

Arab States COVID-19 and Gender Equality

Operational Context

As at the end of June 2020, COVID-19 had spread to 216 countries, infecting 10,357,662 people around the world. Within WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, there were 1,077,426 cumulative cases. The quarterly trends in number of COVID-19 cases suggest that the pandemic continued to regularly rise in the Arab States region. The mortality rate as at 30 June stood at 2.3 per cent, with many of the confirmed cases mainly from Iran, Pakistan, Egypt and several Gulf countries. A sharp rise has been noted in the number of confirmed cases in conflict-affected countries. However, there are great concerns around the accuracy of data and capacities for testing in the region.

Women and girls in the region continue to experience the impact of the pandemic at a different depth and breadth. The impact of COVID-19 on their lives is of great concern as emerging studies and assessments indicate that gender-based discrimination and violence against women and girls in the public and private spheres in the Arab States region has worsened since the start of the pandemic. There is an urgent need to scale up the gender-based violence response in the region particularly when social distancing is in effect.

Since the onset of the pandemic, UN Women has operated 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 at 30 June 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>	39
<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>	45
<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>	1,576
<i>Number of women shelters supported during COVID-19</i>	<i>Gender-based Violence/Protection</i>	21
<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 6,350 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>	3,173
<i>Average amount of cash support</i>	<i>Women's Economic Empowerment</i>	USD 300
<i>Number of meetings and consultations held with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)</i>	<i>CSO engagement</i>	52

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Evidence and data generation

UN Women continued its efforts to fill in data gaps on the gendered impact of COVID-19 on women and girls. Regional and country-level assessments and took place in an attempt to understand and capture the depth and breadth of the pandemic on the lives of women and girls and also generate evidence around short term and long-term factors for robust gender-responsive and inclusive policies and recommendations.

UN Women also pursued joint collaborations regionally and at country level with international organizations and agencies such as ESCWA, UNDP and ILO and provided technical support for national institutions such as the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in Palestine and the High Commissioner for Planning in Morocco for mainstreaming gender in their nationwide surveys and analyses.

Country examples:

In **Egypt**, UN Women partnered with the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) to mainstream gender in a national assessment of gender statistics linked to the Women's Observatory.

In **Palestine**, UN Women - along with several other agencies - provided technical and financial support to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in a household survey to determine the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.

In **Morocco**, UN Women has collaborated with FAO for conducting an analytical study on the socioeconomic situation of women living in Moroccan oases. This study will target 1,000 women and will generate evidence on socio-economic challenges facing oasis women and information on their access to technology.

At the **regional level**, UN Women completed a survey on the impact of pandemic on civil society work with a focus on their work on violence against women as well as to understand perspectives of the roles of women during the pandemic and solutions they have developed.



Consultations with Civil Society Organizations

UN Women provided core support to the establishment of an Arab States civil society organizations (CSOs) and feminist network consisting of 45 CSOs and women grassroots organizations. 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 to date met 6 times. Following a series of participatory consultations, the network finalized a plan to respond to the gendered impact of COVID-19 highlighting major difficulties and challenges faced by women during the pandemic and gaps in policies and services available to women in the Arab States. UN Women acts as the secretariat for the network and provides technical support.

In **Jordan**, UN Women continued to work with security sector agencies and CSOs to strengthen services for survivors of gender-based violence during COVID-19.

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In **Morocco**, UN Women regularly updated and disseminated 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 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

UN Women continued to be actively engaged in the regional WHO-led Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group comprising of frontline organizations such as WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, IOM and IFRC. A collaboration among these organizations was sought and culminated in the publication 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.

Country examples:

In **Palestine**, a campaign on women’s access to justice has taken place in collaboration with the Media Community Center (CMC). A first [radio episode](#) -out of four- has been broadcasted targeting thousands of people with messages on women’s rights and their access to justice. Another campaign in the West Bank has taken place in collaboration with Al Muntada Coalition focusing on the Family Protection Bill.

In **Egypt**, UN Women is also using radio for communication and outreach to raise awareness and change perceptions on women’s roles in the communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. These initiatives are part of the Safe Cities Programme, funded by USAID.

In **Jordan**, UN Women conducted with UNFPA and the Royal Health Awareness Society a learning session for young HeForShe volunteers on COVID-19.

In **Tunisia**, UN Women together with UNDP held a workshop for the Commission on Women, Family, Children, Youth and Seniors to present UN Women’s policy brief on Gender and COVID-19 as well as to sensitize parliamentarians on the need of integrating gender in the response to the pandemic and the development of policies.



Women’s access to essential protection mechanisms

UN Women continued to provide women who have been subject to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) quality specialized psychosocial services. While most of these women were reached through psychological and psychiatric online sessions (specifically in the first part of the month), some of these services were provided face-to-face at women shelters in locations where lockdown and movement restrictions have been eased.

While UN Women promoted that ensuring the accessibility and continuity of protection services were critical issues, it also advocated for the provision of quality of online or face-to-face services. In

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this regard, UN Women continued to extend its support to develop the capacities of counselors, psychosocial experts and social workers by equipping them with the necessary skills and techniques during lockdown and provide them with telecommunications means.

Legislative and structural reforms to combat rising violence against women within the COVID-19 context is another key priority area for UN Women. At country level, UN Women worked closely within their governmental and women's rights networks to support laws and related bills that call for the protection of women and girls from heightened violence especially during the COVID-19 lockdown and movement restriction measures.

Country examples:

In **Egypt**, UN Women has established a partnership with the House of Counseling for Awareness and Development, which provides group support, free-of-charge, to low-income families (women and men) socially, economically and mentally impacted by the pandemic.

In **Jordan**, UN Women finalized and disseminated [a pocket guide](#) on 'How to Respond to Gender-Based Violence Incident Reports During COVID-19' for Public Security Department (PSD) personnel as well as a GBV and COVID-19 response training framework for the Family Protection Department.

In **Iraq**, UN Women developed a policy position paper on the Iraqi Violence against Women Draft Law to be presented to the Iraqi government on behalf of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). The position paper calls for the adoption of an Anti-Domestic Violence Law following the increasing rates of domestic violence reported during the pandemic.

Economic resilience and empowerment



As COVID-19 spread across the Arab States region, the pandemic is expected to continue gravely impact formal and informal economies. As the pace of spread is not slowing, it is expected that additional pressures and challenges will be placed on economies in the region. In response, UN Women collaborated with a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that short-term economic needs and resilience of women (especially female headed households) and their families is strengthened through unconditional cash assistance. In the longer term, UN Women is supporting governments in the establishment and/or strengthening of macroeconomic policies that channel resources to those most impacted by the crisis as well as to provide social and economic support and other productive resources in the economy in order to benefit women and girls.

Country examples:

In **Jordan**, UN Women published a research paper on economic recovery efforts and opportunities, their implications for women's economic empowerment, and how increased attention to, and investment in, women's economic empowerment can help Jordan recover stronger and build back better. [Read more](#)

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In **Morocco**, UN Women launched a research project in collaboration with the Ministry of Economy and Finance, aimed at quantifying the potential economic gains to be generated by strengthening women's inclusion in the labor market.

In **Egypt**, UN Women is supporting community-based organizations in coordinating the COVID-19 response with other partners on the ground, ensuring families most in need and at high risk of falling below poverty lines are being assisted immediately. Food assistance as well as dissemination of information leaflets and hygiene supplies is among the immediate interventions being carried out.

In **Lebanon**, UN Women conducted two remote roundtables with four women's economic empowerment partners and 10 private sector companies to reflect on programming and strategize around approaches to mitigate the gendered economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings will be used to guide partners on the development of gender-responsive economic programming in Lebanon.



Innovations in programming

UN Women in **Egypt** has developed a youth toolkit that describes how youth can act as advocates and agents of change to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. It also highlights ways in which youth can engage in decision-making and have an influence on communities at local and national levels. The toolkit has been updated to include an annex to highlight advocacy methodologies in the times of a pandemic. It also presents a wealth of information about COVID-19 from credible sources such as WHO, the Ministry of Health and others.

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.

The regional Issue-based Coalition (IBC) on Gender Justice and Equality, which is co-chaired by UN Women and UNFPA, organized a second meeting in June. The meeting resulted in the further development of the 2020 IBC Annual Work Plan.

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.

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In **Egypt**, UN Women is a permanent chair of the UN Partnership Development Framework's Women's Results Group, and under the leadership of the National Council for Women (NCW), has led the United Nations Country Team in developing the gender equality components of the UN/Government of Egypt Socio-Economic Response Plan (SERP) to COVID-19.

In **Lebanon**, UN Women continued to actively support the Protection against sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) In Country Network to ensure PSEA is well mainstreamed into the COVID-19 response, including by developing specific guidance and tools and establishing reporting lines for accountability. UN Women facilitated three training sessions, targeting 60 humanitarian personnel on the COVID-19 response including for staff at UN Women and WHO.

Media and communications

UN Women issued a [press release](#) reflecting on how the organization is supporting data collection and policy recommendations on COVID-19, highlighting data and knowledge products from across the Arab States region.



UN Women's Regional Office for the Arab States hosted an [online dialogue on diversity inclusion](#) of women with disabilities and migrant women workers in the context of COVID-19, organized in partnership with the Arab Organization of People with Disabilities and the Cross-Regional Center for Refugees and Migrants.

In partnership with the Arab Women Parliamentarians Network Raedat, UN Women organized an [online dialogue on Women's Leadership during COVID-19](#). The Dialogue aimed at giving visibility to women's leadership and solutions to the COVID-19 response and recovery plans across the region.

UN Women continued its advocacy engagement with [Women 20](#) (W20), a policy recommendation group which is part of the G20 process and aims to ensure that gender considerations are mainstreamed into G20 discussions, policies and commitments. One of the key elements of the partnership will be to ensure women and girls are prioritized in the COVID-19 economic response and recovery efforts agreed by the G20.

Country examples:

In **Egypt**, UN Women continued to produce and disseminate [videos](#) offering psychosocial support messages for women impacted by COVID-19 through different web and social media platforms.

In **Jordan**, UN Women produced and disseminated an [editorial package](#) including human-interest stories and testimonials of women in the frontlines of the COVID-19 response around World Refugee Day.

On Father's Day, UN Women posted a [story on positive fatherhood](#) in times of COVID-19, prepared as part of the "Because I am a Man" Campaign. The story features a Palestinian couple living in a refugee camp in **Lebanon** and describes how they share domestic and caregiving chores at home before and during the pandemic.

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UN Women **Libya** produced [a story](#) showcasing how women peacebuilders are using mobile devices to support COVID-19 response efforts in Libya.

In **Morocco**, UN Women re-launched the communications campaign called « [Hit Ana Rajel](#) » (Because I am a Man) on positive masculinities, to promote ways in which men and boys can leverage their presence at home during confinement to participate more actively in domestic work and with children’s education. In total, 10 episodes have been disseminated on the national TV network 2M and on social media, showcasing public figures and unknown citizens from all socio-economic backgrounds.

UN Women **Palestine** produced a [story](#) featuring the voices of Palestinian women affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stories were drawn from the report “COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming”.



In **Tunisia**, UN Women published a [press release](#) calling for gender-responsive measures to combat COVID-19 as a critical condition to preserve and advance Tunisia’s progress on women’s rights.

Gaps and challenges

While COVID-19 cases in countries covered by WHO’s EMRO continue to increase, the Arab States region is also affected by four protracted humanitarian crises, namely Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In addition, there are 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 critically important to ensure that a humanitarian response is properly informed by gender dimensions. 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.

Financial Requirements

As a 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

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3. (GBV) services and gender-equitable behaviours are promoted during the COVID pandemic and beyond, including through engaging men.
4. **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.

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.