women human rights defenders, journalists, healthcare workers, volunteers, and women-led organizations, whose leadership has been essential to humanitarian response, community resilience, and documentation of violations throughout the conflict.
 - Ensure the meaningful participation of women at all levels of recovery, reconstruction, peacebuilding, and political decision-making, in line with international commitments on Women, Peace and Security.
 - Support independent, impartial, and transparent investigations into alleged violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, and ensure accountability and access to justice for victims and survivors.
 - Mobilize sustained international support for Lebanon's recovery, recognizing that rebuilding communities requires long-term investment in infrastructure, public services, social protection, and community resilience, with particular attention to the rights and needs of women and girls.

The voices in this dispatch remind us that the end of active hostilities does not, in itself, end the human consequences of war. Lasting peace requires more than the absence of fighting. It requires justice, accountability, protection, reconstruction, and a commitment to ensuring that women are not only survivors of conflict, but equal partners in shaping Lebanon's recovery and future.



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Femena works with partners to promote gender equality, inclusion, and peace; expand civic space; strengthen civil society and WHRD resilience; visibilize the work of WHRDs and progressive feminist movements; and foster solidarity and south-south cooperation in the South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region. Femena's work is particularly focused on contexts, experiencing crisis, conflict, authoritarianism and closing civic space.