

GENDER-SENSITIVE POLICE RESPONSE IN ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS (VAWG) IN THE ARAB STATES



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VAWG in the Arab States

Globally, the prevalence of VAWG is very high, with over 1 in 3 women having experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives¹. In the Arab States, the WHO data for 2018 estimates that 31% of ever-partnered women experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner in the Eastern Mediterranean region². According to a 2017 multi-country survey across four Arab States countries (covering Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine), around 10 to 45 percent of ever-married men reported having used physical violence against a female partner, with approximately equal numbers of women affirming they had experienced violence across all four countries³.

The occurrence of violence in the region is shaped by discrimination against women and the persistence of attitudes that perpetuate negative gender stereotypes and the acceptance of violence. For example, in Egypt, 90 percent of men consider that wives should tolerate violence to keep the family together, while the percentage is at 63 percent in Palestine⁴.

Legislation often fails to comprehensively address all forms of violence against women and enforcement mechanisms are frequently inadequate. Linked to these gaps, violence against women in the Arab region is typically under-reported. This is caused by stigma around reporting, fear of retaliation from the perpetrators, and the belief that service providers in the security sector may not be able to support the survivors and may turn them away, treating violence as a private, family affair⁵. Studies found that women in the region did not report violence as they feared complicating the situation or were unsure of what to do and which services to reach out to. Evidence shows that only 40 percent of women who experience violence seek help of any sort and many do not report their experiences to formal mechanisms due to shame, fear of reprisals or a lack of knowledge on how to access available help⁶. Reporting also seems to correlate with the type of violence, with

1 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

2 Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018. Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women. Geneva: World Health Organization, on behalf of the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence Against Women Estimation and Data (UNICEF, UNFPA, UNODC, UNSD, UNWomen); 2021.

3 UN Women and Promundo. 2017. Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa: Executive Summary. Shereen El Feki and others (Eds.). Cairo and Washington DC: UN Women and Promundo.

4 UN Women and Promundo, Images, 2017, available at: <https://imagesmena.org/ar/>

5 Status of Arab Women Report 2017 Violence Against Women What Is at Stake?, ESCWA, UN Women, Lebanese American University

6 <https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/>



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lower percentages of women who experienced sexual violence reporting the incident compared with higher percentage when experiencing physical violence⁷.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many women and girls in the Arab States already did not have access to free essential services for their safety, protection, and recovery, such as emergency helplines, police and justice response, health care, safe accommodation, shelters, and psychosocial counselling⁸. Where these services existed, they have typically been underfunded, understaffed, uncoordinated or of poor quality.

Consequences of COVID-19 on VAWG in the Arab States

COVID-19 in the Arab region has triggered an increase in cases of VAWG, coupled with challenges in ensuring the continuation of essential services. Security, health and financial worries and anxiety have created tensions and strains within households, accentuated by cramped and confined living conditions of lockdown. Women and girls often become the shock absorbers of this tension. The breakdown of protection mechanisms also creates an impunity for perpetrators, which increases many women and girl risk of being exposed to violence.

An assessment conducted by UN Women among the general public in nine countries in the region⁹ saw half of the respondents from all surveyed countries agree that women faced an increased risk of violence from their husbands because of COVID-19 lockdowns. This was confirmed by the reported increase of VAWG by various services and governments providers in countries in the region¹⁰. The majority of respondents also agreed that addressing the shadow pandemic should be prioritized. Nevertheless, the acceptance of VAWG remains high in the region as it is still perceived as a private matter; nearly 1 in 3 respondents at least across the surveyed countries agreed that women should tolerate violence to keep the family together, especially during difficult times.

Instances of online and ICT-based VAWG also significantly increased in the region following the outbreak of COVID-19. Indeed, lockdowns and movement restrictions have led to an even greater reliance on the internet, particularly social media, and cell phones for connection and communication, thus amplifying the likelihood that women and girls may be exposed to online sexual abuse and harassment¹¹.

7 Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 2012, p. 213-214 (see chap. I, footnote 18).

8 See for instance UNESCWA, Shelters for Women Survivors of Violence: Availability and Accessibility in the Arab Region, available at: https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/shelters-arab-region-availability-accessibility-english_0.pdf

9 UN Women, 2020. Rapid Assessment: The Effects of COVID-19 on Violence Against Women and Gendered Social Norms - A Snapshot from Nine Countries in the Arab States Preliminary.

10 In Lebanon, 57 per cent of women and girls have reported feeling less safe in their communities and 44 per cent of women and girls have reported feeling less safe in their homes. An assessment in Jordan of more than 400 girls, adolescents and adults in the refugee and host communities found that 69 per cent of all respondents agreed that violence had increased since the beginning of the pandemic. An initial rapid assessment conducted by the Health Cluster in Iraq indicated an increase in health service utilization by survivors, particularly women enduring intimate partner violence. Nearly 40 per cent of health facilities, hospitals, and mobile medical clinics responding to the assessment indicated an increase in women survivors from the host, refugee and internally displaced communities seeking assistance during the COVID-19 outbreak. Similarly, in Tunisia, in the first weeks following the lockdown, calls to the toll-free numbers run by the Ministry of Women from families, children and seniors were nine times higher than usual. Organizations within the State of Palestine noted perceptions that violence increased, while several women were unable to access justice services.

11 UN Women, 2020. Violence against women and girls and COVID-19 in the Arab region.



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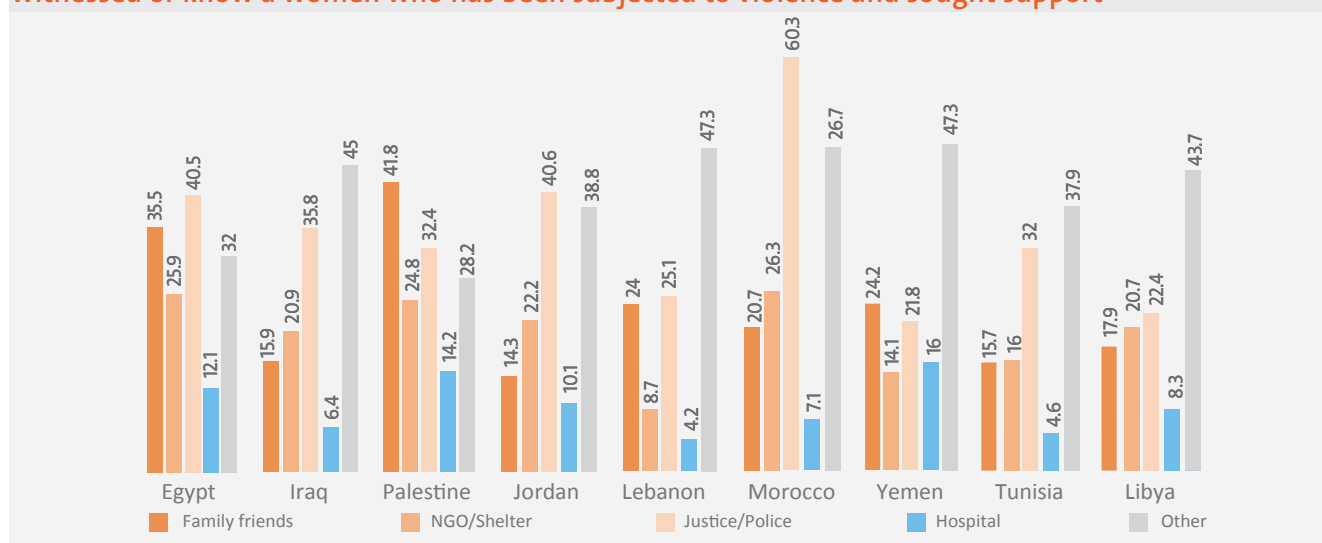
The Police as the First Entry Point for Women and Girls Survivors of Violence

The police play a pivotal role in ensuring that incidents of all forms of VAWG are prevented where possible and, if they occur, are treated seriously, investigated properly and followed up effectively. Police must also avoid any re-victimization of victims by the offender or secondary victimization by police officers themselves and must ensure that the victims' needs are met and that they are treated with dignity and respect.

In the context of COVID-19, the lockdowns, intended to protect from the pandemic, not only impacted rates and types of VAWG, but have meant that the availability of and access to services were made difficult for women and girls survivors of VAWG. The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the police sector which have been overwhelmed, with priorities shifting towards enforcing quarantines, monitoring social distancing or responding to public unrest that has increased in the region as a result of the economic and social consequences of the pandemic and the responses to it.

Despite this change in priorities, according to a UN Women web based survey¹², the police was the main entry points for women survivors of violence seeking support in the region (see graph below) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may be linked to efforts to improve police training and reporting mechanisms, as well as gender-sensitive government responses to ensure such services remained accessible during the pandemic lockdowns (see more information below).

Proportion of respondents who reported services sought by survivors of violence among those who witnessed or know a women who has been subjected to violence and sought support



Source: UN Women, Rapid assessment: the effects of COVID-19 on violence against women and gendered social norms: results of web-based surveys from nine countries in the Arab States.

¹² UN Women, 2020. Violence against women and girls and COVID-19 in the Arab region.



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With the importance of the police as a first entry point for survivors, it is critical to ensure that policing services are available and accessible to all women, including during pandemics and crises; and that the initial contact with the survivor demonstrates that the justice system as a whole is committed to her health and safety, and that her complaints are being taken seriously. During the initial contact with the survivor, policing services must be available regardless of the survivor's nationality, religion, disabilities or any other characteristics. They also have to be accessible 24/7 all year, and be geographically accessible and user friendly to all categories of complainants including illiterate, visually impaired or non-citizens. Seeking the police should also be free, not to add any financial or administrative burdens on the survivors and should include access to other support services such as medical or psychological attention.

During the police reporting, the location must be safe and private to the survivor who has the right to decide whether to engage in the justice process and to be provided with all needed information in order to make an informed decision. Failure to cooperate for fear of retaliation by the perpetrators or fear of secondary victimization, should not be held against the survivor.

In this regard, policing services must be delivered in a non-judgmental, gender-sensitive and survivor-centered manner, and consider and prevent secondary victimization, respond to the survivor's concerns, ensure her privacy is maintained but also be age-appropriate. It is also important for policing entities to encourage the survivor to tell her story and actively participate in the justice process to ensure best results.

Cases of VAWG must be given high investigation priority. Filed reports must be immediately investigated and followed up taking into consideration the physical and mental traumas the survivor has experienced and ensuring they are not delayed or asked to wait to file a report while they are making efforts to seek the justice system. On the other hand, the accused must be immediately arrested as soon as applicable and protection measures must be applied. Coordination is also critical with other support services in addition to protection services that may require reaching out to other entities and CSOs with the overall objective to protect and support the survivor.

Good practices on gender-sensitive policing during COVID-19:

During emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, policing services to survivors of VAWG need to remain as effective as possible in order to provide them with safety and protection while taking into consideration the safety of officers against the pandemic. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on VAWG and on the police response, and good practices were developed by the police in this context to continue providing safety and protection in survivor centered manner.

In Jordan, the Public Security Directorate took different innovative approaches to reach out to the survivors and ensure the provision and continuation of services. Personal Protective Equipment was provided amongst law enforcement officers and professionals involved in VAW service provision. In addition, an emergency response team was established, which included female police officers. The team was trained to effectively respond during the crisis, particularly through directly reaching out to the VAW survivors and escorting them to the police station or the court to ensure the safety of the women survivors as movement restrictions were applied. Moreover, the Public Security Directorate (PSD) worked in close coordination with NGOs to ensure appropriate referrals. Within the Public Security Directorate, the Family Protection Department launched an awareness



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campaign which aired on television and brochures were shared across social media platforms, in collaboration with the media.¹³ **In Morocco**, a system was developed which included hotlines, complemented by a mobile app, linked to all courts. The mobile app was designed to allow the survivors to submit their complaints instantly (online) without having to physically present their complaints at a court or police station. The hotlines usage was made available free of charge and the numbers were shared via several media and social media platforms. This system enabled follow up measures to be taken and provided the survivors with access to shelters or information regarding social services.¹⁴ **In Lebanon**, security forces responded to the increase in VAW cases by conducting home visits and receiving complaints in police stations. In addition, some judges utilized remote listening techniques to issue protection orders. Furthermore, case management, psychological support and counseling were made available remotely (via phone or online).¹⁵ Police personnel from other crime units were also deployed to work on cases of VAWG.¹⁶ The Lebanese Ministry of justice developed policies to facilitate judicial access to women survivors to improve prosecution procedures for cases of violence and formalizing an online mechanism to admit and rule on urgent complaints.¹⁷ **In Palestine**, the Family Protection Unit of the police department, opened a safety line to respond to cases of VAWG.¹⁸ The Palestinian Police launched an awareness raising campaign targeting women during the COVID-19 lockdown to inform them about all available services.¹⁹ The judiciary also issued a resolution that entailed the prioritization of VAWG cases.²⁰ **In Iraq**, an online training was provided by WHO to frontline workers from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense on VAWG and COVID-19.²¹ In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, UN Women, in partnership with the Ministry of Interior - General Directorate for Combating Violence Against Women (GDCVAW) implemented two days training in each governorate to develop the communication skills of the staff who are responsible to receive calls on VAWG and family domestic violence cases through hotlines and provide enhanced support to survivors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Tunisia, electronic and remote tools such as electronic forms and electronic court files were used and improved to respond to the surge in violence. Similarly, online and over the phone legal

13 ESP Virtual Workshop, June 2020, Jordan Intervention; and Violence against women and girls and COVID-19 in the Arab Region https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/12/covid_and_vawg_un_brief_final.pdf?la=en&vs=5344

14 ESP Virtual Workshop, June 2020, Morocco Intervention; and Violence against women and girls and COVID-19 in the Arab Region https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/12/covid_and_vawg_un_brief_final.pdf?la=en&vs=5344

15 COVID-19 and Essential Services Provision for Survivors of Violence against Women and Girls—A Snapshot from the Arab States, August 2020; https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/08/policy%20brief%20esp_en_19820-min.pdf?la=en&vs=4849

16 The Impact of COVID-19 on Criminal Justice System Responses to Gender-based Violence Against Women: A Global Review of Emerging Evidence, April 2021; https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Assessment_COVID-19_and_CJS_responses_to_GBVAW_23Mar2021.pdf

17 COVID-19 and Essential Services Provision for Survivors of Violence against Women and Girls—A Snapshot from the Arab States, August 2020; https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/08/policy%20brief%20esp_en_19820-min.pdf?la=en&vs=4849

18 Report on the violence against women and girls during COVID-19 in the State of Palestine, June 2020; <https://www.hwc-pal.org/files/server/Publications/VAW%20report-%20English%20version.pdf>

19 The Impact of COVID-19 on Criminal Justice System Responses to Gender-based Violence Against Women: A Global Review of Emerging Evidence, April 2021; https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Assessment_COVID-19_and_CJS_responses_to_GBVAW_23Mar2021.pdf

20 UNDP and UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker

21 WHO, Prevention and response to gender-based violence against women and girls in the Eastern Mediterranean Region in the time of COVID-19; <http://www.emro.who.int/violence-injuries-disabilities/violence-news/prevention-and-response-to-gender-based-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-easter-mediterranean-region-in-the-time-of-covid-19.html>



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aid were enhanced in Tunisia.²² In **Egypt**, the Public prosecution acted immediately within the purposes of prioritizing prosecution of cases related to exploitation of women and girls and illegal money making within the context of protection of women and girls against human trafficking and cybercrimes.²³ The Human Rights Department of the Egyptian Ministry of Interior established a hotline to respond to women survivors of violence.²⁴

These good practices demonstrate the extent of efforts made by the police and justice sectors to ensure the provision of essential services to women survivors. They also show the importance of these sectors when aiming to provide comprehensive support to women and girls survivors of VAWG. Due to the centrality of the security sector in responding to these crimes, UN Women and UNODC have launched an initiative to further engage with the police and ensure gender-sensitive responses to cases of VAWG.

UN Women and UNODC's initiative on gender-sensitive policing

As the justice and police sectors represent a key pillar of the Essential Services Package and a direct entry point for women and girls in the region; it is key to work with its representatives to influence the prevention and response to VAWG in the Arab region. The sector's response, and particularly that of law enforcements presents various challenges in the Arab States and beyond, including the lack of streamlined and effective procedures.

To tackle this issue, UN Women in collaboration with UNODC and the International Association of Women Police (IAWP), has developed a Handbook on Gender Responsive Police Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence. The Handbook's objective is to strengthen the police response, allow women and girls to have appropriate and rapid access to essential policing services, including for the most marginalized and at risk women and girls, and contribute to operationalize the ESP.

The Handbook was designed and drafted by the police for the police, complementing existing global and country-specific processes and training materials for law enforcement. The Handbook involves a global collection of feedback on gender-responsive policing efforts and presents emerging issues such as online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls.

With the help of case studies featuring police officers as change agents, it covers in depth areas such as gender-responsive police investigations; prevention; intersectionality; survivor-centered approaches; promoting positive masculinities and coordination. It promotes a police service that seeks to balance effectiveness with accountability in their response to violence against women and girls, by developing elements of collaboration with women survivors' organizations, civil society, and the academia.

The Handbook builds on past and present impediments and provides guidance on the most effective response to violence against women and girls during crises, including pandemics. It targets police

²² The Impact of COVID-19 on Criminal Justice System Responses to Gender-based Violence Against Women: A Global Review of Emerging Evidence, April 2021; https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Assessment_COVID-19_and_CJS_responses_to_GBVAW_23Mar2021.pdf

²³ The Impact of COVID-19 on Criminal Justice System Responses to Gender-based Violence Against Women: A Global Review of Emerging Evidence, April 2021; https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Assessment_COVID-19_and_CJS_responses_to_GBVAW_23Mar2021.pdf

²⁴ UNDP and UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker



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middle-managers and embodies reflections that can be used to better engage senior management towards institutional transformation and training for frontline responders.

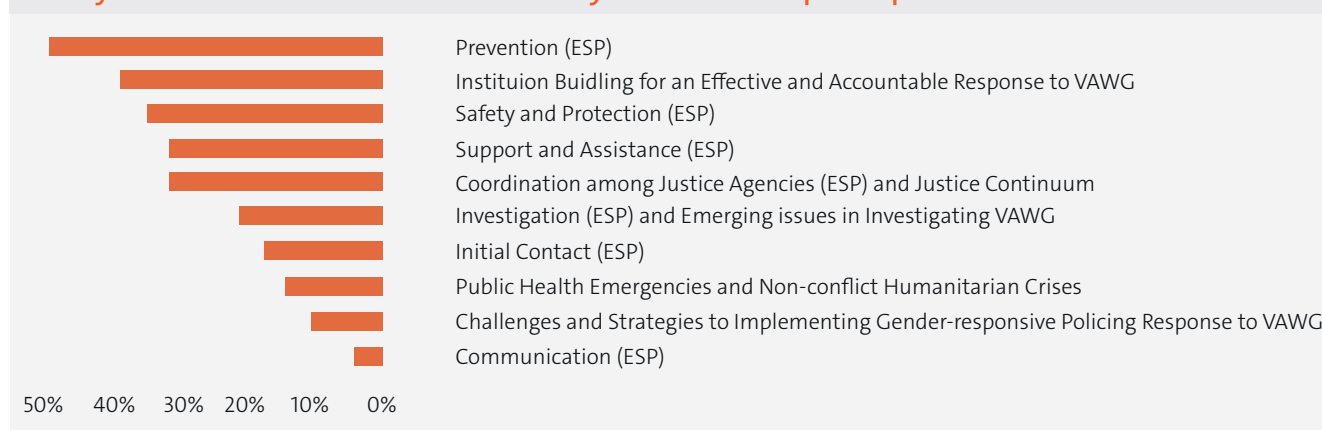
In order to disseminate the Handbook in the Arab States, a regional launch was organized by UNODC and UN Women with law enforcement agencies across countries of the region. The event built on previous efforts by UN Women and other UN partners to learn from the response from various sectors of the ESP (social sector, justice & policing sector, health sector) to the shadow pandemic of VAWG¹⁰ and provided an open platform for discussion with service providers within law enforcement agencies. The online launched gathered police mid-level managers from nine countries²⁵ in the Arab region, as well as global and regional experts on police engagement on VAWG.

The event saw an opening by UN Women Deputy Regional Director for Arab States and UNODC Deputy Regional Representative for the MENA region, followed by a presentation of the Handbook by UN Women global consultants and experts on gender-responsive policing. This was followed by a discussion with all participants where observations and insights were shared to strengthen the collective approach to ending violence against women and girls. The Handbook was recognized and welcomed by police partners as a useful tool to enhance their capacities on gender and VAWG response.

As UN Women and UNODC in close coordination with law enforcement agencies plan to organize training workshops in the Arab Region to further disseminate and ensure the roll-out of the Handbook on Gender Responsive Police Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, the launch event also provided an occasion to obtain the police's opinion on areas for further capacity building and collaboration. These key priority areas for further engagement and assistance are presented in the graph below and included:

- Prevention of VAWG
- Institution Building for an Effective and Accountable Response to VAWG
- Safety and Protection

Priority areas of the Handbook identified by launch event' participants



Event poll: priority areas of the Handbook

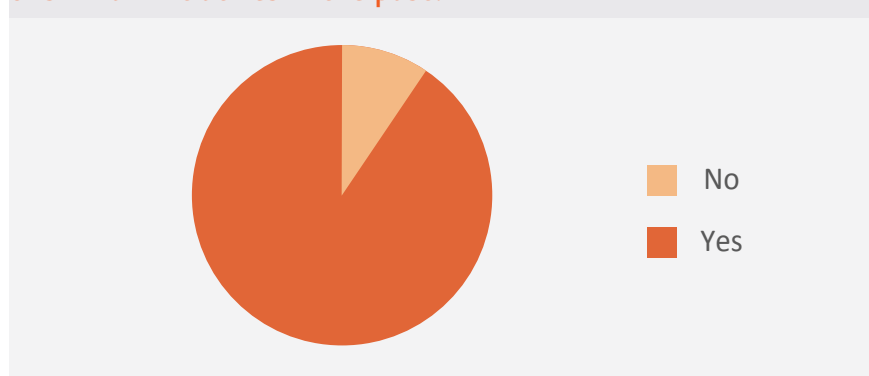
25 Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen



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90 percent of participants also confirmed existing institutional implementation of the Essential Services Package and/or similar initiatives in the past, which the roll out of the handbook would build upon.

Has your institution implemented the Essential Service Package or similar initiatives in the past?



Event poll on previous implementation of the ESP and other initiatives in the Arab region

Way forward: enhancing gender-responsive policing in the Arab States

Following the virtual meeting with police representatives across the region, and the positive reception of the Handbook on Gender-Sensitive Police Services, UN Women and UNODC plan for initiatives to further engage with law enforcement entities across the region on the issue of VAWG. Interventions in the Arab States will aim to encourage the rollout of the Handbook among police actors. These will include:

- At the regional level, a training of experts will be organized on specific priorities areas. The priorities will be informed by UN Women's recent research including research undertaken during COVID-19, as well as the areas put forward by participants during the regional launch in April 2021. These will comprise the issue of online and ICT-facilitated violence, as well as the issue of VAWG in conflict settings. The meeting will provide a space to exchange and discuss gender-responsive police services at the regional level with a focus on these topics. Such an event will also enable UN Women to identify Arabic speaking trainers to support the rollout of the handbook in the Arab States. A roster of Arabic speaking trainers will be established for the Arab region, who will be available and on standby to provide support to the rollout of the Handbook on those critical areas.

At the country level, UN Women country offices, in coordination with UNODC, are elaborating roadmaps to guide their activities in rolling out the Handbook. These include engagement and consultations with the police at the middle-manager level to introduce the handbook, and the training of police forces on gender-responsive policing. In Iraq, UN Women will conduct a gaps analysis and needs assessment to better frame the national rollout of the Handbook. The roll out



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of the handbook will build on the recent establishment of a training platform on VAWG issues for the Ministry of Interior which was coordinated by UN Women. In Palestine, UN Women and UNODC will organize a consultation with various unit of the Palestinian Civil Police (PCP). In Tunisia, specific communication material will be developed to raise awareness on the Handbook and the need for gender-responsive policing. In Jordan, a baseline assessment of the Public Security Directorate (PSD)'s response and approaches will be undertaken to evaluate the best way to rollout the Handbook; and a monitoring plan will be set up the follow up on its utilization. In Morocco, the Handbook will be presented as part of a high-level sensitization event organized with the General Direction for National Safety (Direction Générale de la Sûreté Nationale). This will ensure that awareness is raised on VAWG response in Morocco and the handbook, not only within police services, but also within the other sectors of the Essential Services Package (Justice, Health, and Social sectors).

Recommendations for gender-responsive policing including during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Roll out the Handbook on gender-responsive police services for women and girls survivors of VAWG as well as the ESP which provide concrete steps and guidance to ensure survivor centered police services
2. Publicly indicate that preventing and responding to VAWG, even in times of pandemic and lock down, should be a priority for relevant criminal justice officials and specific warning and sanctioning measures should be in place for not following this policy.
3. Prioritize resources and efforts to ensure continuity and access to essential services to address violence against women and girls, including to prepare for an increase in demand for emergency hotlines and essential police and justice services.
4. Ensure that incidents of VAWG continue to be given high priority, taking into account the increased level of risk for women and children in situations of lock down, particularly when they live with their perpetrator
5. Continue strengthening the capacities of police officers to provide a gender-sensitive response to cases of VAWG with a focus on emergency situations such as COVID-19. This entails promoting women's leadership at all levels in the security sector and fighting misogynistic views in the sector
6. Support and publicly promote the development of online reporting/advice mechanisms for women and children (through apps and websites), including "quick escape" buttons and other measures to avoid detection by the aggressor.
7. Issue instructions for police officers to support victims in safety planning based on risk assessments that consider the particular risks of quarantine, home confinement and other measures to address COVID-19.²⁶

²⁶ https://www.unodc.org/documents/Gender/Thematic_Gender_Briefs_English/GBVAW_and_UNODC_in_COVID19_final_7Apr2020.pdf



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8. Conduct regular assessments and monitor the response to VAWG during the pandemic and other emergencies.²⁷
9. Coordinate policing services with other criminal justice entities as well as the social and medical sectors and strengthen liaison with women's support entities and CSOs.
10. With the rise in online violence linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritize efforts to end ICT-facilitated violence and advocate to enact cyber-violence laws and policies

²⁷ https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Assessment_COVID-19_and_CJS_responses_to_GBVAW_23Mar2021.pdf