

# Arab States COVID-19 and Gender Equality

## Operational Context

As at the end of July 2020, COVID-19 had spread to 216 countries, infecting 17,106,007 people around the world. Within WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, there were 1,564,836 cumulative cases. The quarterly trends in number of COVID-19 cases continued to suggest that the pandemic is regularly rising in the Arab States region. The mortality rate within the region stood at 2.5 per cent as of 31 July, with many of the confirmed cases generating mainly from Iran, Pakistan, Egypt and several Gulf countries. The sharp rise continues in number of confirmed cases in conflict-affected countries, the capacities for testing and the accuracy of data in the region remains of great concern.

As a result of lockdowns and preventive measures undertaken by governments to slow down the spread of the COVID-19 virus, women and girls are now facing greater risks of violence. A [shadow pandemic of violence against women](#) has grown in intensity and frequency. Since the start of the pandemic, emerging data shows that all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence has increased. The pandemic has resulted in an amplification of issues facing women and girls, especially their physical and mental wellbeing. As these issues continue to grow due to the COVID-19 crisis, global collective efforts are critical more than ever.

UN Women continues to operate with its vast network of government, national and international partners at the regional and country levels to adapt, expand and scale up its response services in order to meet the needs of women and girls. Below is a brief summary of its response.

## UN Women COVID-19 Preparedness and Response

<i>Response in Figures</i>	<i>Thematic Area</i>	<i>Progress as of 31 July 2020</i>
<i>Number of policy briefs produced by UN Women or jointly with other organizations on impact of COVID-19 on women and girls</i>	<i>Knowledge, innovation, results-based management and evaluation</i>	41
<i>Number of formal initiatives led or supported by UN Women to promote knowledge generation and exchange on issues related to the gendered impact of COVID-19.</i>	<i>Coordination</i>	48
<i>Average number of women and girls provided with protection assistance (including online psychosocial support and legal counselling) on a monthly basis</i>	<i>Gender-based Violence/Protection</i>	1,842
<i>Number of women shelters supported during COVID-19</i>	<i>Gender-based Violence/Protection</i>	32
<i>Number of personal protective equipment/protective gear provided to support shelters, frontline staff, etc</i>	<i>Gender-based Violence/Protection</i>	15,208 PPEs 6,431 hygiene kits 46,300 masks 62,500 gloves
<i>Number of women provided with economic support including cash-based assistance and cash for work</i>	<i>Women's Economic Empowerment</i>	3,522
<i>Average amount of cash support</i>	<i>Women's Economic Empowerment</i>	USD 300-500
<i>Number of meetings and consultations held with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)</i>	<i>CSO engagement</i>	67

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## ***Evidence and data generation***

There is very limited evidence and research on the COVID-19 outbreak that captures the depth and breadth of the pandemic's impact on the lives of women and girls, especially the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on women in the Arab States region. UN Women recruited a feminist-economist expert to support its country offices, and through them the UN Country Teams (UNCTs)/Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) and fill data gaps that better inform UN Women's work around economic empowerment. In collaboration with ESCWA, a senior researcher has also been recruited to cost the effects of COVID-19 on SDG5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls. In an effort to integrate SDG targets into COVID-19 socioeconomic recovery plans, this research will estimate costs required by governments in the Arab States region to achieve set targets in the region.

UN Women continued to provide technical support for national and international institutions at the regional and the country levels (such as the Palestine Monetary Fund and the Ministry of Economy and Finance in Morocco) for more robust gender-responsive and inclusive plans, assessments and analyses.

### **Country examples:**

In **Morocco**, UN Women continued to support the High Commissioner for Planning (HCP) in conducting a qualitative gender analysis on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on households. The survey report is being finalized.

In **Libya**, UN Women is in discussions with WFP to produce an analysis related to the impact of COVID-19 on gender and food insecurity. The analysis would consist of WFP data, complemented with UN Women conducted focus group discussions.

At the **regional level**, UN Women has undertaken two surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality and violence against women, and on the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) in response to violence against women. The preliminary findings and analyses of both surveys have been completed, and the virtual launch and events are planned to take place in August.



## ***Consultations with Civil Society Organizations***

UN Women continued to provide core support to the Arab States CSOs and feminists network. This network operates within the COVID-19 response framework and is part of a broader movement to support the Beijing+25 process and the Generation for Equality Forum. The network was formally established in June 2020 and during July it met twice to continue discussions around the response to the gendered impact of COVID-19 in the region.

In **Egypt**, UN Women continued to support vulnerable families at risk of falling below the poverty line through its network of community-based organizations (CBOs). The support provided through CBOs included food assistance, as well as COVID-19 informative materials and hygiene supplies.

In **Morocco**, UN Women continued to regular update and disseminate a nationwide mapping of institutional and civil society services available to women who have experienced violence during the COVID-19 crisis and under lockdown. The nationwide dissemination of the mapping has created

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momentum in Morocco and encouraged CSOs to reach out to UN Women to include their services and contact information, making the document more inclusive and comprehensive through each update.

### ***Risk communication and community awareness targeting women and girls***

Together with WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, IOM and IFRC, UN Women continued to be actively engaged in the regional WHO-led Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group. A collaboration among these organizations, with UN Women in the lead, culminated in the publication and operationalization of the RCCE guidelines “How Can Risk Communication and Community Engagement Include Marginalized and Vulnerable People in the Eastern Mediterranean Region”. These guidelines have been published in **English** and **Arabic** language and been disseminated widely through the web and social media. The practical guidelines explain the vulnerability of different marginalized groups to the pandemic and how national and local efforts can address them so that no one is left behind.

### ***Women’s access to essential protection mechanisms***

The provision of quality specialized psychosocial services to women who have been subject to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) continued throughout July through face-to-face consultations in locations where movement restrictions have been lifted and online sessions where lockdown measures are still actively imposed.

UN Women continued to advocate for legislative and structural reforms to combat rising violence against women through its work of women’s rights’ networks and implementing partners.

### **Country examples:**

In **Palestine**, UN Women in collaboration with Al-Muntada succeeded in establishing a national coalition of community members to advocate for the endorsement of the Family Protection Bill (FPB). Over 70 women and men from different backgrounds have already joined the coalition. The coalition had its first meeting late July to discuss its advocacy strategy and objectives.

In **Egypt**, UN Women through its partnership with the House of Counseling for Awareness and Development, continued to provide free-of-charge group support to low-income families (women and men) socially, economically and mentally impacted by the pandemic. UN Women and the National Council for Women (NCW) established the institution in 2019 and it is an active part of a network of psychological and psychosocial experts. Its counselors are actively receiving and supporting women survivors of violence, referred by national partners and key stakeholders in the response sector.

In **Saudi Arabia**, UN Women has delivered online trainings to support service providers of the National Family Safety Programme during COVID-19. The first webinar on hotlines was successfully carried out in early July, where efforts and good practices from Morocco were shared.

In **Lebanon**, UN Women continued to deliver protection services and emergency livelihoods support for women and girls. It has also been working on a protection and gender mainstreaming plan for community isolation centers that have been identified as a priority area through assessments undertaken.



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## ***Economic resilience and empowerment***

As the spread of COVID-19 has not abated in the Arab States region, the pandemic's damaging impact on formal and informal economies also persisted. UN Women continued to shed light on issues concerning women, such as economic theories and modeling between paid and unpaid sectors of economies. The recruitment of a feminist economist and a senior researcher to cost the effects of COVID-19 on SDG5 are some of the first steps undertaken by UN Women to demonstrate the myriad obstacles women face and propose economic policies as well as support to counter the negative effects.

UN Women also continued its collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders among. On 7 July, UN Women held a regional webinar with UNDP and OECD on the impact of COVID-19 on women's economic empowerment and policy responses in the Middle East and North Africa. The online webinar was attended by more than 200 participants and was facilitated by high level representatives such as the Tunisian Minister of Women, Family, Children and Seniors, the National Council for Women and the Ambassadors of Japan and Sweden to Egypt.

### **Country examples:**

In **Lebanon**, UN Women issued [a policy brief](#) on COVID-19 gender-responsive recovery. The document proposes reform measures that can be taken to mitigate the loss of women from the economy during and after the pandemic.

In **Egypt**, UN Women - as part of a joint programme with ILO on decent employment through inclusive growth policies and investments in care economy - provided online training for women in corporate executive level positions, in collaboration with the International Finance Corporation and the Women on Boards Observatory, to ensure continuity of this capacity development component during COVID-19.

In **Morocco**, UN Women has supported the registration of 3 cooperatives belonging to women living in Moroccan oases so they can avail of a fair-trade online marketplace to promote their products.

In **Libya**, UN Women provided technical support for the integration of gender into the UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19. The framework addresses short- and longer-term response under five pillars: health, social protection, economic response and recovery, and social cohesion and community resilience.

## **Innovations in programming**

In collaboration with the National Union of Women of Morocco (UNFM), UN Women is supporting the Kolona Maak platform which provides 24/7 support and guidance nationwide for women survivors of violence. The Kolona Maak platform is operated by UNFM and is connected to institutional services such as the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family, the Office of the Public Prosecutor, police authorities, the Ministry of Health and other relevant stakeholders. In July, UN Women Morocco mobilized an artificial intelligence expert to support the platform in centralizing their data and information, monitor the complete support system provided to survivors of violence, and optimize collaboration between the national platform and its regional listening centers.

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## Coordination and partnerships

At regional and country levels, UN Women continued to actively engage in the 3RP technical committee, WHO-led COVID-19 Crisis Management Group, protection working groups, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) networks, and the risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) working group to ensure that the gender lens was consistently mainstreamed in the COVID-19 response.

UN Women is a member of several regional Issue-based Coalitions (IBCs), which form part of the UN Development System's coordination mechanism, with key linkages to the COVID-19 response. UN Women and UNFPA co-convene the IBC on Gender, Justice and Equality, and have thus far ensured that the 2020 Annual Work Plan is approved to ensure synergies among efforts undertaken by various actors in the region.

UN Women continues to provide technical support to governments and partners through the secondment of gender technical experts to (1) WHO in **Lebanon** (2) informing the national, OCHA-led and UNHCR-led planning and coordination platforms in **Jordan** and **Palestine**, and (3) into the national COVID-19 response in **Tunisia**. The aim of these secondments is to provide technical support to ensure that women and girls are placed at the center of the COVID-19 response.

In **Jordan**, UN Women has been designated as the Sector Gender Focal Points Network (SGFPN) co-chair with UNHCR and plans to support the network with intersectionality training in the coming months.

## Media and communications

UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka and UNFPA Executive Director Natalia Kanem, issued a [joint Op-Ed entitled "Putting Women at the centre of Syria crisis response"](#) during the fourth Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region (Brussels IV). The piece focuses on Syrian women and girls, their specific needs in conflict, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and displacement, and their role in peacebuilding.

In partnership with UNIDO, FAO and funded by the Italian Government, UN Women supported the Conference "[Women in Industry and Innovation \(WII\)](#)". The event provided a platform for exchange amongst public and private sector representatives, experts, entrepreneurs, researchers and other relevant stakeholders on challenges and solutions to create an enabling environment that supports women's empowerment as drivers of industry and innovation, including during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

UN Women and Women 20 (W20), the official G20 engagement group on women, issued [a joint statement](#) to call on G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors to put women at the heart of COVID-19 recovery efforts. In their joint statement, UN Women and W20 called on G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors to implement gender-responsive impact reviews of the crisis, recovery packages



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and plans worldwide, especially for the worst-affected women and girls, in order to guide investment priorities.

UN Women, UNDP and OECD hosted a [webinar](#) to take a closer look at governments' investments in gender equality and women's economic empowerment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The webinar discussed the role of the private sector and civil society organizations as supporters of, and beneficiaries from, an economic recovery process that is gender responsive.

At the regional level, UN Women [released the video '#WomenAndCOVID'](#), a public service announcement highlighting the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls in the Arab States region, and the urgent need to prioritize women's fundamental rights in response and recovery efforts.

As part of UN Women's Youth Blog series, feminist advocate Marwa Azelmat from Morocco [published a blog](#) reflecting on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Beijing+25) in times of COVID-19.

## Country examples:

In **Iraq**, UN Women produced a [human-interest story](#) featuring the voices of women on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response across the country.

UN Women **Morocco** published [a story](#) focused on how the COVID-19 crisis is disrupting value chains for women's cooperatives in Morocco. The piece highlights UN Women's support to these cooperatives through technical assistance provision to help them adapt to this context, thereby mitigating the impact of the crisis on their economic situation.



In **Palestine**, UN Women produced [a story](#) illustrating how UN Women and partners are supporting women to access legal services as well as securing child visitation and custody rights during the COVID-19 lockdown in Palestine.

UN Women **Yemen** produced [a story](#) on the challenges facing women during the COVID-19 pandemic amidst the ongoing armed conflict.

## Gaps and challenges

Countries covered by WHO's EMRO – which includes many Arab countries - continue to face a regular increase in COVID-19 cases. The Arab States region is also affected by five humanitarian crises, namely Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In addition, there are increasingly fragile countries hosting a large number of refugees due to the spill over of the conflicts in neighboring countries including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. The region's pre-existing gender inequalities are further compounded by these protracted conflicts and COVID-19, make it vitally important to ensure that humanitarian responses continue to properly be informed by gender dimensions. Within the Arab States region, UN Women continues to raise awareness and address the need for gender-responsive humanitarian action but sees limited funding prioritization within national and international response plans for gender equality and the empowerment of women, challenging the effectiveness and scale of the response

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## Financial Requirements

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Women launched a regional appeal seeking USD 22.5 million to meet some of the most immediate needs of 43,500 women and girls who suffer the consequences of the pandemic and reach around 10 million people with gender-responsive awareness-raising. Through immediate technical, financial and life-saving support to UN Member states, CSOs, women's groups, the UN system and other partners, UN Women is working to ensure:

1. **Gender-responsive governance, women's voice and leadership:** Regional and national responses to COVID-19 tackle gender issues with data and evidence, financing and women's voice in decision-making.
2. **Gender-based violence is tackled:** Women access and benefit from essential protection mechanisms throughout the COVID response, with a focus on access to gender-based violence (GBV) services and gender-equitable behaviours are promoted during the COVID pandemic and beyond, including through engaging men.
3. **Women are at the heart of economic recovery:** Women affected by the COVID-19 crisis are more economically resilient and employment is maintained where possible, including through addressing gender-blind economic stimulus packages.

As highlighted in [a press release](#) issued during July, the Government of Japan has generously supported UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States by providing USD 909,901 to take immediate action and meet the essential needs of women and girls during the pandemic. UN Women has also re-programmed and channeled its resources to respond to the crisis. However, the response and recovery plan still has a significant funding gap of approximately 85%. The consequences of the pandemic and underfunding could have serious short- and long-term lasting impact on women and girls and push back hard-fought results achieved across the region.

UN Women and the Embassy of Japan in Egypt hosted an [online regional roundtable](#) on 16 July to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls in the Arab States with the aim of helping inform the response. The event highlighted gender-specific differentiated action required for successful response and recovery to COVID-19 across the Arab States.