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IN BRIEF



RAPID ASSESSMENT ON COVID-19 AND DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE SERVICES ACROSS PALESTINE

Photo: UN Women/Seung Deok Seo

Introduction

As the coronavirus cases spread across the globe, the Palestinian Government has taken measures to contain the spread of the virus and save lives in Palestine, including isolating cities, imposing restrictions on borders, and shutting down businesses. While these measures are welcomed for the most part, the measures have left survivors of domestic violence particularly vulnerable and at an increased risk.

A new survey, administered by UN Women, of domestic and family violence services across Palestine suggests that domestic violence has increased due to the conditions created by the COVID 19 pandemic, which in most cases resulted in lock down of survivors of violence with their abusers. With families in lockdown, helplines are seeing a surge of cases requesting a multitude of services. Key findings of the survey include:

- Domestic violence is on the rise as women at risk are spending more time in lockdown with their abusers.
- While women at risk are increasingly turning to domestic violence helplines for psychological support, the police and the prosecution are observing a drop in reporting of cases of domestic violence.
- Security and Justice services, including protection of violence against women cases are not considered essential under the state of emergency with the main shelters not taking in new women and courts limiting litigations procedures for cases of the emergency law violations.
- Social Councillors and case workers at front line are themselves working under stressful conditions, putting their emotional and psychological well-being at risk.

- Dealing with economic hardship and unemployment is a top priority for families, including families with women at risk of violence.

The objectives of the Rapid Assessment

1. To collect data on the impact of the emergency situation caused by the COVID-19 on essential services provided by governmental and CSOs service providers to survivors of violence.
2. To collect data on the change in the level of domestic violence during the emergency situation from the perspective of and based on data collected by governmental and CSOs service providers.
3. To collect data on types of services that have stopped and new services that have emerged as a result of the emergency situation caused by the COVID-19.

The Survey Sample

The survey employed Microsoft Forms and was distributed virtually through UN Women network of governmental and civil society partners in the West Bank and Gaza as well as other service providers listed in the newly developed GBV Directorate updated by UN Women and other partners.

A total of 59 service providers, both governmental and civil society organizations from across Palestine completed the questionnaire between the period from 2 April and 11 April 2020. Of the respondents, 60 per cent provides services at the national level, while 31 per cent provides service at the governorates level and only 9 per cent provides services in specific locations.



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A total of 14 governmental representatives have completed the questionnaire, comprising 23 per cent of the total respondents. Governmental institutions include representatives from the security and justice sector and the social development sector, including the Police's Family and Juvenile Protection Unit (FJPU), Violence against Women (VAW) Specialized Public Prosecution, VAW judiciary, Sharia Court, and the Ministry of Social Development, including shelters.

Civil society organizations, comprising 77 per cent of the responding organizations, provides a multitude of services including legal support, psychological support, health services, advocacy support, and economic empowerment.

The survey included a total of 46 questions organized in three main sections:

Section 1 - General information about the responding organizations

Section 2 - Information on the direct effect of the State of Emergency on the organizations' capacity to provide services

Section 3 - Information on the effect of the State of Emergency on women at risk from domestic violence

The survey questionnaire was developed by UN Women and validated by partner stakeholders before being officially launched on 2 April 2020.

The Survey Sample

According to the survey, 53 per cent of service providers reported that they are observing an increase in domestic violence. Respondents to the survey have cited psychological violence as the main type of violence women at risk of domestic violence are experiencing during the lockdown, followed by verbal violence and physical violence. Respondents explain that as women at risk are spending more time with an abusive husband or immediate relative due to the imposed lockdown, domestic violence is increasing; unemployment and financial hardship caused by the pandemic are cited as main factors that contribute to the increase in domestic violence as abusers are addressing their own depression by abusing their victims while they are at home.

The increase in domestic violence is mirrored by the increase in calls placed to domestic violence helplines. According to the survey, 50 per cent of service providers with a "Help line

Service" are experiencing a surge in calls placed to the domestic violence help lines. Many respondents cited distress and anxiety the lockdown is causing to those suffering or at risk of domestic violence as the main reason for the surge in the calls. Movement restriction, downsizing of services of many service providers, and fear of contracting the coronavirus by women at risk are key reasons behind women at risk are turning to calling in the help lines for psychological and legal support.

However, only 33 per cent of respondents are witnessing an increase in reporting cases of violence by women at risk compared with 28 per cent who observed a decrease in the rate of reporting. Respondents explain that while women at risk are experiencing increased rate of domestic violence, movement restrictions are preventing women at risk from leaving their homes to seek appropriate help. Moreover, fear of contracting the coronavirus is stopping women from leaving their homes to report domestic violence to the competent authority. Additionally, respondents explain that women victims of violence are compromising their rights to live a life free of violence to ensure protection of their families and alleviation of economic hardships. In line with this, victims of violence normally wait to be by themselves before they seek help or secretly reach out to friends; now they find themselves in lockdown with their abusers with very little openings to leave their homes and report to the competent authority. Both the Family and Juvenile Protection Unit at the Palestinian Civil Police and the Public Prosecutors Office are observing a dramatic decrease in cases related to domestic violence. The decrease is explained due to movement restrictions, which is limiting women's at-risk ability to reach to the police.

With this surge in domestic violence and the limited ability of women at risk to leave their abusive relationships, most service providers at the local, regional and national level are still operating, but with many having to downscale services they provide and changing the way they deliver their services. Of the respondent's organizations to the survey, only 36 per cent had an emergency plan prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, but 43 per cent of the organizations had to stop some services, 33 per cent of the organizations have reduced number of working staff, and 7 per cent of the organizations have totally shut down.

For 48 per cent of the responding service providers, fear of contracting the coronavirus by their staff and the women who are seeking help are the main reasons for downscaling services and turning into virtual tools for service provision.

Movement restrictions and social distancing orders by the government are also leading reasons for downscaling service as staff and women at risk are unable to reach service providers institutions or organizations. Moreover, suspension of essential services by some stakeholders have limited the capacity of service providers to provide essential services.

While shelters remain open, they no longer accept new cases that require accommodation to protect their current residents with no action taken to provide any women seeking sheltering help at the time of this survey. This is affecting other service providers work such as the Family and Juvenile Protection Unit, which with the absence of alternative protection options is forced to resort to conservative tools through which they are returning women at risk of violence to their homes under the guarantees of male leaders. Shelters are moreover practicing physical distancing within shelters and cancelling all group therapy sessions and other services that involve group work, including case conference mechanism.

Beyond shelters, other essential services for survivors have also been affected by the pandemic. While the judiciary system is still operating, litigation related to ongoing cases has stopped due to prevent gathering in the courts out of fear of spreading the coronavirus. Exception to this are cases related to extending arrest decisions or release decisions. Sharia courts have imposed complete lock down of services in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Recently, the Gaza Sharia court issued a circulation that enable court to manage urgent cases such as custody and alimony. Courts have also observed a drop in new cases related to domestic violence that is being transferred by the Public Prosecutors. The Public Prosecutors Office is also observing a drop of cases related to domestic violence. This is explained due to the movement restriction imposed which has limited women's ability to reach the police or the prosecution.

Civil society organizations providing essential services to women at risk are facing their own challenges too. In many cases, it is no longer possible for victims and women at risk of violence to meet with case workers, while at the same time supportive community ties were cut. All services that require gatherings, such as field visits, awareness and educating sessions, group and individual support sessions, training programmes, capacity building sessions, as well as appearing in courts for litigating cases were ceased. Other services, such

sessions, group and individual support sessions, training programmes, capacity building sessions, as well as appearing in courts for litigating cases were ceased. Other services, such as facilitating child visitation services and economic empowerment activities, were also stopped. Service providers are turning their services to helplines, phone consultations and virtual sessions for those who need help with 10 organizations launching a Hotline Service after the announcement of the State of Emergency on 5 March 2020 bringing the number of organizations with Hotline Services to 28.

These service providers are now straining to respond to the demand using new methodologies. Staff, mainly women, are overwhelmed, as they find themselves having to work on sensitive cases while being locked in their homes. The emotional and psychological well-being of these councillors is at risk because they are being stressed by the calls they are receiving while dealing with fears and disruptions to their own lives. For services providers who are on the field, fear of contracting the coronavirus is adding additional stress as many help seekers are yet to adopt the recommended social distancing behaviours including limiting distances between people and avoiding hand shaking amongst other measures, in addition to limited availability of personal protection equipment (PPE).

Additionally, service providers are struggling to meet the emerging needs of women at risk of violence due to limited resources. While domestic violence helplines are receiving calls and providing psychological support and legal advice, many civil society and governmental organizations are struggling to turn into virtual working mode due to lack of the necessary infrastructure, including equipment's, and lack of the technical know-how. Service providers are also struggling to meet the emerging needs of women at risk of violence, which above all includes financial assistance due to increased unemployment resulting from the movement restrictions and the shutdown of businesses.

Recommendations

Based on the above analysis of findings of the survey and taking into consideration the recommendations made by the Secretary General, GBV Sub- Cluster and other related forums, UN Women Palestine Country Office recommends the following action points:

**For the justice and Security Sectors, the Ministry of Social Development, and CSOs**

- To ensure that the justice, security and protection services for women victims and survivors of violence remain “essential services” during the emergency state declared by the government on 5 March 2020. This requires exploring possibilities of introducing virtual services and strengthening coordination between service providers while issues of privacy and confidentiality of cases to remain a cross-cutting principle.
- To provide access to the full range of supports to workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis, including proper protective equipment, and other key services, such as emergency child care and housing, that enable them to go to work without putting their families at risk.
- To collect comprehensive data on COVID-19 infection and domestic violence to understand the full impact for policy making and relief and recovery planning, including good practices, lessons learned amongst others.

**For the Ministry of Social Development**

- To ensure the effective implementation of the Cabinet's decision issued on 28 April 2020 regarding the referral of women victims and survivors of violence during the COVID-19 emergency state. This could be achieved through developing a multi-sectoral coordination plan with other stakeholders, notably the Ministry of Health and the Family and Juvenile Protection Units.
- To ensure gender perspectives in the Ministry's relief and humanitarian plans during and in the aftermath of the emergency state. This includes taking into consideration the compounded impact of emergency state and gender-based violence on women victims and survivors of violence.

**For the Ministry of Women's Affairs**

- To lead the revision of the National Referral System, to include a special section on VAW referral pathway during emergency. Learning from the experience of other countries, such as Jordan is a good entry point. In Jordan, the National Referral System has been revisited to include referral pathway during the emergency state.
- To advocate with the government on the need to ensure gender perspectives into the government's emergency plan. The government's emergency plan should be based on a deep understanding of the complexities associated with Gender Based Violence during emergency, and as such the needs of women victims and survivors of violence.

**For the CSOs**

- To explore opportunities for partnering with volunteers with the required competencies, and within a professional working platform that ensures confidentiality and privacy of cases, to address the psychological and legal needs of women at risks, particularly with the surge of calls to domestic violence helplines as demonstrated in the findings of the survey. This could alleviate the stress on the staff of CSOs.
- To launch an awareness campaign on the relation between the lockdown and domestic violence and call on neighbours and friends to take their role on detecting signs of abuse and providing a supportive environment for women at risk of domestic violence.

**For the international community**

- To set gender responsive targets and indicators for the humanitarian assistance during and in the aftermath of the emergency state. A criterion should be developed that takes into consideration the most disadvantaged groups of the community, including female-headed households, women with disability, women victims and survivors of violence amongst other vulnerable segments of women.
- To provide the required support to the governmental and CSOs service providers, to ensure they are able to continue providing the essential services. This could be achieved through supporting them in developing and using innovative tools, such as online tools to ensure women at risk have the support they need. In many cases, social workers and service providers lack equipment and tools, such as laptops, desks, printing equipment's, to efficiently work from home. Relief packages should include funding and technical capacity building to service providers to enhance their capacities to provide essential services.
- To enhance coordination and collaboration between the justice and security sectors service providers and CSOs to enable them to discuss issues of mutual concern, including challenges facing the work of service providers on VAW cases, complementarity entry points for better coordination, and plan better on ways to ensure that women have access to essential services. A dialogue between civil society and the government is essential during this time to ensure resources are mobilized efficiently.