



Policy Paper

ENDING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB REGION





Introduction

This policy paper is developed within the process of preparing for Beijing +25 and the Generation Equality Forum 2021. Given the pluralistic nature of the Arab region, and in view of UN Women's commitment to participation and inclusivity, a series of policy papers on four gender thematic areas were prepared by the Arab States CSOs and Feminists Network to amplify the voice of civil society and feminist organizations and push forward the gender equality agenda.

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Gender-based Violence in the Arab World

Violence is more than based on gender; it is intricately intertwined with it. Gender norms do support the violence, but violence also enforces the performance of gender, maintains gender hierarchies, and is in itself an enactment of gender. As such, violence against women is, simultaneously both a practicing of gender and a gendering practice.¹

While most Arab states indicate a willingness to combat gender-based violence (GBV), and despite the civil society relentless efforts, the picture is still bleak and women and girls in the region continue to be challenged by laws and policies that perpetuate GBV, deeply entrenched gender norms and practices that influence relationship, family & institutional power dynamics, and insufficient accountability mechanisms, all leading to increased GBV and underreporting. Arab countries have approached violence against women and girls through piecemeal reforms with no clear connection or complementarity between legal and policy frameworks, and failed to implement due diligence which have hampered national efforts to reduce the prevalence of violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened gender inequalities and exacerbated all forms of violence against women. With the enforced lockdowns, violence increased due to many factors including forced coexistence, community closures, economic stress, and fears of exposure to the virus. The abysmal failure in response to GBV in the Arab countries during the pandemic was particularly manifested in the lack of preparedness for the surge in the domestic violence cases, their severity, and the availability and access to state protection services in terms of shelters, financial and legal support.

¹ Jakobsen, H. (2014). What's Gendered about Gender-Based Violence?: An Empirically Grounded Theoretical Exploration from Tanzania. *Gender & Society*, 28(4), 537–561. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214532311>

Prevalence

Violence against women and girls is endemic in the Arab countries as reflected in the 2017 IMAGES Survey² for the Middle East and North African countries, where around 10 percent to 45 percent of ever-married men, across the four targeted countries, reported ever having used physical violence against a female partner, with approximately equal numbers of women affirming they had experienced this violence. The percentage of women who indicated experiences of physical abuse from their partner over their lifetime were 25.6% in Egypt (2015),³ 19% in Jordan (2018)⁴ and 20% in Tunisia (2010).⁵

According to the Wave V survey of the Arab Barometer, roughly half of the respondents in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen, reported that one of their household members has experienced domestic violence or other types of violence in the last 12 months.⁶ A study conducted in Egypt in May 2020 showed that 75% of the women who were living with men during the pandemic have faced violence.⁷

A gender analysis conducted by the IRC in 2019 in Jordan indicated that Jordanian and Syrian women and girls experience extremely high levels of sexual harassment in their day to day life with around 75.9% reported having experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime. In Tunisia, a study of 3,000 women aged 18-64 found that more than half have experienced psychological or physical harassment at least once in public spaces.⁸

Sexual violence in the world of work in the Arab re-

gion still lacks the comprehensive knowledge base and the clear legal provision criminalizing workplace sexual harassment.

In Egypt, more than 99% of women experienced a form of sexual harassment, including at work, according to a 2013 study by UN Women and Egyptian organizations. A 2018 study carried out by the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) found that 75.3% of Jordanian women subjected to workplace harassment did not consider legal action.

Violence against women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in the region is another manifestation of GBV. WHRDs, who are at the front lines of the struggle for justice and freedom in a misogynist and patriarchal context, have been facing escalating threats and intimidation acts ranging from being silenced, intimidated or banned from travelling to imprisonment and killing.⁹ The women targeted included political activists, civil society representatives and humanitarian workers.¹⁰

Gender-based violence in social networks and via the internet has increased in the past years, and it varies from hacking accounts, publishing personal details, extortion, receiving pictures with inappropriate content and more. A research for the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media found that one third of Palestinian young women are subjected to violence and harassment on the internet.¹¹ Also, in Morocco, a government survey shows that 13.4 % of women were subject to online abuse and that women are more vulnerable to this type of abuse.¹²

2 The International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) is the largest multi-country study of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine). Promundo and UN Women, in collaboration with local research partners. P16. Available at <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/understanding-masculinities-results-international-men-gender-equality-survey-images-middle-east-north-africa/>

3 Egypt Ministry of Health and Population, El-Zanaty and Associates, and ICF International, Egypt Demographic and Health Survey 2014 (Cairo, Ministry of Health and Population; and Rockville, ICF International, 2015).

4 Jordan Department of Statistics (DOS) and ICF, Jordan Population and Family and Health Survey 2017-18 (Amman DOS; and Rockville, ICF, 2019).

5 ESCWA, Against Wind and Tides: A Review of the Status of Women and Gender Equality in the Arab Region (Beijing +20), 7 January 2016 (E/ ESCWA/ECW/2015/3).

6 Arab Barometer. "Sexual Harassment and Domestic Violence in the Middle East and North Africa". December 2019. Available at <https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Sexual-Harassment-Domestic-Violence-Arab-Citizens-Public-Opinion-2019.pdf>

7 Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, Stories of Women in the time of Corona, May 2020.

8 Stop Street Harassment, "Statistics: the prevalence of street harassment", 2017. Available at <http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/statistics-academic-studies/>

9 Equality Now, Open Letter on Human Rights Violations Against Women, 2018. Available at https://www.equalitynow.org/open_letter_whrd

10 Equality Now, Open Letter on Human Rights Violations Against Women, 2018. Available at https://www.equalitynow.org/open_letter_whrd

11 See more at <https://7amleh.org/2018/11/22/one-third-of-palestinian-young-women-are-subjected-to-violence-and-harassment-on-the-internet/>

12 See more at <http://www.morocccoworldnews.com/2019/05/273120/survey-high-rates-violence-women-morocco/>

The Girl Child

Adolescent girls living in the Arab region have disparate experiences and needs, most of which remain largely untargeted, and face severe violations in relation to their bodily integrity and freedom. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is still viciously practiced for several reasons, most commonly cited are tradition, religion and its association with marriage. Almost 50 million girls and women have undergone FGM in five practicing countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Iraq and Yemen).¹³ Data shows that 94% among women aged 15-49 have undergone FGM in Djibouti, 87% in Egypt, 87% in Sudan, 19% in Yemen, and 7% in Iraq.¹⁴

Also, the past decade has witnessed a setback to the slow progress achieved in decreasing child marriage

with noted increase of child marriage among conflict-affected and displaced populations in the Arab region.¹⁵ Besides impeding girls' educational and economic opportunities, child marriage increases girls' risk of being subjected to additional forms of GBV and exploitation. For instance, the Family Reconciliation Homes of the Ministry of Social Development of Jordan reported in 2017 that 60% of female victims of violence are victims of forced and child marriage.¹⁶ In Yemen, conflict parties are recruiting children to engage in hostilities. Additionally, girls targeted for recruitment reportedly survived sexual violence and/or forced early marriage.¹⁷

Legal Framework

Majority of Arab countries have not enacted specialized laws on eliminating GBV that address the 5Ps (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Punishment and Providing redress and reparation). Addressing GBV in legal frameworks is still in the form of scattered articles in the penal codes of the Arab states.

Social Norms

In all Arab states, a sizeable gap exists between women's constitutional/legal rights and prevalent social norms, with traditional social expectations and commonly upheld versions of manhood and cultural restraints allowing for the perpetuation of various forms of violence against women from domestic violence and sexual assault, to isolation and economic exclusion and contributing to the environment of impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators.¹⁸

¹³ United Nations Children's Fund, Female Genital Mutilation in the Middle East and North Africa, UNICEF, New York, 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ ESCWA, Estimating the Cost of Child Marriage in the Arab Region: Background Paper on the Feasibility on Undertaking a Costing Study

¹⁶ Jordanian Higher Population Council, 2017. Policy Brief: Child Marriage in Jordan, Page 3. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/policy-brief-child-marriage-jordan-2017>

¹⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/A-HRC-45-CRP7-en.pdf>

¹⁸ UNFPA, March 2020. Reporting on gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Settings. Available at <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Journalist%27s%20Handbook%20-%20March%208%20-%20English.pdf>

Service Provision

Many Arab states have designated the police, courts and hospitals as organizations where women can report violence. This includes offering survivors' access to a hotline, shelters, psychosocial and legal support and other services often run by the government or civil society organizations.¹⁹

Despite the hotlines availability, mostly by feminist organizations access to GBV services is hampered due to the absence of night staff in family protection departments and other relevant bodies, lack of media exposure for these hotline services, and fears related to confidentiality and privacy.

While most of the States in the Arab region have shelters, their number and geographic distribution is extremely limited, with the number of shelters in the Arab States not exceeding fifty. In Yemen for example, there are only four shelters for women survivors of violence.

The scarcity of shelters and their services, combined with limited knowledge of their existence, restrict women's access across the region. In addition to the limited resources and increasing demand, Arab states lack national policies related to GBV or to shelters as well as proper implementation of existing GBV legislation.²⁰

Women Facing Multiple Forms of Discrimination

Women facing multiple forms of discrimination such as migrant domestic helpers who are excluded from labor law protections and are subjected to restrictive rules thus raising the risk of violence, exploitation and abuse,²¹ disabled women, LBTQI who confront structural marginalization including sexual harassment, blackmail, and underpayment, refugee women and girls with lack of identity documents, low trust in the authorities, extreme poverty, and a culture of rely-

ing on informal channels for resolving disputes, face hindrances in accessing the formal justice system and protection services for GBV. These women faced worsened conditions with the lockdown measures of COVID-19 in terms of receiving vital GBV services, contacting organizations or other community members to report GBV incidents, or seeking help when needed.

19 ESCWA, LAU, UN Women. 2017. "STATUS OF ARAB WOMEN REPORT 2017 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: WHAT IS AT STAKE?"

20 ESCWA, UNFPA, ABAAD, and WAVE. "Shelters for Women Survivors of Violence: Availability and Accessibility in the Arab Region". 2019.

21 See more at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/lebanon/report-lebanon/>

Goals

Advocate and implement a zero tolerance strategy of gender based violence through prevention measures, survivors-centered services, monitoring through data collection and availing necessary funds.

Objectives

Objective 1:

National Harmonization/Domestication of international legal standards to protect women and girls from GBV:

- A. Enact special laws on eliminating GBV that address the 5Ps
- B. Ratify ILO convention No. 190 on ending violence and harassment in the world of work
- C. Ensure due diligence of States in implementing laws on GBV
- D. Reform family laws and others that encourage VAW
- E. Enforce protection schemes for women human rights defenders
- F. Enact Specific laws on online violence as well as specialized mechanisms with trained and skilled personnel required to confront and eliminate online violence.

Objective 2:

Changing prevalent social and cultural norms pertaining to victim blaming and stigmatization of women

- A. Work with religious/ community leaders, academic institutions and actors at grassroots levels
- B. Engage men and boys in GBV prevention and response projects
- C. Change negative societal perceptions of masculinity that perpetuate gender discrimination through social media campaigns, capacity building, awareness raising, and other advocacy campaigns to enable for a new perception of the “Arab man”.

Objective 3:

Ensuring provision of survivors-centered services :

Ensure the availability and access to essential GBV services in all areas including underserved/remote areas and for all women including women facing multiple forms of discrimination (LBTQI, disabled, refugees, migrant workers)

- A. Enhance access to health services and justice through advocating for the institutionalization of a referral/ data collection/ reporting / monitoring systems on different forms of violence (for example a national platform), linking justice and security sector professionals, health-care professionals, local-clinics and nongovernmental organizations providing services for survivors of violence.

Objective 4:

Enhancing coordination and strengthening partnerships between governments, CSOs, academic institutions, donors, local communities, and the private sector.

- A. Conduct nationwide/regional evidence-based research on the economic costs of violence to encourage policymakers to undertake legislative reforms and ensure adequate allocation of resources to service providers and survivors.
- B. Seek partnerships between CSOs and the private sector to secure and improve the livelihoods of women survivors of violence by linking them to the job market.

Good Practices that can be replicated/ taken to scale

1. KAFA (Enough violence and Exploitation), a Lebanese NGO, in partnership with feminist, rights-based and advocacy organizations and associations, as well as human rights defenders, from 13 Arab countries, has prepared a **“Model Law on Combating Violence Against Women and Girls in Arab Countries 2017”**²² which was submitted to the CSOs to guide them prepare their national strategies and local laws for combating violence against women and girls in the Arab communities. Having a regional framework allows for a coordinated approach to addressing GBV in the region and serves to stimulate regional interventions for harmonization of advocacy intervention and response efforts to GBV.

2. EDRAAK Foundation for Development and Equality (EFDE) has established the **“Gender Based Violence Crimes Against Women and Girls Observatory”** (GBV-CAW Observatory) which is a platform for documenting data on violent crimes against women, with the aim of issuing comparative studies and reports on violence against women and girls using descriptive and analytical approach in collecting information and data based on official and private newspapers published, news sites, and statements of the media office of the Public Prosecution. The observatory provides insights and help to CSOs, NGOs, women activists, and all stakeholders concerned and working on GBV by ensuring the availability of analytical data on GBV.²³ Having similar national and regional observatories is essential as it gives access to national/regional data to allow trend analysis, increase the information level, and promote well-informed prevention and response efforts.

3. Women’s Center for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) in Palestine which has adopted a **holistic emergency response to protect women from GBV during the COVID-19** pandemic through offering a free, 24-hour GBV helpline service as well as e-counseling for women in need of support, providing shelters, carrying out media interventions and awareness campaigns on GBV through social media, radio and television and responsive interventions through partnerships and protection networks, including financial and in-kind assistance to women victims of violence. WCLAC’s experience is a best practice in terms of addressing GBV through a comprehensive approach which includes advocacy for prevention and better protection of women, victim assistance including programs to alleviate the impact of increased economic hardship among women at risk, and engaging in international advocacy to promote respect for International Humanitarian Law and human rights.

GBV against women should stop. Structural reforms to combat GBV starting with the adoption of a stringent legal framework and law enforcement measures, sufficient resources to programs combating violence and protection services, and eradication of practices rooted in discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls should become a reality.

²² See more at <https://www.kafa.org.lb/sites/default/files/2019-01/PRpdf-103-636773712119795062.pdf>

²³ Edraak Foundation for Development and Equality. 2020. Numbers and statistics of rates of violence against women and girls. first-half of 2020 Report. See more at shorturl.at/cxAD2