

الاتحاد العربي للنقابات  
ARAB TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION



**COVID-19 Pandemic and  
the Need to Eradicate  
Gender-Based Violence  
Targeting Women and Girls  
in Arab countries**

# Introduction

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How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact Arab women and girls? Was the lethal effect of COVID-19 only target those that were infected with the virus in the Arab region, or did Arab families increase their misery by killing them twice, once with the Coronavirus and once more through domestic violence affecting women by virtue of the cultural heritage that is based on male dominance over family affairs.

What are the suggested solutions' action plans to address domestic violence targeting women? How does the unfortunate general picture of the Arab family and women's conditions look like, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic? More precisely, what are the results of the accomplishments in terms of data, as well as the outcome of the data provided by the Arab Barometer in this field in addition to the available data provided by official institutions and other NGOs and human rights bodies from some Arab countries? The aim is to make it possible to concretize a set of recommendations that will be the basis for discussion aimed at finding practical solutions to the problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak at the level of the Arab region.

These are the most prominent contents of this document, which experts contributed to its preparation. It is a document that is worthy of being the focus of dialogue in forums with the participation of experts from various disciplines and groups that are directly concerned with the issue of violence against women, namely human rights organizations, humanitarian organizations as well as of the women's specialized bodies within the trade union movement in the Arab region.

This document is based on the knowledge of a wide range of experts who provide solutions aimed at eliminating violence against girls and women, taking into account the national context in which the crisis occurs.

# The COVID-19 Pandemic and Violence Against Women

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The emerging data shows the intensification and exacerbation of the phenomenon gender-based violence targeting women since the COVID-19 outbreak, especially domestic violence.

With the expansion of orders stipulating home quarantine to contain the spread of this pandemic, women who are subjected to violence from their partners find themselves isolated from people and from the means that can help and protect them from such violence.

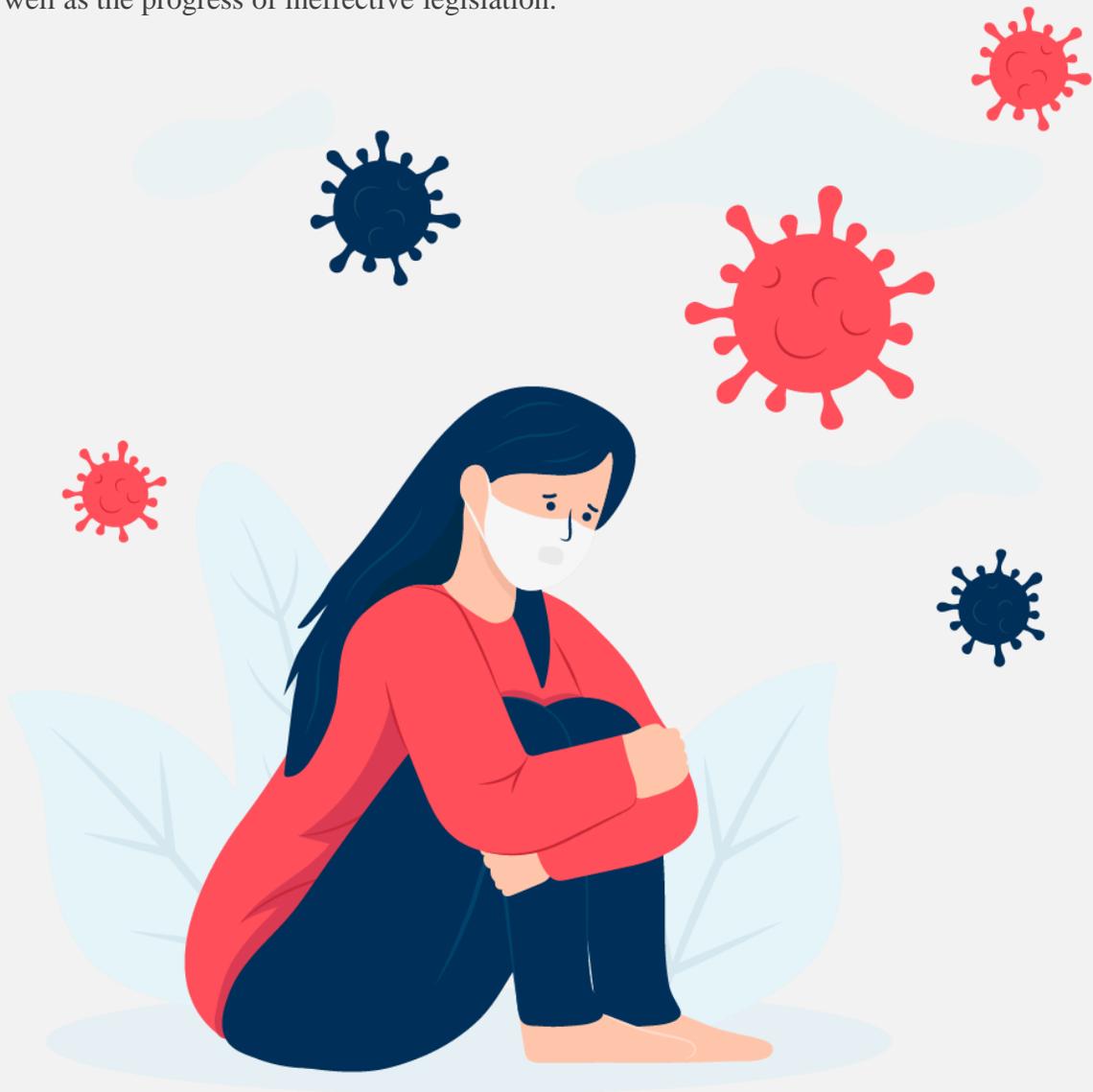


# Arab Women and Domestic Violence in the Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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In light of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent measures such as curfews and constant closures, domestic violence has reappeared in the public sphere in the Middle East and North Africa region. Hence, this crisis may be an opportunity now to transform domestic violence from being a private matter into a public issue in Arab countries.

This could also be an opportunity to reform predominating inequality between the sexes that have existed since ancient times, and which are increasing in light of these crises as well as the progress of ineffective legislation.



## Domestic violence has a history of being a serious problem

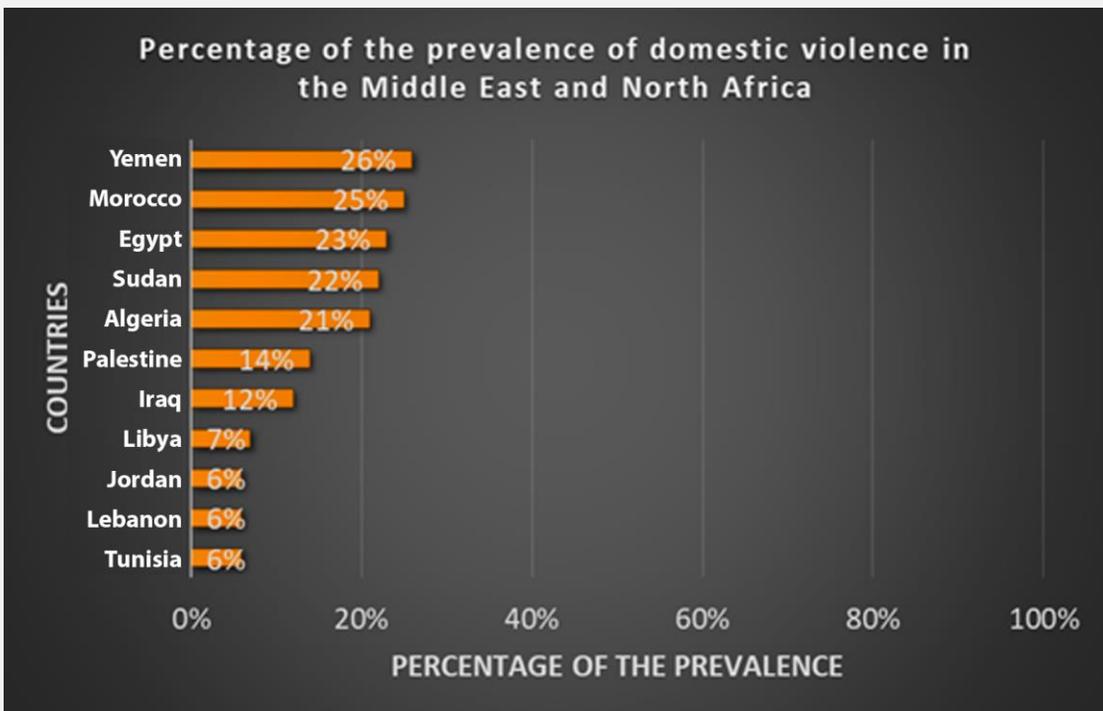
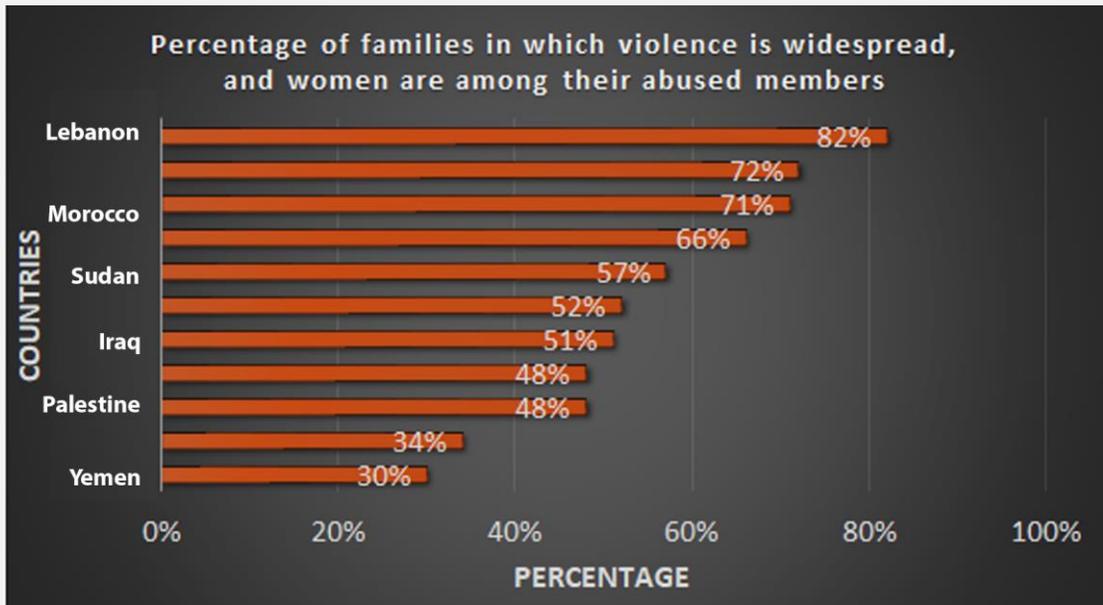
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Domestic violence was a serious problem in the Arab region even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. This form of violence has increased, however, as a result of the repercussions resulting from this pandemic. According to the Arab Barometer survey, statistics conducted in the 2018-2019 period, indicate the presence of domestic violence cases in about 15 % of families in the region.

the rate of domestic violence in Yemen is estimated at about (26%), in Morocco (25%), and in Egypt (23%), which is a high prevalence compared to the rest of Arab countries, with a lower rate in Libya (7%) and (6%) ) In Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia (see below the Arab Barometer survey result graph for a comparison of these ratios).

Domestic violence rates vary between different countries, and domestic violence can target men or women, as the percentage of reports of domestic violence against female victims in homes experiencing domestic violence stands at 82% in Lebanon, 72% in Egypt, 71% in Morocco, and 66% in Algeria. On the other hand, the percentage of reports of domestic violence against female victims in Libya is 34% and in Yemen 30% (consult the below graph of the results of the Arab Barometer survey to compare these percentages).





Monitoring the escalation of violence against women during COVID-19 times in a number of Arab countries

## **Violence against women in Morocco during the period of complete lockdown**

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The home represents the most dangerous place in which Moroccan women are exposed to domestic violence, with 52% of cases of violence against women, which is equivalent to 6.1 million women, according to official data of the High Commission for Planning (a government institution for statistics). The same report indicated that out of 13.4 million Moroccan women ranging between the ages of 15 and 74, more than 7.6 million women have experienced at least one type of violence, which represents 57 % of Moroccan women.

Morocco is among the Arab countries that have adopted a law to counter violence against women since 2018, which imposes penalties and provides mechanisms to sponsor women victims of violence.

Despite the existence of these restricting measures, it still did not prevent the escalation of violence against women during the general lockdown period that began on March 20, 2020.

“Ingad” network indicated that the number of women who were subjected to violence significantly increased, especially in the second and third weeks of quarantine. This was recorded through the increase in the number of calls received by female social workers working in the network. During that same period, human rights organizations received daily phone calls from women seeking legal advice after they found themselves, in an exceptional circumstance, facing hidden violence.

The escalation of domestic violence in Morocco during the COVID-19 pandemic period is due to the tensions that appeared within families as a result of the psychological pressures associated with the quarantine situation.

Many reported cases included situations in which husbands exploited this circumstance in order to exert psychological pressure and physical coercion to force their wives to give up their rights. Abused women are forced to accept the situation due to poverty, vulnerability and illiteracy, especially if the husband is the sole breadwinner for the family.

On March 27, 2020, the National Union of Moroccan Women launched the platform “We are all with you” to accompany women and girls who are victims of violence, around the clock seven days a week, in parallel with the launch of a national network for psychological and social convoy that includes 12 listening cells in all regions of the country. The mission of these cells is to provide psychological and social support from a distance. They consist of specialists in psychology, sociology, psychological counseling, family mediation, and remote social assistants. The network also aims to listen to women, youth and people in vulnerable situations and reduce their isolation during the quarantine period, in addition to counseling and guidance on the available alternatives in order to maintain family cohesion by preventing conflict and protecting women and girls from all kinds of violence.

The Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family also financed the initiatives of associations and networks of listening centers, in order to support women victims of violence through listening, psychological support, coordination with specialized authorities to protect victims, and provide guidance towards services. However, the quarantine measures and a state of emergency made it difficult for human rights organizations and associations to quickly-respond to victims of violence.



## Quarantine raises rates of domestic violence in Algeria

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Algerian human rights organizations confirmed that the phenomenon of domestic violence has increased in light of measures taken to confront the COVID-19 pandemic with quarantine and curfews, as a result of the tension in family relations between family members due to their presence in closed spaces for long periods of time. This contributed to increasing tension between them and often the husband is the one who utters violence against women, especially men who suffer psychological pressure due to social, health, or financial conditions, and ends up being violent towards women, the first victims of cases of violence, followed by children.

The Wassila Network for Defending Women's Rights has recorded the emergence of new cases of violence along with the exacerbation of violence with the group that was previously exposed to this problem, through the phone calls it received from female victims, as the number of calls reached about 70 per week, an average of 10 per day. A psychologist talks to the battered woman and provides the necessary solutions and steps to get her out of the crisis.

Human rights organizations also recorded 11 murders across the country during the home quarantine phase, the victims of which were women. Indeed, measures to confront the Coronavirus in Algeria did not help to protect battered women during the home quarantine period, as the forensic services of public hospitals suspended their reception of victims of violence, and were limited to referrals by order of the Public Prosecutor or the security services. Such procedure reduced the number of applicants for forensic diagnosis and medical certificates for their exposure to violence, but this does not reflect the real cases of violence that occurred within the family environment during the home confinement period.

Therefore, human rights organizations blame the official authorities for not taking adequate measures to protect vulnerable groups of women and children in these exceptional circumstances, and they demand a green number that women victims of violence could use to report on the aggressors during the home quarantine period, and to open urgent interests in the courts for the same purpose.

## **In Tunisia, 4,000 cases of violence targeting women and children took place during the general lockdown period**

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The COVID-19 pandemic recorded an increase in the attacks against women in Tunisia, as it reflected negatively on many Tunisian families. This is explained by the blurring of the situation imposed by the pandemic on the citizens, the lack of financial resources, the difficulty of professional conditions for vulnerable groups, in addition to the tightness of housing stores and the increasing burdens on housewives, which affected housewives. These loads of pressure and problems within families, lead to the point of violence, physical harm to women and children, and also getting kicked out from when the situation intensifies.

It is estimated that the number of cases of violence against women has increased seven times compared to the same period in 2019. The Tunisian Minister of Justice, Thouraya Jribi, announced in a session in the Tunisian Parliament that during the general lockdown period that was decided to confront the COVID-19 outbreak that began on March 22, 2020, 4,263 cases were recorded in which the Public Prosecution investigated and related to violence against women and children, and that 5,111 were charges in these cases in the period between March and April 2020

Shelters also witnessed an increase in the number of female arrivals who were victims of violence during the general lockdown period, as psychologists and social workers and support doctors, especially that some of them needed exceptional care because of the severe violence they have been subjected to, together with their children. A free hotline was also launched to receive the complaints of women victims of violence.

Despite the efforts that were made for psychological, material and judicial assistance by the organizations concerned with women, family and human rights organizations, they only covered a limited number of cases of violence.

Moreover, the advanced Tunisian legislation in the field of women's and children's rights was not sufficient to protect Tunisian women and their children from violence during the quarantine period, and it became necessary to find more comprehensive and meaningful solutions.

## High level of violence against women in Egypt during quarantine

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The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research “Baseera”, in cooperation with the National Council for Women and UN Women, conducted a poll of Egyptian women concerning the emerging Coronavirus during the period extending from 4 to 14 April 2020, and its results showed that 11 % of married women had been subjected to violence from their husbands after the emergence of the pandemic in Egypt

The survey also showed that less educated women were the most vulnerable to violence. The percentage of those with violence who had less than average education was 14%, while the percentage of those with a university education or higher was 4%.

The percentage of battered women decreases with the increase in the material level. The percentage among the lowest material level is 14% and the higher one is 6%.

The survey revealed that women between the ages of 30 and 50 years old were more exposed to violence from their husbands compared to other age groups, where the percentage of those who were exposed to violence is 12% compared to 9% among their younger or older counterparts.

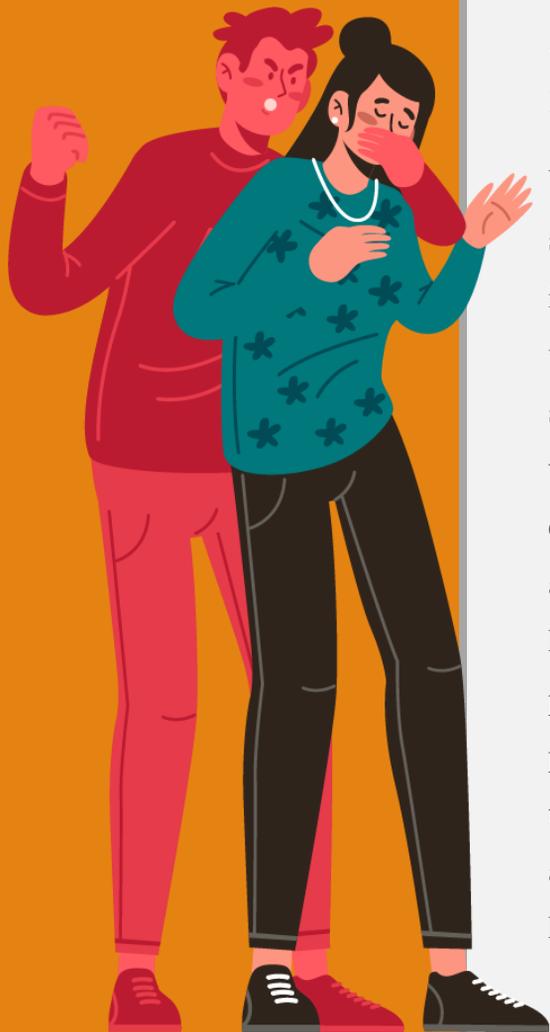
It should be noted that 7% of those who have been subjected to violence have not previously experienced violence from the husband, and 4% have previously been exposed to violence from the husband. The survey also showed that family problems during quarantine increased by 33% and the rate of violence among family members increased by 19%.

The National Council for Women Complaints Office has designated the hotline number 15115 in all governorates to receive complaints from women victims of violence and through its branches in the governorates around the clock. There were 370 complaints of violence registered during the period from March 1 to April 20, 2020, and 241 complaints of economic or material violence were requests to repay debts or loans obtained by women, and the threat to take legal measures against them in the event of non-payment.

While women's complaints of physical, verbal or social violence reached 129 at the hands of husbands and fathers, they sometimes amounted to threats to kidnap or kidnap children, forcing women to endure the violence inflicted on them.

The hotline, which operates 12 hours a day, is supervised by legal professionals and social and psychological workers who receive complaints and provide reports of violence with legal advice and social and psychological support. In this context also, other channels for complaints through social media have been harnessed. In addition, a child helpline was designated for the Motherhood and Childhood Council, the human rights sector at the Ministry of Interior, the Cabinet complaints line, a complaints line at the Ministry of Social Solidarity, and the hotline for the General Secretariat of Mental Health.

Women's hosting centers were supported with basic services for women and girls subjected to violence, including a medical protocol for dealing with cases of violence, a guideline for referring cases, a guide to judicial standards, an effective police response guide, a guide for women's complaints office, a procedural guide for establishing anti-violence units in Egyptian universities, and a trained guide for medical services providers. Furthermore, a guide to providing social services and procedural steps in hosting houses was also granted, in partnership between the National Council for Women and the ministries of justice, the prosecution, the interior, health and social solidarity, civil society organizations and United Nations agencies.



## **Iraq: The problem of domestic violence, harassment of minors, and abuse of women has increased in light of the home quarantine caused by COVID-19**

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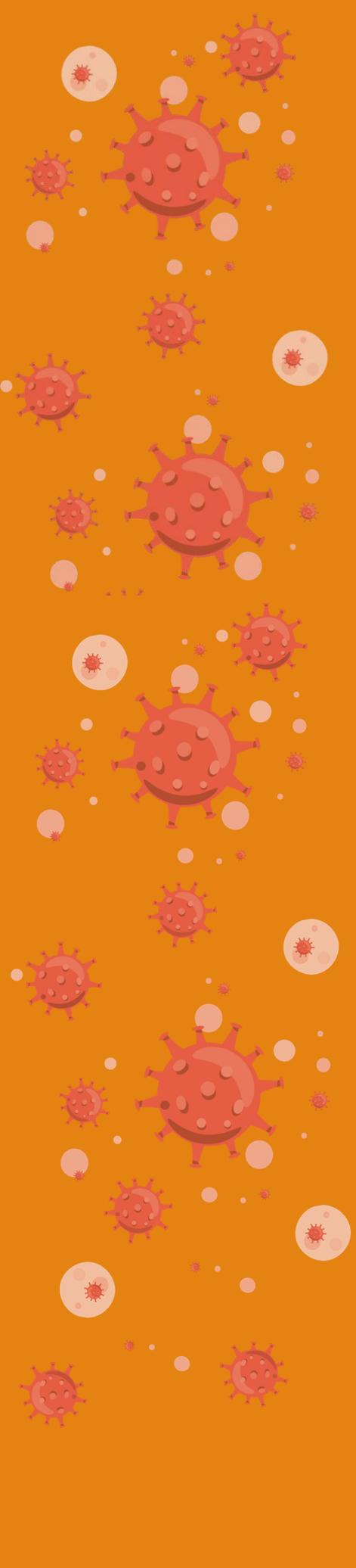
The United Nations reports in Iraq in mid-April 2020 documented many cases of horrific abuse against women and girls from rape and violence by husbands towards their wives, sexual harassment and suicide due to domestic violence, which prompted the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council to issue a circular calling on judges to use all legal provisions as a deterrent. Human Rights Watch in Iraq said that this is not sufficient to fill the gaps, indicating that the government is required to take immediate steps to protect women and hold perpetrators accountable.

The quarantine measures that were adopted to confront the COVID-19 pandemic in Iraq beginning in mid-March 2020 have contributed to an increase in the risks of domestic violence and reduced the ability of victims to report abuse and to seek safe shelter to obtain support and protection.

Based on the reports of the Human Rights Office in Iraq, some battered women are unable to leave the home to seek medical care because of the stigma and shame they may bring to their families, and also because social customs do not allow women to be alone in quarantine centers in the absence of a male relative.

While Iraqi media reports and social media reported an increase in domestic violence, the authorities noticed a decrease in official reports on domestic violence.

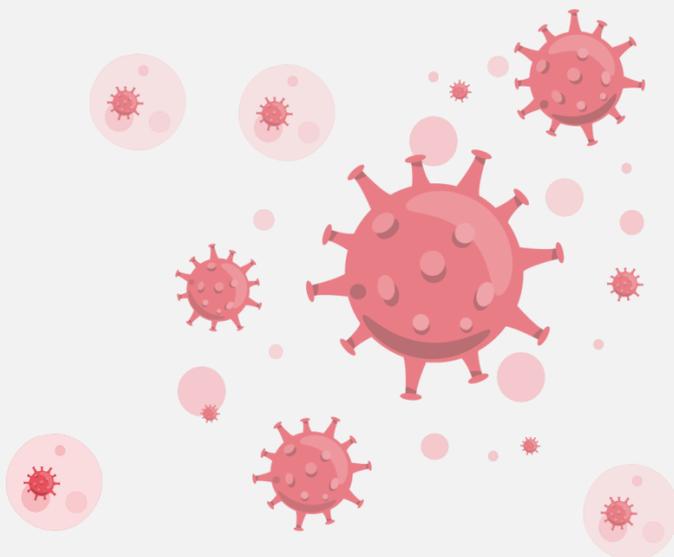
Women bore the largest share of care and household responsibilities, and the burden of the crisis fell on them, and they were the most vulnerable to violence in their homes. They endured it in silence with their inability to report the perpetrators for fear of humiliation in the community. Victims do not always look for support for fear of bringing shame to their families in addition to the legal obstacles women face when reporting domestic violence, including the Penal Code, which states that a husband's punishment of his wife is a legal right and therefore not a crime, which creates a feeling of impunity for perpetrators of crimes of violence against women.



In cases where perpetrators are held accountable, they are often forced to sign a document indicating that they will not repeat their offense or that victims are asked to “reconcile” with the perpetrators, which is usually the preferred solution.

The reception of the Iraqi Family Protection Centers, which are units that provide a safe place for women and support victims of violence, have registered a higher influx of battered women, but the number of women who are able to report often have been expelled, and they are required to obtain a report signed by a judge.

Therefore, after the first quarantine experience and the hidden violence against women in Iraq, it became certain that the government and parliament in Iraq would accelerate the focus of the law on combating domestic violence. This law would be part of the solution that must be backed by the creation of accessible shelters and the provision of urgent special measures for women, including safe and confidential online services to file complaints, or the easing of requirements for women to report abuse and seek shelter in times of emergency.



## **In Palestine, married women and housewives are the most susceptible to violence during the period of complete lockdown**

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Violence against women did not take into account the conditions and challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis since the beginning of this year, but rather fed from it.

During the outbreak of this pandemic, since the beginning of 2020, women in Palestine faced a reality in which the social challenges of facing the occupation were mixed with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic for women and the family, multiplying the extent of risks faced by women. These risks are in terms of violence and discrimination, either in the labor market, in light of the continuing fear of disrupting economic life and dispensing with workers or stopping their salaries due to the crisis. In addition to issues at home and the implications of the conditions of psychological and economic stress, and thus women's bearing of these crises.

These conditions made women, and in many cases, pay the price of the pandemic outside and inside the home as a result of home quarantine and as a result of the economic decline witnessed by families, loss of income, and the uncertainty that prevails in families and society.

Two women died due to psychological and physical violence since the beginning of the Coronavirus , battered women attempted suicide, and dozens of women were exposed to forms of psychological and physical violence during the first four months of 2020, as mentioned in the special statistical report issued by the Ministry of Social Development at the end of April 2020 for the period extending from the beginning of January through the end of April 2020.

According to that statistical report, cases of violence against women fluctuated during the first four months of 2020, with a noticeable increase in the month of March, as the number of documented cases during this month reached about 37.5% compared to 16.6% of the total cases, and the rest of the percentage included the remaining months. The other report, indicated that there are about 42.4% of cases of abuse among married women.

These figures do not reflect all cases of violence against women, as they represent the number of cases that women counselors dealt with in directorates of ministries of development, especially since there were cases that did not reach the directorates, in addition to cases that sought help through civil society organizations and the hotline. There by, some violence occurrences remained unknown.

Violence has been used against women in the age group between 20 to 39 years, which is the group that forms the family incubator, as their percentage reached about 67.7% of the total number of women who have been subjected to violence.

It was also found that the decline in the educational level was a noticeable influencing factor, as the percentage of women who were subjected to violence during the quarantine period, and who did not study beyond secondary school, was 58.3%.

The Ministry of Health data showed that about 72.9% of the total number of battered women whose cases have been documented are housewives. Second place concerned service sector workers, and was followed by other professions with 12.5%. The role of women as housewives and managers of their families matters, as well as being a worker and providing a source of income for the family did not help to spare women from violence during the pandemic. While psychological violence represented about 42% of the forms of violence to which women were subjected, compared to 32% who were subjected to physical violence, which are high rates compared to other forms of violence.



## Jerusalem, least affected by domestic violence, deceptive numbers

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Official data show that the percentage of women who were subjected to violence during the last period amounted to 1% in the Jerusalem governorate, and the rest of the percentage was distributed to the rest of the governorates in which cases were recorded. The reason for the decrease in violence against women in Jerusalem during the time of the pandemic, as confirmed by Sama Aweidah / Director General of the Center for Feminist Studies In Palestine, was due to the fact that available statistics on Jerusalem in all fields are often inaccurate for reasons related to the lack of confidence of Jerusalem residents in anyone who collects information as a result of the efforts made by the occupation authorities to collect information that enables the authorities to diminish the identity of Jerusalem, a goal that the occupation authorities are seeking to empty Jerusalem of its residents.

According to Aweidah, this is also a result of the residents of Jerusalem knowing that the only body capable of punishing the violent are the occupation authorities. Here, women get into one of two problems, one being the lack of consent to punish a Palestinian by the occupation authorities, and because of their lack of confidence in these authorities in terms of dealing with Palestinian problems properly. The other reason is that the pandemic crisis did not have a major economic impact on the residents of Jerusalem, the same way it affected the residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, thanks to the presence of social security. Workers did not stop working as it was the case in other areas. There were no strict measures similar to what happened in the West Bank, in terms of leaving the house and moving around, which made the complications of this crisis in Jerusalem less than in other areas.

One of the effects that resulted from violence against women in Palestine was that about 64% of them tried to escape from their households to get rid of violence, and there were 8 cases of battered women who attempted suicide, whose ages was between 20 and 29 years, most of whom were exposed to more than one form of violence.

In this context, among the cases of domestic violence against women, the Ministry of Social Development recorded 20 suicide attempts during the general quarantine period for women, the causes of which are violence within the family.



# Traditional patriarchal culture

From the previous examples, it becomes clear that the situation in the Arab region is very unfortunate due to the entrenched patriarchal culture (patriarchy), in addition to the impact of gender-based violence on women of all backgrounds. The COVID-19 pandemic has come to make the situation worse, as this patriarchal culture based on customs and traditions that make all decisions related to the family in the hands of the man, as most men (70%) in the region say that husbands, not wives, should have the final decision in family affairs, according to a survey conducted by the Arab Barometer last year.

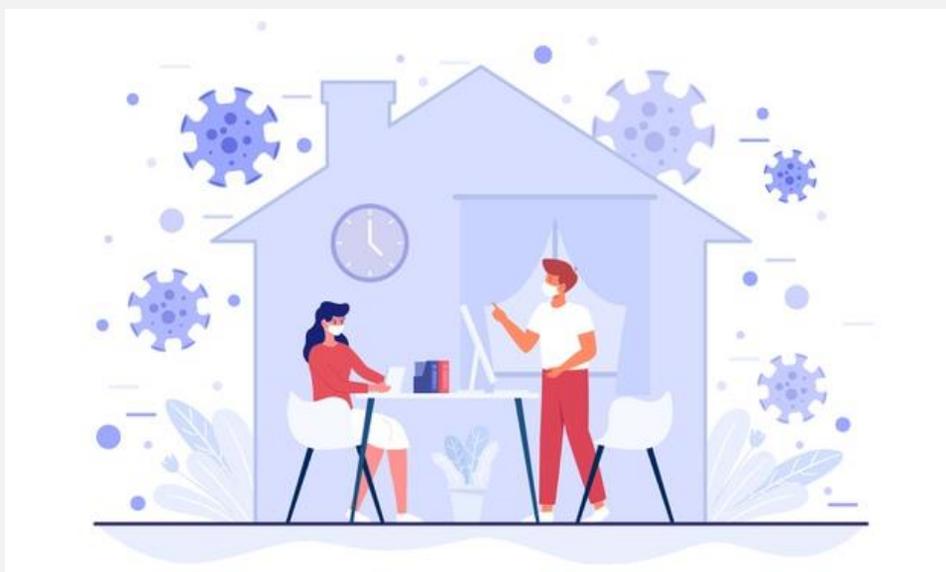
In 6 countries out of 12 countries included the Arab Barometer poll, more than half of women in these six countries believe that the husband is the one who should be the first and last decision-maker in family matters, and this belief is consistent with anti-women relationships that advocate male domination, which in turn increases the likelihood of violence against women. This also restricts the independence of women in family decision-making, which leads to an increase in the negative effects of women in light of the Corona pandemic.



## Fake choices for Arab women

Victims of violence as a result of closures and curfew measures in many countries spend more time indoors with their aggressors, which leads to increased harm against them, and given these circumstances, the options available to women at risk from violence are very limited. These women either stay at home and suffer or flee from home without any guarantees guaranteeing them, a safe shelter to accommodate them in light of this pandemic, and both options ultimately represent just plain imaginary choices, because the main problem is that Arab governments have not yet succeeded in giving priority to women's health and protection in the context of plans to confront the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of the lack of places where women who suffer harm can take refuge and the inability of the police and medical centers to absorb these cases due to the lack of necessary equipment, civil society organizations are struggling for women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa region to bridge this gap by providing alternative means that take into account restrictions on movement and social distancing measures. These methods include: Providing direct lines of communication and counseling services via mobile phone, the Internet, in addition to providing temporary shelter for survivors, and despite these available means, most women do not turn to these organizations to seek help, but rather prefer to seek help from relatives.



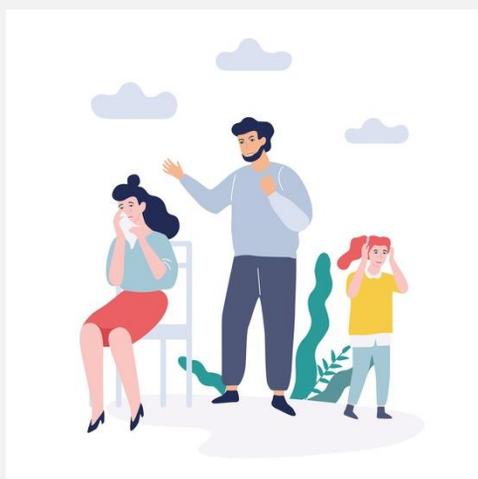
## Considering violence in Arab societies a private family affair

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Domestic violence is a common occurrence in Arab countries, and this phenomenon is exacerbated in particular as a result of being considered a private family affair, as the survey conducted by the Arab Barometer between 2018-2019 shows that most of the victims of violence are women in the Middle East and North Africa (88%) (They resort to their relatives or female relatives to ask for help from them, with a small percentage of women in the region (12%) thinking of submitting a complaint to the local police because of this violence, and the situation in Lebanon differs in terms of the percentage of women who report domestic violence to the local police, as it reached ( 49%), and this percentage is an exception among the percentages of Arab countries.

In view of these percentages, in case there are laws that address domestic violence, these laws remain not widely enforced in all cases, because the percentage of women who will report domestic violence to the police is small, which leads to exempting the aggressors from punishment for their abusive acts.

According to the survey, the percentage of battered women who go to hospitals to seek help and support in the Middle East and North Africa region is (6%), which is a small percentage compared to the number of cases of violence. On the other hand, almost none of the women exposed to violence seek help from local organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the shortcomings of the support measures taken by Arab authorities to protect survivors of violence, even those measures taken before the spread of the pandemic.



## The following is a comparison of the ratios between countries according to the Arab Barometer Survey

Percentage of women victims of domestic violence in Arab countries who resort to the following agencies to seek protection and assistance						
None of the above	Local organization	Hospital	Local police	Relatives (female)	Relatives (male)	Countries
6%	/	12%	7%	14%	64%	Palestine
16%	/	9%	6%	18%	50%	Iraq
6%	3%	7%	8%	41%	47%	Sudan
17%	/	/	9%	34%	45%	Algeria
8%	1%	13%	9%	60%	44%	Morocco
14%	/	6%	12%	24%	43%	Tunisia
10%	3%	3%	8%	34%	40%	Yemen
/	/	6%	6%	19%	39%	Jordan
/	/	/	49%	30%	34%	Lebanon
12%	/	13%	16%	37%	32%	Egypt
8%	1%	6%	12%	28%	55%	Middle East and North Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for Arab authorities to transform domestic violence from a private family affair into a public issue, as only six countries in the Middle East and North Africa had passed laws and measures to combat domestic violence until 2019, according to local women’s rights activists and Human Rights Watch.

As reported by Human Rights Watch, these laws contain many deficiencies and loopholes that weaken their effectiveness in deterring aggressors from harming women.

The authorities in the Arab countries must strongly and firmly address domestic violence as a public health crisis, as this violence affects the physical and psychological health of women. Therefore, the authorities must strengthen cooperation between the police, the health sector, the criminal justice system, and local organizations concerned with women’s rights in order to provide relief as well as immediate and adequate support for women survivors of violence.

In the long term, there is a major obstacle standing in the way of women that must be overcome, which is reforming gender-based laws in Arab countries and re-aligning gender roles in a way that achieves equality, so that domestic violence is controlled and Arab women are not discouraged from seeking help from outside the family. This in turn leads to exempting the aggressors from punishment for their offensive actions due to their failure to inform the competent authorities such as the local police.

## The national measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic should include the following matters

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Providing services aimed at addressing violence against women and girls, including increasing the means and resources needed to support shelters, hotlines, and online consultations for women and girls.

Expanding the scope of these basic services and adapting them to the current crisis context to ensure that women and girls survivors receive appropriate support.

Giving priority to psychosocial support for women and girls affected by the outbreak of this pandemic, as well as for survivors of gender-based violence, and for frontline health workers and other social support workers working on the front lines.

Law enforcement authorities should rally warnings and serious messages upholding that the perpetrators of these acts will not be tolerated and that impunity is unacceptable, as the police and judicial actors must ensure that incidents of violence against women and girls are given high priority, and that the manifestations of violence must be addressed, as it keeps emerging in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.



## Issues and trends

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Violence against women and girls is a violation of human rights and is a global issue with a major impact on victims / survivors, their families and their communities.

Globally, nearly 18 % of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 years who have been in a relationship before, have experienced physical or sexual violence, despite the fact that violence by a partner is one of the most common and widespread forms of violence against women.

However, women and girls are exposed to violence in multiple contexts - in times of peace or conflict, or in the aftermath of conflict - and also in various fields: at the family and community level or at the level of society as a whole. The rapid advancement in technology provides another avenue for violence, which is electronic violence against women. The available data indicate that less than 40% of women who are subjected to violence report these crimes or seek help, and among those women who request help, most of them seek help from family and friends. As the percentage of women who seek help from Police are less than 10% of the women who ask for help.

The crisis of violence against women and girls has exacerbated remarkably in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as new data show that since the outbreak of the virus, reports relating to violence against women have increased in several countries, especially reports of domestic violence, and this number is likely to increase with the increase in security, health and finance concerns, that raises tensions and pressures due to the cramped and restrictive living conditions resulting from the closure, as half of the world's population was subject to a state of lockdown and home quarantine starting early April 2020.

# The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Arab women and girls

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Great pressure on basic services that women and girls resort to, such as direct contact services and emergency shelters

An increase in domestic violence due to prolonged stay in the home as a result of the imposed closure

Increasing electronic violence that women and girls are exposed to by using social media

## Restriction of freedom of movement

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The increase in reports of domestic violence is occurring at the same time that these basic services are under stress and danger resulting from this pandemic, the provision of care and support to save the lives of women who have been subjected to violence (such as clinical care for victims of rape, mental health care and the provision of psychological and social support for women And girls) may be disrupted as a result of fatigue of the providers of these health services and their preoccupation with dealing with and treating cases of COVID-19.

Even in the case of maintaining the most basic services that are considered necessary, the lack of coordination in the confrontation between the health sector, the police sector, the judiciary sector, social services departments as well as the imposed social distancing, these sectors face challenges in providing effective and appropriate support to women and girls who are subjected to violence.

In light of this pandemic, freedom of movement has become restricted, and access to essential basic services has become very limited, and these basic services have become managed in a different way as a result of social distancing (by providing the necessary consultations over the phone, via emails, or other platforms).

As a result, requests for assistance from women and girls have decreased. This is a worrying indicator for women who have been left without shelter, as they cannot access the means that can help them cope with or survive situations of violence, and as a result of the prevailing situation, women and girls may not be able to have access to networks and organizations that support them and acknowledge abuse (such as women's rights networks, teachers, health workers, religious scholars, community development personnel).

Women and girls in many countries, especially those facing multiple forms of discrimination, may not be able to access the means of services that are provided to seek help, such as mobile phones, computers, and the Internet, or they may not be able to use them freely and safely at home due to being closely monitored by either the perpetrator or a family member, as a result of the existing digital gender gap.

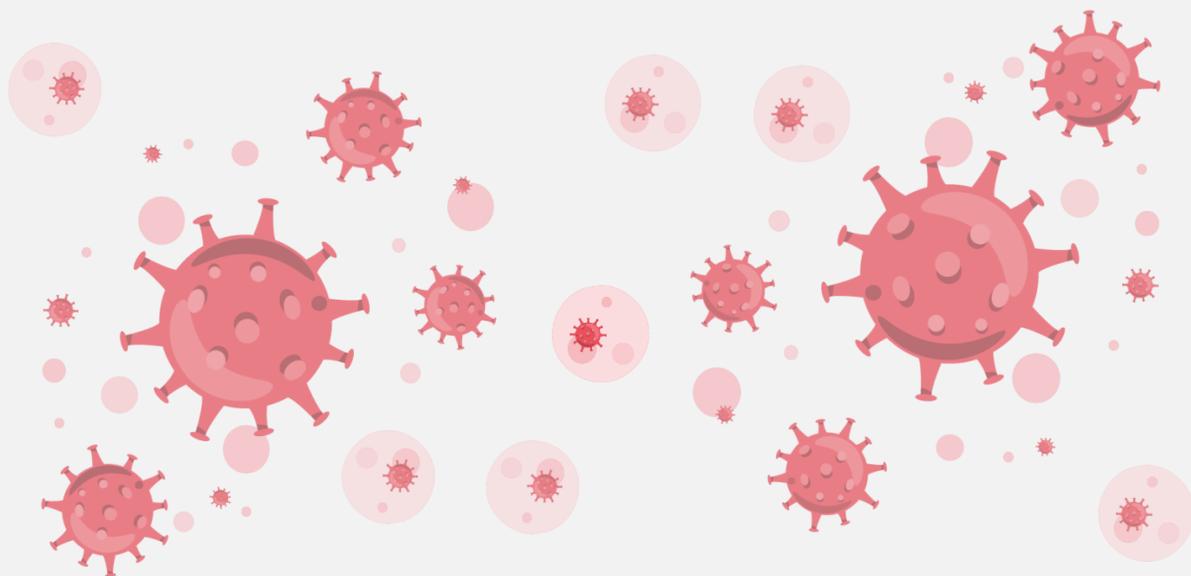
In cases where women have access to technology, cyber violence against women increases (by receiving abusive and sexual e-mails or SMS messages, or by exposing them to abusive and inappropriate approaching attempts on social media).

The use of virtual platforms has increased in the past few weeks due to the movement restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and some have used these platforms as an opportunity to lure young people into exploitative situations, as millions of women and girls frequently use video conferencing via virtual platforms for work and study, according to the media. According to social media posts and women's rights experts, the different forms of violence that occur on the Internet are increasing, including stalking, bullying, and harassment, as well as sexual harassment and phishing.

Besides the increase in reports of violence against women and girls, we are also witnessing a more complex form of this violence.

It is likely that women's fears and their risk of exposure to sexual violence and other forms of violence will increase in places where the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading, whether in urban or rural areas, when the streets and means of transportation are empty of people, except for people working in basic services as a result of closures and social distancing measures.

Women constitute 70 % of health care workers and those on the front lines of confronting the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result, women face multiple risks that threaten their health, well-being and safety, as reports of physical and verbal attacks against health care workers have increased.



# The economic impact of violence against women and girls and the COVID-19 pandemic

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The social and economic costs of violence against women and girls are very large, due to the increased costs associated with providing services to victims, in addition to the costs related to the criminal justice system response. The only factor that increases this cost is an increase in violence, so that violence is expected to increase in light of this. The pandemic, and the expected rise in various forms and manifestations of violence against women and girls will not only exacerbate the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis, but also slow down the economic recovery around the world.

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, represented by the widespread closure of businesses, companies and factories, imposes increasing financial pressures on local communities, especially on segments of society that already include groups of the population that are most vulnerable or least able to help themselves, so that these groups are most at risk of this. Most women work disproportionately in unsafe jobs with low wages and part-time nature in the informal economy, as these jobs have insecure income and social protection (such as health insurance) with little or no protection. Therefore, they are more vulnerable to the risk resulting from Economic recession in light of these crises and less protection from its effects.

Building on experience with the Ebola and Zika outbreaks, this experience shows that pandemics exacerbate existing inequalities, including inequalities based on economic status, ability, age, and gender.

Hence, stark social and economic inequalities will place the most vulnerable groups of women at greater risk of violence, and in light of this crisis, violence against women and girls will continue to increase, at the same time as unemployment, financial pressures and insecurity increase, and women lose their income. In cases of abuse, it will make it more difficult for them to overcome the current situation.

The financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the ability of local women's organizations to advocate for policy reforms related to violence against women and girls as well as its long-term impact on services provided to survivors of violence.

# Recommendations regarding measures to be taken

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It is very important to address the increase in violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic period, through intensive and urgent efforts by governments, international and national civil society organizations and united nations agencies, and therefore priority must be given to the needs of women and girls who face multiple forms of discrimination.

## Recommendations to governments

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- ❑ Allocate additional resources and include evidence-based measures to address violence against women and girls in the national response plans for the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ❑ Strengthen the services provided to women subjected to violence during the Covid-19 pandemic and facilitate their access to them through :
  - Consider the services provided to women subjected to violence to be essential services, so that the sustainability of their work must be preserved during the closure period.
  - Enhance the services provided to women and girls, including shelters and shelters, by conducting rapid assessments of their absorptive capacity, developing risk assessment processes, preparing plans for safety and for managing violence cases and their issues, so that these procedures and services are in line with the context of this pandemic, in order to ensure violence survivors' access to the support needed during the lockdown.
  - Provide psychological and social support to women and girls who have been subjected to violence and to front-line workers in the fields of health and social support.
  - Increase the capacity of shelters and use other available places, such as empty hotels, or educational institutions, to meet the increasing quarantine needs.
  - Promote helplines that protect women and girls from sexual exploitation and abuse, in addition to supporting technology-based solutions such as SMS messages, online tools and social support networks that provide online aid and counseling.

## Recommendations to governments

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### **Build capacities for key services in order to prevent impunity and improve the quality of the confrontation provided through:**

- ❑ Raise awareness among police and judges about the increase in violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide them with the necessary training to clarify the mechanism for responding to and protecting victims of violence, in addition to the mechanism for their access to appropriate basic services.
- ❑ Train respondents to violence and frontline workers in providing psychosocial support, including health workers, law enforcement and court personnel, workers in emergency shelters and counselors, as they are the only ones who are still working during this crisis.
- ❑ Provide appropriate training for education sector and child services personnel regarding safety and information needed to refer children who may be exposed to abuse in their households or who may be vulnerable to cyber-trolls.

## Recommendations to governments

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**Put women's issues at the center of efforts made to confront the COVID-19 pandemic and to recover from their injuries, such as measures related to changing policies and formulating appropriate solutions through:**

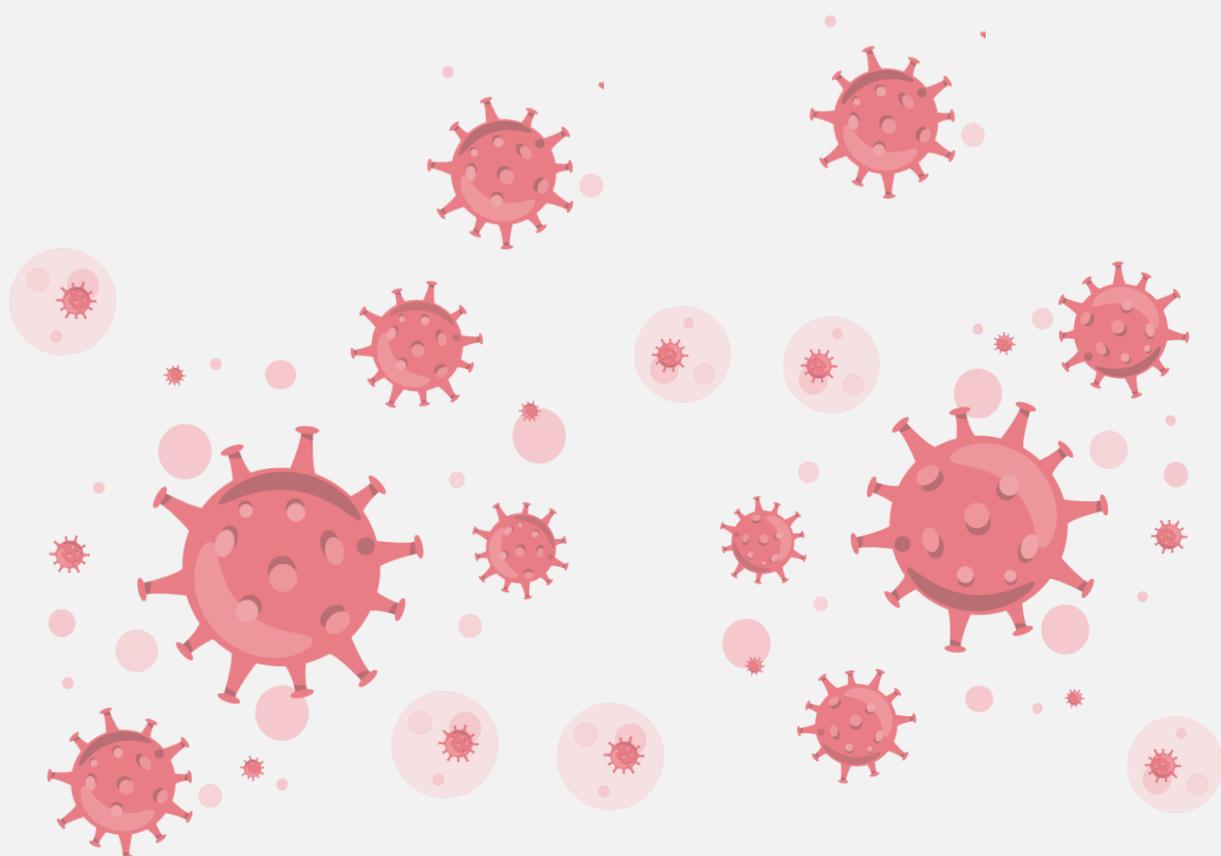
- ❑ Provide support to grassroots women's rights organizations, especially those organizations that provide basic services to vulnerable population groups and those living in remote and hard-to-reach areas.
- ❑ Ensure the participation of organizations concerned with women's issues and local women's organizations in decision-making processes so that the needs and concerns of women and girls are identified and thus included in measures and policies related to preventing and addressing violence against women and girls.
- ❑ Consider the role that organizations concerned with women's issues play in recovery plans and in providing long-term solutions to address the increase in violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Recommendations to governments

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### Ensure the collection of data disaggregated by gender in order to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls through

- ❑ Collect data disaggregated by gender on cases of violence against women and girls, so that this data includes domestic violence, psychological violence, economic violence and sexual violence, in addition to recording the location of these cases.
- ❑ Collect data related to the needs and capacities of the main services provided in response to the increasing demands of women and girls in light of the COVID-19 pandemic
- ❑ Ensure that efforts to collect data do not expose women and girls to a greater risk of violence and tension.



## Recommended actions for trade union and civil society organizations

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Enhance advocacy and participation for various actors to address violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic, through:

- ❑ Raising awareness and support among community members about the increase in violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic
- ❑ Pre-emptively challenging gender stereotypes and harmful or harmful male patterns, as these patterns are exacerbated in the circumstances associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (such as increased domestic and family care work on women and financial insecurity / unemployment), while sending targeted messages to men, in order to encourage them to adopt healthy ways to deal with stressful situations.
- ❑ Working with the media to continue to shed light on the increasing violence against women and girls, and to show how the risk factors are exacerbating and driving an increase in violence in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ❑ Providing the necessary information to survivors of domestic violence, through public announcements, on how to continue their work in a safe manner, using formats that are easily understood and accessible by different groups of women and girls.
- ❑ Raising awareness of the private sector and involving it in the prevention and response mechanism of violence against women and girls, using available global guidance, including women working in the home remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic and who are subjected to domestic violence.
- ❑ Ensuring that local and regional authorities provide safe public spaces for women and girls throughout this pandemic.

## Participation of UN Women in the measures to be taken in Arab countries

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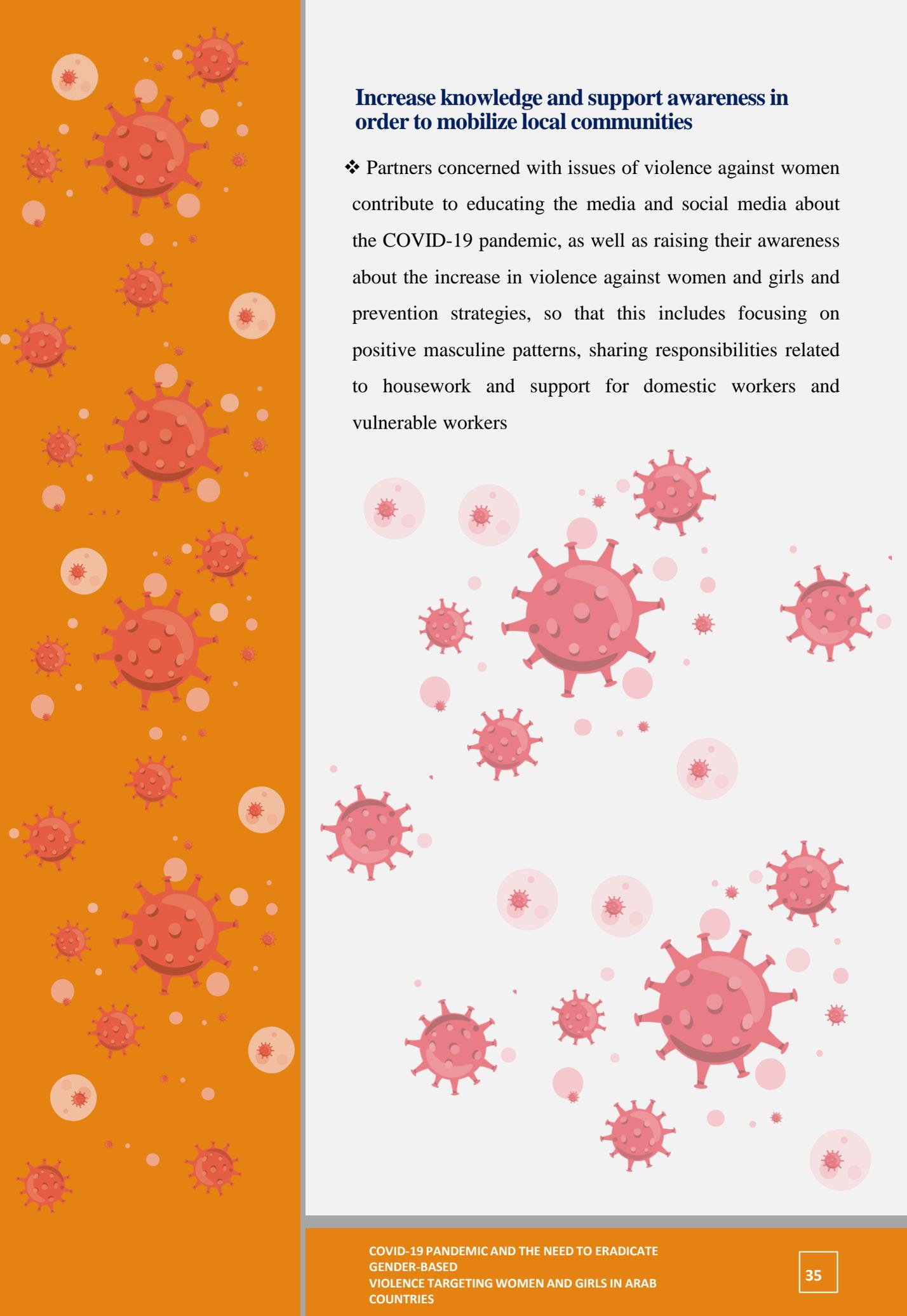
UN Women is working with its partners to ensure that measures to address violence against women and girls in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic are incorporated and recovered from the country, regional and global levels, in line with the principle of leaving no one behind.

**The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UN Trust Fund) is reviewing all existing grants to determine potential budget that can be reallocated as quickly as possible to provide immediate assistance to local women’s organizations in these difficult times. Subject to donor contributions, the fund will also establish a funding window for the COVID-19 pandemic with two specific paths:**

- ❖ Supporting civil society organizations in the existing Arab countries funded by the United Nations Trust Fund, giving priority to small women’s organizations in order to provide additional basic funding to help them adapt to the challenges arising as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and to ensure the continuity of their projects and the organization’s long-term sustainability.
- ❖ A counter-response to the COVID-19 pandemic, called the “COVID-19 Response”, aiming to present proposals that would finance new projects specifically designed to support women and girls who are survivors of violence in light of the crises resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gender-sensitive confrontation and domestic confrontations related to the COVID-19 pandemic and violence against women and girls, with women in key roles in decision-making related to them:

Globally, and through the United Nations’ Safe City and Safe Public Places initiative, the United Nations is working with local governments, judicial / police / health sectors, and grass-roots women’s organizations to deepen support across municipal departments (such as transportation, public parks, and public workplaces. , Sanitation, housing) in ensuring safe public spaces are provided to women and girls during this crisis.



## **Increase knowledge and support awareness in order to mobilize local communities**

- ❖ Partners concerned with issues of violence against women contribute to educating the media and social media about the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as raising their awareness about the increase in violence against women and girls and prevention strategies, so that this includes focusing on positive masculine patterns, sharing responsibilities related to housework and support for domestic workers and vulnerable workers

# Questions and Answers on: Violence against women in light of the COVID-19 pandemic



## What can I do if I lose my sense of safety at home?

It will be very useful for you to communicate with one of your family members, friends, or neighbors to seek help in case you are exposed to violence, or you can request help and support through electronic services dedicated to survivors of violence or through direct contact lines (hotline - green number). You can inquire on the status of local services, such as shelters that house survivors of violence, or electronic counseling, and seeking assistance from them if these services are available and are able to provide support in light of the imposed closures.

- ❑ You should put in place a precautionary plan that guarantees your safety and your children's in the event of an escalation and increase in violence directed against you, and this plan includes:
  - Determine the place to go in case you have to leave the house immediately to maintain your safety, such as: the house of a friend, neighbor, colleague, relative or the shelters concerned with sheltering survivors of violence.
  - Prepare a safe advance plan for the mechanism of leaving the house and arriving at the desired place, taking into account the available means of transportation.
  - Keep the necessities in cases of emergency when you leave the house, such as: phone, list of emergency numbers, identity documents, medicines, clothes and money.
  - Agree with a trusted neighbor or relative on a specific sign or symbol through which they can reach you and help you in emergencies if this is possible.

## **Who can help me and where should I go if I need medical attention because of my exposure to violence?**

❑ You can call an ambulance or call the emergency health services in your country when urgent medical care is needed, and when any other support is needed, contact the providers of these services, whether it is health services or other services, to provide the necessary support.

## **Is there anyone who can help me during the COVID-19 pandemic with the long-term psychological, sexual, social, health or physical problems that I suffer from due to the violence that I have been subjected to?**

❑ Seek the necessary care and assistance from a health care provider trained in symptoms and conditions, including injuries that need medical care, and given the restrictions on freedom of movement and pressure burdening health sectors due to the outbreak of this pandemic, it will be difficult to obtain health care based on Personal communication between the provider of this care and the person in need. Therefore, in this case, you should think of alternative options available near you, such as taking advantage of services that provide support through the use of modern means based on the phone or the Internet.

## Here are some tips that will reduce tension and stress:

Maintain constant communication with friends and relatives, and know how to contact them when you need help and support from them.

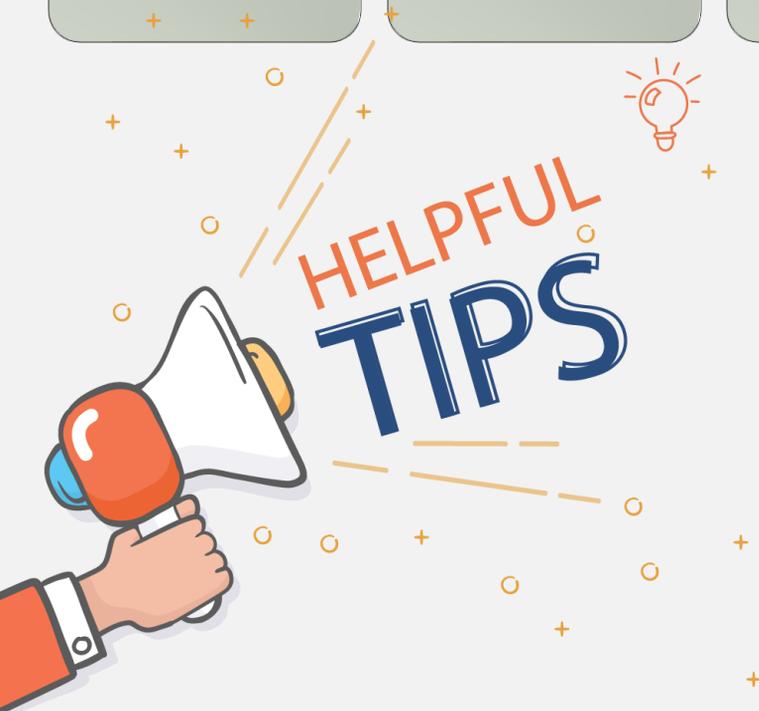
Don't give up on your daily routine, and set aside a suitable time for physical activity and sleep.

Make sure to practice various relaxation exercises to alleviate the feelings and thoughts that cause tension and stress. Examples of these exercises are: meditation, slow breathing, etc.

Renew your participation in activities that helped you in the past to deal with and overcome difficulties.

Check out the information related to COVID-19 from reliable sources, while reducing the time you spend following the news in order to reduce the tension resulting from watching the news and browsing inaccurate information.

Be sure to continue your health care remotely by phone or the Internet during the lockdown period due to COVID-19.



## How can I help someone I know who I am worried and afraid of ?

Here are some things you can do if you know someone in a relationship where they are being abused and hurt and you are feeling anxious for them:

- ❑ Staying in constant and regular contact with this person to ensure their safety and health, while ensuring that this person is able to communicate with you safely.
- ❑ Searching for the best ways and means by which you can communicate with this person without causing them further harm when the perpetrator of violence is in the home or when there is fear that the perpetrator will be able to look through their phone and see the ongoing contacts and conversations between you.
- ❑ Make sure that the perpetrator of violence is not inside the home when you talk to this person by sending a short message, e-mail, or via social media instead of direct contact with great care.
- ❑ Knowing the services provided to survivors of violence and working during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as shelters, counseling services, direct lines of communication, in addition to knowledge of organizations concerned with women.

Posting information related to these services on social media and informing your knowledge of them

Providing information to the concerned person in a conservative and careful manner without resorting to direct methods, for fear of knowing the perpetrator of violence.

- ❑ Stay fully prepared to contact the police, emergency health services, or direct lines of support, when the person you know needs urgent help.

## **What should I do if I become aware of an incident of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and want to report it?**

- You should follow the procedures and guidelines for your country when you wish to report an incident of violence, making sure to contact the service through which you are likely to obtain a response that focuses on survivors of violence.
- Make sure you have a solid safety plan in place to protect yourself from exposure.

Urging decision-makers in your country to make exceptions to restrictions on freedom of movement to allow people to report violence.

Ask for support from friends, neighbors, colleagues, or local support services for survivors of violence when you encounter problems or difficulties in reporting the relevant authorities.

## **I have already harmed my wife and children, or I am afraid to harm them with my words or actions, so how can I control myself and what are the tips to stop it?**

- Change position or go outside to take a deep breath when you are feeling angry or upset.
- Do breathing exercises that include (inhale and exhale) and during these exercises, think carefully before taking any action or speaking anything in order to get rid of the state of anger and return to the state of calm.
- Ask for help from a trusted friend or relative and talk to them to reduce your anger, or seek help and advice from specialized services in this field or from local health services if necessary.

- ❑ Take into account the pressures resulting from this pandemic due to the closure and the financial pressures resulting from it, as all your family members are also suffering from stress and tension during this period.

Take the necessary measures to ensure that you properly handle stress and tension in safe and sound ways

- ❑ Be kind and patient in your words and actions when dealing with your wife, children and all family members.

## **How can I help survivors of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic as a health worker?**

As a health worker, you can do many things to help mitigate the effects of violence on women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

- ❑ You should provide help and care for women who seek help to deal with the physical and psychological harm caused by violence, even in light of the health emergency caused by COVID-19.
- ❑ Using various technology means to provide services and support to women, such as mobile phones and social media operating on the Internet. Also taking care of doing so in a safe manner that does not cause further harm to survivors, in case direct care is not possible due to the closure.
- ❑ Treating the survivor infected with COVID-19 like other survivors when requesting help regarding the violence to which she is exposed without difference in your way of responding to it, while adhering to the health procedures prescribed in dealing with the infected, such as leaving a distance of not less than a meter and a half between you and the injured person, wearing masks and protective gear as well as wash your hands regularly to avoid infection.

- ❑ Participating in the necessary training to deal with survivors of violence for frontline workers in facing this pandemic to preserve the safety of women.

Encouraging women to communicate with additional support services.

- ❑ Listening and understanding well the survivors of violence while showing interest in women's inquiries and concerns

## **What can I do as a health facility manager to provide support for survivors of violence during the Covid-19 pandemic ?**

- ❑ Defining the services designated for survivors of violence, such as direct lines of communication, shelters, and counseling services, in addition to specifying all information related to the local services assigned to them.
- ❑ Determining the working hours of the services provided to survivors, in addition to their contact details
- ❑ Identifying services that can provide support and assistance to survivors of violence from a distance.
- ❑ Facilitating access for patients or citizens coming to your health facility to information related to these services and make this information available to health care providers.
- ❑ Encouraging and providing support to all health care providers in your facility to continue supporting survivors of violence under these critical circumstances.
- ❑ Remaining fully prepared to provide remote or alternative care services as a result of the imposed closure, by developing effective response plans capable of rapidly switching to alternative methods.
- ❑ Instructing survivors about ways to protect themselves and provide them with the numbers necessary to obtain support

## **As a policymaker, what can I do to prevent and respond to violence women are subjected to during times of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic preparedness and response plans include basic services for violence against women when developing these plans.

- ❑ Ensure that adequate resources are allocated to the services provided to survivors of violence, while taking care to identify ways in which these services will be made available to them in light of the imposed closures.
- ❑ Ensure the use of technology in the health field, such as telemedicine, to enhance the access of survivors of violence to the support and services provided.
- ❑ Ensure that the imposed curfew laws do not punish women who go out to seek help from the police or hospital because of their exposure to violence, while making sure that shelters are provided to shelter them if necessary.

## **Has violence against women increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

- ❑ Reports coming out of most Arab countries indicate a clear and large increase in cases of domestic violence in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite this significant increase, other reports indicate a decrease in the number of women who seek support and assistance due to the imposed curfew measures in addition to their fear of going to these Health services for fear of infection from people infected with this virus.

## **How does the Covid-19 pandemic increase women's risk of violence?**

The COVID-19 pandemic increases the risk of women being subjected to violence as a result of the stress and tension that this pandemic causes to the family due to financial pressures, in particular, which led to the dismissal of male and female workers from their work and the loss of their source of income, reduced access to services and prolonged sitting inside the home due to the imposed curfew. In addition to that, women have difficulty accessing the few sources of assistance, such as direct lines, shelters, police and health services

## **What groups of women are most at risk in the light of this pandemic?**

All women in this pandemic are at risk of violence, but certain groups of women are at high risk of being exposed to violence during this pandemic:

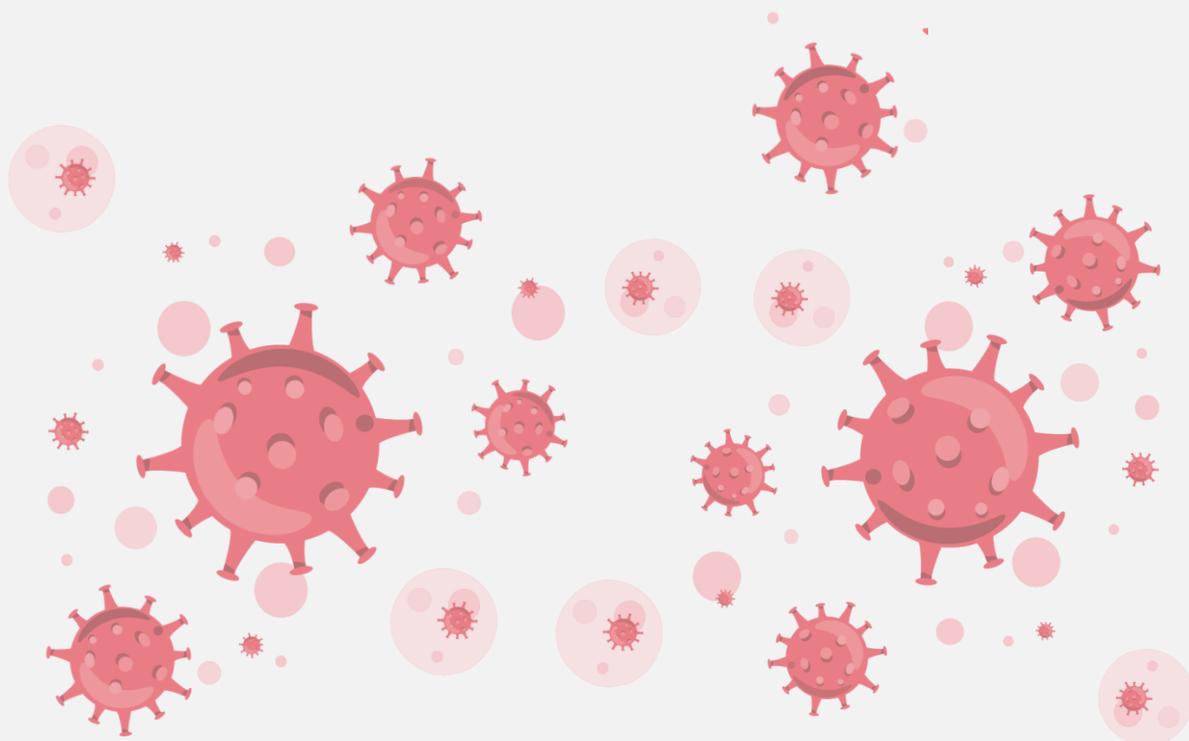
- Old women
- Women with disabilities
- Displaced women, immigrants or refugees
- Women living in conflict-affected areas

## Why should we pay special attention to the issue of violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Because violence against women is a clear violation of human rights, in addition to its grave effects, which are:

- Many health consequences for women and their children
- It leads to serious injuries and problems related to physical, sexual, psychological and reproductive health
- Violence has long-term effects on women's well-being
- It leads to death in its extreme cases

Therefore, we must protect women from this violence and provide support to survivors, as a contribution to preserving women's human rights and to enhancing their well-being and reducing its grave effects. The prevention of violence is of utmost importance in alleviating the pressures placed on the health sector in light of this health crisis that exhausted it.





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