

Personal Testimonies

Emma Gration, Tala Hassan, Farah Baba, Mira Fawwal, and Myriam Boulous

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Corresponding author: Stephanie Nasr

Author contact: stephanie.nasr@lau.edu

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Emma Gratton

is a Lebanese Drag Queen who is part of the entertainment community and who is currently located in Qatar.

Q: How did the Beirut Blast affect your work as a drag performer?

After the blast, a lot of the safe spaces for the queer community disappeared—places where we would go for drinks, hang out, or for coffee. Or, as far as I'm concerned as a drag performer, places where we used to do shows. Places such as Madame Om, Now Beirut, and so on and so forth. For drag performers, in particular, a lot of people, including me, due to the economic crisis and everything going on in Lebanon, relied on drag as a main source of income. So, with that gone, the ability to do shows is gone, our source of income and money also went away. So, there was this big struggle of what are we supposed to do? Are we doing virtual shows? Should we do shows that are streamed outside and should viewers have to pay a fee or tips online?

Personally, talking about this while I'm in Qatar, after the blast, obviously, I was devastated. I was devastated to see the places I go to, my friends' houses, all of

these things blown up and destroyed. I remember like a day or two after the explosion, I can't remember exactly, there was a big protest in Downtown [Beirut], and I thought: *This is the change we were waiting for.* And I remember we went down to the streets, but an hour later we were tear-gassed and the protestors were dispersed. I went home and nothing had changed. If Beirut getting blown up isn't going to change anything, what will? There's nothing bigger than this that will happen and that will trigger change. So that was my first indication to not really hold my breath for anything to change. It was a domino effect of me giving up on Lebanon and Beirut. It's bigger than protesting and elections. It's all geopolitics and bigger countries taking control of our right to decide what to do with ourselves.

Q: How has the Blast affected the groups or communities that you work with?

One good thing that came out of the explosion is the sense of community. It was really there—not just the queer community or the LGBT community. We were helping people, along with Sandra Melhem, the founder of EGO—we set up a makeshift

basecamp out of her own apartment. We were handing out donations and any kind of help that was needed, whether the person was queer or straight or whatever it may be. I remember that Sandra's neighbors were supporting us, and the thing is they knew who we were. We weren't hiding and we were super out and proud and had a pride flag out. They knew that we were queer, and they were happy that we were helping. That brought people together.

A day or two after the blast, there was no clear path of what was going to happen. Are they going to rebuild? Are they going to close? What are they going to do? Everyone's fate was in limbo. No one knew what was going to happen and people couldn't really rely on themselves anymore. That's when the GoFundMe pages and all happened. That was enough for a month or two and it was how a lot of people survived, with the help of do-gooders from the outside. A lot of people relied on donations to live, while before they were working and making money just like everybody else.

But a lot of things have changed since then. The economic crisis has gotten worse. And the crisis didn't really bring people together. It just made Lebanon more of a jungle, a survival of the fittest, and a fight to get the most money.

Q: How did your work change after the Blast?

After the explosion, we were already going through COVID-19, and already dealing with the dollar exchange rate, so we already had enough on our plate. Then the explosion happened. Drag is already super expensive to do in any case, even when the dollar was stable. So, it became difficult to do in all cases. That's when a lot of people stopped doing drag. It was fun for them, but it was no longer fun after the blast because it was just causing them more struggles.

The Blast took away a lot, not just speaking about drag performers or about the queer community in general. These places [where we performed] had waiters, managers, and different positions in them. Not just talking about venues anymore but in general. A lot of people were kicked out of their homes by their families, so they moved to Beirut and

were forced to rely on themselves to survive.

Q: In your opinion, what does the future of drag look like in Lebanon today?

Honestly, with everything being said, in terms of venues being closed, it's been hard. Specifically, Bardo closed in October and other [venues] that are for drag performances that were affected by either the blast or the economic crisis. There are two more venues [left] just to do shows in, and one I think is close to closing. It's very difficult for drag viability. And what drag performers in general in Lebanon can resort to is photoshoots, online presence, or creating online content with the occasional booking of private events. So, the visibility is declining in terms of local performances but of course, we cannot deny emphasis on online presence. But that's the thing, there are a lot of facets to online presence including a lot of security concerns, harassment, and bullying. Also, a lot of performers and people believe that they're not going to get in drag for a photoshoot if they don't have a performance or show. Although others mainly exist on social media by doing looks, for example.

I hope that there remains a community, especially now that I left. A lot of queens and kings are leaving the country just like a lot of others are leaving. And like everything else, it's going to need a miracle. And there's that word that I hate using but there's resilience because we've faced so much. This might be too big to overcome, but I hope we do.

Tala Hassan

is a member of the Queer Mutual Aid Groups. The Group consists of individuals throughout society who offer mutual aid to the queer community through social support.

Q: How did the Beirut Blast affect your work?

As a queer mutual aid group, we started having conversations before the blast, actually the summer after COVID-19 started and the economic crisis really got worse. In the summer of 2020, we started thinking together about what kind of support and aid we wanted to offer: We use aid in a non-charity sense and we use it in its full term of mutual aid just not to take it out of context. It was a friend of mine who initiated this conversation with me and their other friends. They put together a group of people whom they knew would all be interested in this topic. We started tackling what we need as a community—I use community loosely here to mean queer people who are marginalized and erased from society and social benefits and spaces and to mean people who are oppressed whether its identity based or whether it be by the state or by society.

We were frustrated with the idea that basic needs were not being met. That might mean cash assistance, or it might mean direct food donations. These things are sometimes hidden from view because of the fear of replicating charity and charity-like dynamics, where there's a power dynamic and a certain ulterior motive. There's a certain element in charity that we didn't and don't want to replicate. At the same time, we want to acknowledge the basic needs that people have are sometimes going to be very material and this is okay, and this is what we need to work on. We need to work on homelessness, access to food, medicine, healthcare, and social spaces.

We started looking up mutual aid models. Personally, not talking for the whole group, mutual aid was a term I had heard of and conceptually agreed with, but I didn't know how it was practiced. And it took me a while to know how to differentiate it from charity. The process was nice because, on the one hand, we were thinking about how we can do work on the ground, specifically with queer and trans people that need very basic material needs and not so basic survival

needs such as socializing, access to mobility, being safe in homes, etc. And on the other hand, we were thinking politically, theoretically, and intellectually about how to address things like capitalism and antiracism and the erasure of queer and trans people. These two lines of thinking and working are ongoing.

And then the Blast happened. When that happened, we realized there is an emergency need right now. My friend who put us all in touch already had a few contacts they were thinking of supporting but nothing was fully in play yet. We felt the urgent need to support our community because they were being turned away from the mainstream support being offered after the blast: People were being evicted, people lost their homes, people were getting denied access to food and health care, either because they are trans or because they're not Lebanese. There were just so many layers.

We had a contact in Europe who was immediately supportive and immediately thought of us. That's where the term queer

relief fund came from. This was the title of the fundraiser at the time. We were able to raise a lot of money. People were so generous, and [the fundraiser] was being shared [online] a lot. It was also going on in parallel with a lot of other fundraisers, so it was cool to see the multiplicity of initiatives that were all very community based. This is where we really got the funding to start working the way we had imagined although obviously not under the circumstances we had thought of. And we kept moving forward from there.

We haven't really changed the means or mode of our work. The Blast didn't take away from the way we wanted to work, which was making sure that people have access to the resources they needed. It's not just about helping someone survive on the most basic level, then just letting them be. It's also not denying that general social life and personal life are so important as well. I think our core beliefs, and a core belief in mutual aid is that support should be sustainable. This is one of the main things that differentiates it from charity: That the work is done in a sustainable way, whether

that means providing ongoing support or whether it means helping someone get the resources they need to support themselves. So, for example, rather than paying someone monthly to pay rent when their issue is not having access to transportation to get to work, we should also invest in transportation so that they can then access work and make money. So, this is where you start to think creatively.

This has always been the case even though it was an emergency and people needed the most basic resources to recover from the Blast. We always wanted to do it in a sustainable way.

Q: How has the Blast affected the groups or communities that you work with?

I think that the core ways people have been impacted are obvious. I mean things that are out there and explicit, like losing housing, access to resources, and healthcare with the pressure the healthcare system was under even before the Blast, and especially for queer and trans people. Obviously, with the economic crisis and the way that the crisis was moving in parallel, everything became more expensive and unaffordable. Add to

this, lockdowns and mobility restrictions. All these things have in fact had an impact on everyone.

But when it comes to the people we support—marginalized queer and trans populations, it hits them harder—if you're poor, if you don't have access to transport, if you don't have your own place to rent, if you don't have a Lebanese passport or a "white" (Western/Global North) passport. All these things really matter. So, it's very important to acknowledge the power differences.

The way these crises affect us is not comparable. When COVID-19 started, there was this expression going around: *Corona doesn't discriminate*. But it does in one way or another, not the virus itself, but the way it's affecting us. We can see our social dynamics in the way the virus is affecting us as a society and in the world, even. The same goes for the Blast. Of course, it affected everyone, of course, it traumatized everyone in one way or another, but there's a difference in how people are addressed, and the resources people receive after to

recover from that trauma or be able to survive this context.

Another important difference is that the organizations and groups, whether informal or formal, whether registered institutions or not, indulged in a lot of discrimination against many of the communities who were most affected by the blast, such as queer and trans, as well as non-Lebanese, communities like migrant workers from Africa and Asia, or Syrians and Palestinians. There was a huge gap in that sense. To give a more solid example about how the blast “doesn't discriminate,” some of the neighborhoods that were greatly impacted were Bourj Hammoud and Karantina, which is also where a lot of migrant workers live. There are these geographies and politics that exist, and we can't pretend that these things are neutral. There's a reason that more effort was put into rebuilding and cleaning Gemmayze than in Bourj Hammoud. These are really things we need to unpack and think about. Politics is always at play.

Q: Have your goals shifted in the aftermath of the explosion?

We're still working in the way we started.

We rely a lot on fundraisers, donations, and small grants from feminist organizations to be able to carry out the work. Yes, it was an emergency context a year ago, but the repercussions and the broader context that we live in, that queer and trans people must navigate through, are constant and ongoing. There's one thing that lies at the core of what we do, which is the belief that everyone needs enough resources to be able to survive and live the lives they want to live, to do things they want to do, not just things they have to do. This goes back to why, through emergencies or not, money is important for what we need to do our work, as is sustainability and the ability to think a bit wider in terms of how support and mutual aid can be a sustainable endeavor.

One thing, maybe, that I can say that has developed is that we gained a bigger space to think about how we can broaden our scope and go bigger because we've always wanted to focus on people's basic needs. We've always wanted to think more widely and engage our political imagination. For

example, having a community space that we're eager about. It's so hard to do and it really takes a lot of time and effort, other than just money. But this is one thing that maybe now, stepping back from the very urgent and on the ground needs, we can start to think about a little more. In general, I think more community-based efforts and how to expand more as a network are important. Now, this is a very important point to bring up, because we are a group of people that are just coordinating something. We coordinate money that we have and other resources that we can mobilize, whether it's contacts that we know in medical care or other medical resources, or for people who might know of houses: We mobilize these resources as coordinators. But we're not a group that's closed off in any way. We want to expand our network and share resources. There is a dynamic, a power dynamic, that we can't escape from because we live in a specific world where these relationships are built with certain expectations. But we try as much as possible to be very engaged, collaborative, and participatory. We've never told someone what to do with their money, we've never

asked about a receipt to see where the money was spent. We try to facilitate the process for the community we're working with.

Also, an important part of this work is to start meeting each other to become more of a mobile network where people can contact each other. We're not needed to do this obviously, people have the agency and autonomy to build these networks also, and they exist formally and informally. We can't deny that, and we are in no way the creators of such a network. But, because of the position we're in now and the people we are in touch with we can support its mobilization. We want to open up a bit more and have more engagement from people interested in this work. There's never enough support, honestly.

We have relied so much on social media and just people sharing, and it's been so amazing what we have been able to do with people's donations. As cliché as it sounds, it makes me so happy to see the community in action in this way. People care and people want this alternative world that we're seeking. It's

really touching to see that people are trying as much as possible to support this work and this alternative vision.

Some things to think about over the long-term is about documentation, and how to document the work that we're doing. Whether it's documenting internally as a group or documenting our thoughts, politics, and conversations or all the knowledge we're gaining from the process and sharing it throughout the world. There are so many things that we've come across and have come to realize by doing this work that are so important to share and put out into the public. How can we start sharing information and knowledge, with emphasis on community sharing? We don't want it to be as "Group XX" released this infographic, but at the same time, we want that information out there. For example, when we started doing this work, I think personally, I realized the extent to which we sometimes shy away from conversations about homelessness and poverty because in these political feminist spaces it can be a topic that's considered taboo. But when in fact it's an essence of reality and it's

important to say that and acknowledge it because otherwise, you're erasing that very real experience that defines somebody's access to resources and having a safe space around them, to living the way they want to live. And homelessness—I didn't know how important it is as an issue to tackle, especially for trans people. It is so invisible, I rarely hear anyone talk about it, to be honest, let alone trans people who are homeless and then faced with so much assault and violence.

Basically, all the things that we're learning are important to put out there one way or another. And sometimes you get distracted from that or don't have time for that because you're doing the work on the ground, the coordinating, the logistics, and the acts: That's a bit tiring. But we need to start thinking wider. We're also very excited to start having more conversations. However, it's hard to organize—nobody has time or energy. But political conversations are very necessary as well, something that's very alternative to what we're used to whether in queer and feminist spaces or in more general political and *Thawra* spaces.

We want something different, and we want
to build a different discourse. We're
discovering that together.

Farah Baba

is an Advocacy and Communications Officer at the Migrant Community Center (MCC). MCC is an Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) establishment where migrant workers in Lebanon meet, organize, build alliances, and access information, resources, and direct assistance.

Q: Can you recount your personal experiences of the Beirut Blast?

I was at the office in Hamra, next to LAU [Lebanese American University]. It's funny because most of the other people who survived that day survived because of pure coincidence. I was supposed to go to Gemmayze to meet a friend and he canceled on me at the last minute. So, we didn't go, and I decided to stay in the office. A few of my colleagues were there. It's very close to Hariri Palace and it was only three days before the verdict of [Rafic Hariri's] assassination was supposed to come out. We all assumed that when [the Blast] happened, it had to do with the Hariri case. We kind of felt it in the building and it made sense that we assumed so. The first few seconds were a shock. I froze in my chair, and I was looking at the glass. I was watching it break until my colleague literally removed me from the chair.

I live right next to the office as well, so going and seeing the apocalypse smoke all over and the grass all over the ground, I think the only word to describe it is "apocalypse" especially because you didn't know what exactly happened, didn't know if Israel finally acted on its promises and invaded us, and what we're going to do. So, it was quite the shock. I then went and saw my friend. We were supposed to go and donate blood, but we couldn't because of the traffic. It was a shock but there was, for a long time, and what I'm going to say applies to me and most of my friends, there was this sense of survivor's guilt. For example, when we went home, by coincidence, all the windows were open and very minimal damage happened. It was the same with my friends and their houses that were not close to Gemmayze or Achrafieh. It was interesting how almost all my friends had the exact same reaction. They were shocked and went to their houses and found minimal damage. Then they realized that it was because they remembered to open the windows that day, so there wasn't any pressure.

With the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), which is the parent organization of MCC (Migrant Community Center), we were checking on the members of MCC because we were seeing all over the news that there are unidentified people with brown and black skin [who had been injured]. So, we were panicking and questioning whether they were people we knew. What if employers abandoned domestic workers? It did indeed happen. There wasn't time to actually understand what had happened. It was just time to organize a protest, go look for the missing migrant members of MCC, go talk to all the migrant groups to check if any of their acquaintances are missing or if they're hurt or dead, and to know exactly what was happening. And then of course the big protest happened a few days later. I was injured, and I decided after that not to protest anymore. It was a very surreal and apocalyptic period. What happened after was horrible because we were seeing employers abandoning migrant domestic workers at hospitals and we saw on live T.V. and even in front of us in the car, paramedics literally ignoring the presence of injured black people and saying, "Oh I'm

sorry we have to prioritize Lebanese," even though the person was very visibly bloody and injured. It was just really bad. We basically had to call hospitals trying to identify the non-Lebanese victims because there were many official and unofficial lists. We had to compare them. People were panicking and we were just calling hospitals to ask if there were any body parts that were not "white." It was surreal, something you would never expect you would have to go through to make up for the failure of the state or the system.

Q: How was your work affected by the Beirut Blast?

MCC closed temporarily in March 2020, with the [COVID-19] lockdown and reopened again this July 2021. Everyone who was MCC staff was transferred to other teams because we had three or four temporary projects for solidarity and support. Many members were part of the solidarity campaign we had to distribute food packages, food kits, and hygiene packages. Of course, after the blast, we had to reassess what we even thought was a priority and we had a somewhat existential shift to see if the work we're doing is

actually benefiting anyone whether it's advocacy, casework, or even MCC classes. Right before the blast, actually funnily enough, on the day of the blast in the morning, we had a meeting with the vice-consul of Sierra Leone and we had been planning an advocacy campaign for the evacuation of migrant workers and migrant domestic workers including retroactive justice for unpaid wages. We were thinking of how to reshape the advocacy campaign for evacuation because, after the blast, a lot of people left domestic workers at the consulates and on the streets at the embassies. We decided that we're not just going to do an advocacy campaign and pressure consulates and the International Organization for Migration. We're going to do that but also complement it with an actual evacuation plan. A lot of people raised funds for tickets because they were extremely expensive with the crisis.

Three things happened. First, we had to really accelerate and push the pace and demands for the evacuation advocacy campaign. We also had to do a lot of media outreach because there were a lot of people

[affected by the explosion] who had not been identified. Even right after [the Blast], when the army and some nongovernmental organizations were distributing aid or fixing houses, we had a lot of documented cases where organizations said that they can only give and help the Lebanese. It was a very hopeless situation at the time. We decided we'll just do everything ourselves instead of pressuring the government or the ministry to do something because it's supposedly their job. These issues and communities were not in the media. So, we did a lot of media campaigning and awareness [raising], specifically with international media because local media is hopeless and there are very few independent outlets. There was a lot of international advocacy work as well, and of course, the credit isn't only to us. There were others working with us. MCC members who had already left Lebanon were also helping us throughout this process. That's the second thing that happened: there was an increase in international coverage about the *kafala* system and the situation of migrant domestic workers. So that was a good impact. This created a lot of pressure for

consulates and embassies, particularly the Lebanese consulates such as the Kenyan, Cameroon, Nepal, and Madagascar consulates, to respond to the situation.

The third thing that occurred was an acceleration of our relief work in terms of supporting households, and continuing food and hygiene packages. It also involved evacuation. We were helping people travel. At the same time, the case team's work changed a little. There were many cases of unpaid wages and employers who lost everything in the blast and who were, consequently, unable to pay domestic workers' salaries. So, they literally just threw the migrant worker out.

To sum it up, the impact [of the Beirut Blast] led us to decide and work really fast because the situation was hopeless and you cannot wait for a long-term advocacy plan to actually achieve success. Unfortunately, advocacy takes time, and you have to be very strategic and political. We decided that we don't have time for that. We resorted to aid work and international advocacy, specifically with UN agencies such as the ILO

(International Labour Organization) and the IOM (International Organization for Migration) who were very helpful and endorsed a lot of our demands. At the same time there were a lot of awareness-raising and fundraising campaigns by so many people, including Lebanese diaspora from all over the world.

Interestingly, our work unveiled a lot of collaboration or coordination with the diaspora in the countries of migrant workers. There are a lot of Ethiopians in the U.S. who were trying to push their embassy and the Lebanese consulate in New York to solve the issues of abandoned domestic workers in the streets and issues of unpaid wages. There was a lot of strategic advocacy being done on the topic, which I believe was successful.

But again, it's not just us. One organization or group cannot do all of this on its own. Of course, all of this was a collective effort with MCC members, Egna Legna, the Alliance for Migrant Domestic Workers, This is Lebanon, and Meghterbin Meshtemiin.

Q: How has the Beirut Blast affected your organization's goals and work?

Specifically, with MCC, after the blast, we were thinking of reopening once the vaccination [campaigns] started. But we had to rethink the actual impact of everything we were doing before. I work in the advocacy team of ARM and MCC is a project by ARM, so we agreed that it would make sense for the team at MCC and the advocacy team of ARM to be always coordinating with each other. We realized that strategic advocacy was really working, and we also wanted to push MCC in the direction of community building and community organizing. The classes unfortunately have stopped. But now there are more capacity-building programs, like a citizen journalism program that is in collaboration with the Media Institute at LAU that teaches participants how to report on a situation affecting their own community instead of just answering the questions of journalists who are not very familiar with the context.

As before, the social element [of MCC] is still very much there: social events, cultural events, birthdays, and everything. Now, one of the new programs introduced has to do

with psychosocial support, because after the pandemic, so many members were telling us they felt so isolated because they work all week and have one or two days at MCC where they feel connected and part of a community with those who are sharing their struggle and advocacy, specifically when it comes to the *kafala* system. We decided that we would have a psychosocial support program for this but it's still being developed because we feel, in this context, when it comes to *kafala* and migrant workers, we're not really fans of the traditional approach of primarily talk therapy. We also want to politicize what we think of therapy, mental health, and alienation, especially when someone works in very critical conditions under such a system as the *kafala*: alienation is a very severe part of it. Also at the same time, one of the aims is to humanize the experiences of migrant workers, and not just to talk about their struggles and what they're going through as workers. So that's a way for us to politicize or contextualize what they're experiencing.

There are also other ad hoc activities that happen alongside these two bigger projects. For example, on December 18, 2021, there's International Migrants Day so our community members are planning a poetry evening with the spoken word. These are things that they really enjoy. In the advocacy team, we're planning a campaign to practically think of ways to abolish the *kafala* system because no policymaker has any real interest in abolishing the system. So, we are thinking of changing things on the ground and imposing new realities. This is of course happening with MCC members, and not just us alone doing a campaign and attracting media. We're trying to avoid doing this without community input, and this is why it's taking a lot of time but we're working on it with MCC members. So, a big part of MCC's work is community organizing and self-advocacy.

Mira Fawwal

is a psychology student at the University of Balamand. Fawwal is a social activist for mental health and wellbeing who offered virtual and in-person emotional support for individuals affected by the Beirut Blast.

Q: Can you recount your personal experiences of the Beirut Blast?

Well, my ex-partner was in Beirut on the day of the Blast, and I was going there. I had left Tripoli, where I'm from, and by the time I reached Beirut, the Blast had happened. I didn't understand anything anymore. It was really bad, honestly. I started thinking that a war had happened or something equally as bad. I just wasn't understanding and did not know what to do or whom to talk to. I didn't even have a phone connection to speak to anyone. I was disconnected from being able to speak to others. I remember going to Gemmayze where he was, and thankfully he was well. When I reached Gemmayze, I stopped thinking about myself. I was more concerned about how to help those around me. What am I better at than emotional support? I thought that was the only thing I could do. I started to just talk to people.

I also tried to help those who had physical injuries with my experience and knowledge from the Lebanese Red Cross. I'm not completely qualified to do a lot in that field, but I tried as much as possible to be there for people.

I then went home and obviously I couldn't sleep. So, I used my platform on Twitter and offered emotional support for those who would want to talk. Surprisingly, a lot of people reached out. It meant a lot to me as well. For about two days following the Blast, I would just talk to people individually, even long through the night. I ended up making a support group on Telegram and it grew from there. There were maybe 12 support groups, each having 12 to 16 participants. I then went on the ground and the work continued.

Q: How has the Blast affected your work?

Honestly, it was really challenging because it was the trauma and still is the trauma that it is difficult to respond to. Everyone has their own reaction. Everyone expresses this trauma in their own way or behaves or speaks in a certain way. Some people don't

even say anything at all. So, it was difficult at first, but I tried my best to understand how I can offer the most support. I was personally going through so much and I'm not trying to invalidate my own feelings, but I wanted to give. There were people that were tragically impacted, and I felt I needed to be there.

At first, I was working alone. But after two months, I met people from Political Action who were working in Karantina, specifically in the areas in front of the government hospital there. They were working mainly with kids and the activities taking place were more drama therapy-based because kids cannot express themselves easily. But they were really supportive. Now, we were still only three women and we had with us a professor from the AUB (American University of Beirut) who was directing us. That was the main source of support through the actual work that took place.

Q: How has your work shifted in the past year since the Beirut Blast?

When you're physically on the ground, it's different from all the concepts and theories we learn as psychology students. You experience being there for others and

identify how each person thinks uniquely and comes from a different background. There are a lot of people that still don't grasp that talking to someone is actually an initial step of psychology. Especially, if we want to talk about those from Tripoli that were in Beirut, it's difficult to create a relationship with them to support them. It's not easily accepted within the culture to go and see a psychologist or simply speak to someone. So, my goals shifted in the manner that I want to push myself to understand how each individual thinks and processes to be able to speak to them and offer support. I have developed skills to put myself in their shoes and I'm working on the idea that I might not be able to help everyone through such acts.

But I want to continuously keep trying to understand more and that's something I was not as aware of as I am now. I've known that therapy is ideal and had in mind that it's the working path and will do its thing. But now I know how much of a process it is and how much time it takes and effort. That was something I learned the hard way that shifted my way of thought and allowed me

to realign my goals on how to approach people in this field.

Before the Blast, I wanted to leave the country. But after all the chaos, I felt that I needed to stay here not just because I'm able to offer support but also because I'm politically involved with MinTishreen. I get hope from those around me, even though we might not be able to change everything around us because from the essence there is corruption. But at least I feel that I'm doing something. And what I do represents me in a way where women are involved in change and development.

Myriam Boulos

is a Lebanese photographer who began her photography exploration at the age of 16. She uses photography to explore, defy, and resist society.

Q: Can you recount your personal experiences of the Beirut Blast?

I felt like I would need a trigger warning for this question; I was starting to prepare to put on my emotional shield. I was at home in Fassouh, and I was taking selfies for a Lebanese designer, Emergency Room. It's funny because I was posing in a body that's open from down, so I was kind of naked. I remembered that it was one of the only days in the summer where I was faking normalcy—*okay have a normal day*—in a way faking things, and then I heard the vibrations. A month before the explosion, every time there was a helicopter I would freak out. Everyone was telling me to stop freaking out because it's just a helicopter. And when I felt the vibrations, I was thinking *don't freak out, they're just helicopters*. So, I stayed in my room. But my flatmate ran to the balcony to see what was happening and I simply put my head outside to see what was happening. However, he rushed me inside. I then had a blackout, but I remember that my friend who grew up in

the south and was used to explosions took me to the toilet immediately. I think the second explosion happened when I was in the bathroom—I think, I'm not sure.

I had this image in mind of an earthquake, of two dead children hugging in the rubble, and thought to myself that that was going to be the way I die: That people would find me and W., my flatmate, hugging under the rubble. And I couldn't help but think that I was naked, and people would find me naked.

From my balcony, we can't see the port. So, in my head, it was an explosion of the building in front of us. I then sent a message to my parents along the lines of there being a bomb in the building in front of us but I'm safe and okay. Immediately, we took the car to go to my parents' place which is outside Beirut. During the drive, I was still thinking it was a bombing. It was when I arrived at home that I knew that we were safe in a way, and we were not going to have an explosion near us again in the next second.

Q: How has the Beirut Blast affected your work as a photographer?

The day after the explosion, international media started contacting me to document [the aftermath]. For me, it was super important to document everything from a local point of view and to use these big platforms instead of having foreign photographers sent to tell our story. At first, I was convincing myself it was okay to do this because it's a way of processing things. But when I stopped documenting two months after the explosion, I realized how much of a torture it was to relive the trauma over and over again through people's stories.

The blast affected my work a lot. My way of photographing changed from one day to the other, it's crazy. It's very superficial things that have changed. An image is first of all superficial. I used to make images that are very dynamic and have an intense composition with a lot of elements. Since the explosion, my aesthetic changed completely. I started centering the people I'm photographing and only having them in the image instead of other elements. I'm also a very shy person and I'm fascinated with people, so for me, one of the reasons why I'm a photographer is to get closer to

people. So, I used to get very close to people—literally and physically. Since the Blast, I realized I took a step backward and put distance between my subjects and myself because taking these pictures was acknowledging that this happened and yes, this is real and yes, we are not dead and yes, we are still present. I now also always ask the people I photograph to look at the camera and be very frontal. It's also a way of feeling that things are real and we're not dreaming. Since we're talking about trauma, I feel I must give space to the person I'm photographing and not be too close to them. Already, the act of photographing is very aggressive as it appropriates reality. So, there's this distance that changed.

Also, I started including text in my work: Fragments of diaries because I always write. Along with fragments of interviews because I used to just meet the person and take photos but since the explosion, I meet the person and we talk a lot before taking some pictures. I then ask every person I photograph to send me an audio note saying what they think is important to be said and what they want to express. It's not only the explosion but it's also these whole two years

that made me be more conscious about the act of photographing and the space of the subject. I used to use photography in more selfish ways, but these two years made me realize you cannot just stick your reality and your vision on people's bodies and faces. My work for me is not just a project, it's more of an ongoing documentation so it's automatically linked to the Blast and everything that came after like how people are living through the aftermath and how I am living as well.

Q: How has the Blast affected the groups or communities that you work with?

In all my work, I start with people around me—my family, friends, the people in the same social circle—and then I continue to different social circles and different contexts. I think it's still the same. In the context of the aftermath of the explosion, it makes sense, I photograph people depending on the region they were in, but when I told you that two months later, I realized it was torture to document this much, after that, I focused more on myself through my work. The diary and journaling aspect of it took more space at some point because I needed that. I created very strong

bonds with people I've photographed after the blast because we shared something bigger than us.

Q: How have your goals for your photography changed or developed because of the Beirut Blast?

These last two to three years, I've been documenting the situation. The themes I've been exploring have been imposed on me because of the country. I finally started another project—this I can call a project—on women's sexual fantasies. I've been wanting to do this project for a few years since I've discovered my sexual fantasies. But I've been postponing it because of the situation in Lebanon. I finally decided to go for it because I find it to be a form of resisting everything that's been imposed on us. It's an opportunity to explore the other struggles and themes that I have in me that I need to explore. But I never work and live thinking that I have this goal and I want to reach it. In my work, I never think that I want to express a specific message. When I work on something it's because I need to work on it, not like a desire, but things I obsess about for years. So, the only way to go through it is to explore them through

photography. I've always worked like this
and I'm still following this.