

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE ARAB STATES THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has dramatically changed the lives of women and girls in the Arab States. With confinement, curfew and lockdown measures put in place, many have been forced to stop working or have lost their incomes entirely.

The burden of unpaid domestic and care work has also increased for women particularly, due to their roles as caregivers and pre-existing gender norms. Lockdown measures have also generated other serious implications for women, putting them at risk of violence in their homes, or of being trapped with their abusers. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, 37 percent of ever partnered women in the eastern mediteranean region have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence at some point in their lives.

The COVID-19 measures, reports of violence against women, and particularly domestic violence, have increased in several countries across the

region as security, health and money worries and anxiety have created tensions and strains, further accentuated by the cramped and confined living conditions of lockdown. These conditions have also affected more adversely women in conflict-affected areas, as well as refugee and internally displaced women, and women from other vulnerable groups.

UN Women has reached out to civil society organizations (CSOs) to understand the impact of COVID-19 on their work, the challenges they are facing and the solutions they are creating. This brief aims to highlight the key findings of this assessment. The brief also provides qualitative and quantitative data on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women, including within the most vulnerable groups, through the lens of women CSOs from the Arab States region.

METHODOLOGY

As part of its response to the COVID-19 crisis, UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States (ROAS) conducted a rapid assessment of the impact of the pandemic on women’s civil society organizations in the region.

The methodology used was based on a survey of 49 questions in English, Arabic and French, including both multiple choice and open questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The data was collected from 6 to 20 May 2020. [UN Women received inputs from over 220 CSOs from 15 countries across the Arab States region : Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia,](#)

[Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen](#)

CSOs working with women survivors of violence, women peacebuilders, women in conflict-affected communities, and more broadly on gender equality responded to the questionnaire. This variety of respondents worked at the local, country, and regional level and was funded at 23 percent by Governments, at 55 percent by international organizations, and at 48 percent by private donations.

This brief articulates the findings of the assessment around the impact of COVID-19 on women’s organizations and the consequences of the pandemic for women in the region.

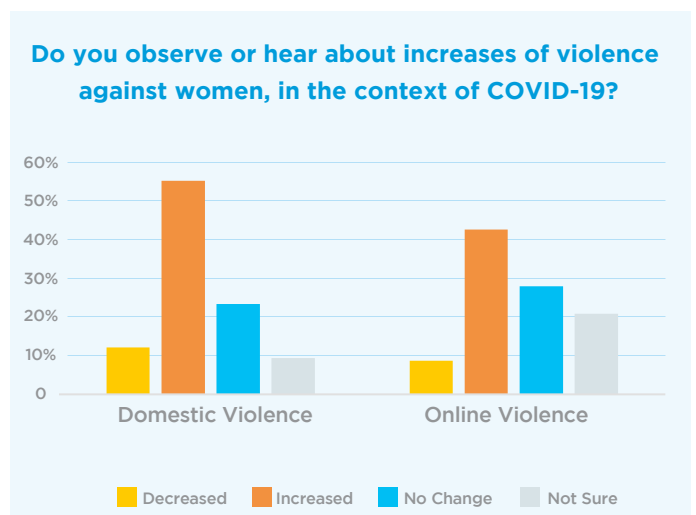
KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ASSESSMENT

COVID-19 has increased violence against women both in the homes and online

A high number of the surveyed women’s CSOs mentioned that domestic violence had increased in the Arab States. The main causes highlighted for the higher numbers in cases of violence were increased stress due to financial hardship, prolonged confinement in closed spaces, as well as the discontinuation of services or support systems for women. Unable to run away from the house they share with their abusers or to reach out to their families for support, women have been forced to endure violence.

CSOs noted an increase in online violence towards women and girls as social networks were occupied by perpetrators as a new space, due to social distancing and other measures preventing gatherings.

CSOs indicated the presence of dark humor about gender roles on social media.



Vulnerable groups are more than ever at risk due to the pandemic

Similarly to other crises that often compound inequalities and vulnerabilities, the COVID-19 pandemic and related government measures have had a significant impact on minorities and vulnerable populations who have lost their support structures. Refugee women, migrant women, women with disabilities, as well as ethnic and sexual minorities were described by women’s CSOs as facing a “double impact” of the pandemic due to their pre-existing vulnerabilities.

CSOs working with refugee women highlighted new risks for them as well as compounded vulnerabilities, as they are at higher risk of health issues and food insecurity in the region. In addition, CSOs denounced the stigma and discrimination facing refugee women.

CSOs working with migrant women workers highlighted that their beneficiaries were

at risk of food insecurity as well as loss of employment. A trend of domestic migrant women workers being evicted and dismissed by their employers was seen across the region. Often without access to their identity documents or without any possibility to go back home, women migrant workers were left without basic needs assistance and protection during the pandemic.

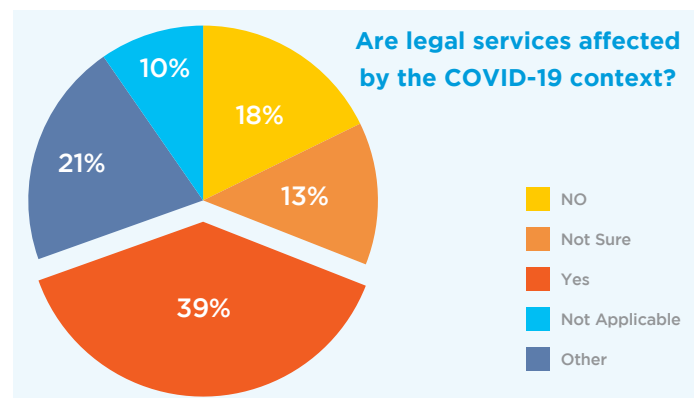
Women living with disabilities have also been more vulnerable in the face of the pandemic. CSOs noted that these women are often more likely to experience limited access to health services, lose their support mechanisms as well as their access to caregivers, and experience violence. Women with disabilities faced challenges when looking to access services. With the closure of special care centers, these women were also being stigmatized as “dependents” and as representing an additional burden for the households in this period of crisis.

Access to services has been disrupted for women survivors of violence

While the pandemic has increased the number of cases of violence against women in the region, this trend has been coupled with a disruption of essential services for survivors of violence due to the lockdown measures. CSOs reported that the health, police, justice and social services have been impacted.

Legal services have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic according to 39 percent of women’s CSOs who reported that courts were closed and a number of procedures for legal redress, custody and alimony cases, have been put on hold in the context of the pandemic. The disruption of legal services seems to have also forced the police and other actors to resort to informal justice mechanisms to ensure the protection of women survivors. 35 percent of women’s CSOs indicated that during

the pandemic it has been easier to access informal or traditional justice mechanisms such as community mediation, or alternative dispute resolution through the family or traditional leaders. These coping mechanisms have the potential to increase the vulnerability of women survivors and put their safety and well-being at risk.

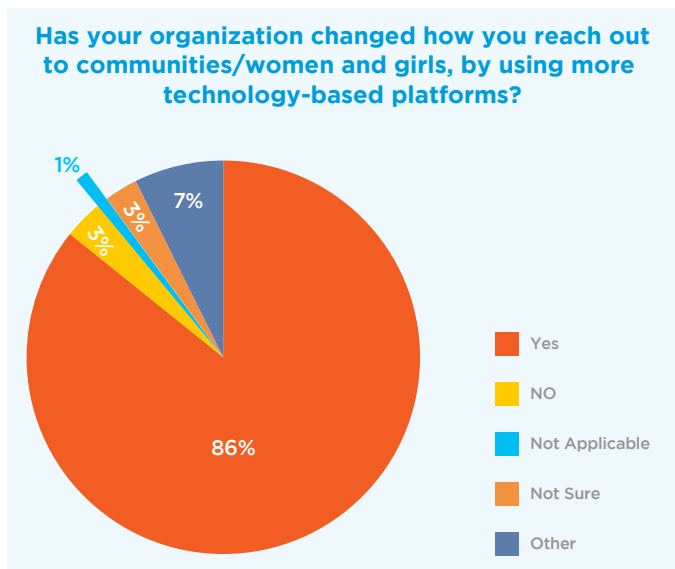


Respondents mentioned that both shelters and hotlines for women survivors have been impacted by the pandemic (respectively at 15 percent and 29 percent). Implementing social distancing in shelters has proven difficult as confinement or quarantine spaces are not always available or

require more space, while testing for the virus is expensive and often not affordable for shelters. Hotlines, key services during the pandemic, faced a higher number of calls and had to adapt to provide remote counselling services.

Women's CSOs have shifted their approach to keep providing support to women in need

Eighty-six percent of the women's organizations surveyed mention having changed how they reach out to communities and women and girls by using more technology-based platforms, with 68 percent of organizations being available on Facebook and 49 percent on mobile applications. CSOs found several positive aspects about the shift to virtual services, such as the more equalitarian access to information, and mentioned that technology-based platforms have helped them to ensure a feeling of safety and protection for beneficiaries during the outbreak.



Negative aspects of the online platforms on the other hand include the high cost of the internet for CSOs and beneficiaries, with the main disadvantage of such services being leaving

behind the most marginalized populations, with women at risk sometimes not having access to a smartphone or other technology assets, having connectivity issues, not being able to afford an internet connection, not knowing how to use certain applications (with some of the beneficiaries also being illiterate), while some survivors are trapped with their abusers and unable to speak most of the time. With the greater use of social media platforms, have also come different challenges such as the necessity to ensure the safety of information online, in particular when dealing with cases of violence against women.

Privacy and security issues when working on online platforms were amongst the greatest concerns of service providers.

Despite their resilience and the criticality of their support, CSOs indicated being at risk of not being able to continue providing services to women survivors. 84 percent of the women's CSOs participating in the survey mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted them either negatively or very negatively, and 67 percent of respondents indicated that if their organization did not receive necessary funding in 2020 and 2021, they would remain only partially operational, while another 6 percent noted that they would have to close down should the funds not be provided. The inability of CSOs to continue their work could have important consequences, as in a number of contexts across the region, CSOs are still the only ones providing direct support to women facing violence.