



## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women and Girls in Palestine

### Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 pandemic continues to have implications on all aspects of life in Palestine. Ever since the government has declared the state of emergency on the 5th of March 2020, and the subsequent extraordinary measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic including, among others, lockdowns, movement restrictions among governorates, restrictions on movement of individuals and the closing of government institutions and commercial facilities, women have faced social, economic and political challenges that were compounded by COVID-19 related challenges. These measures, while indeed important, threatened the well-being of women and increased their vulnerability to domestic and family violence. Data provided by official, local, and international organizations indicated an increase in violence against women. This is due to lockdown measures, whereby women find themselves confined to their houses together with the perpetrator and unable to access basic services.

### Indicators of Gender Based Violence Against Palestinian Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A 2019 survey conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics indicated that 27% of women were subjected to at least one form of violence by their husbands. Around 17.8% endured physical violence, 56.6% psychological violence, and 8.8% sexual violence.

However, despite all the measures taken by the State of Palestine to eliminate violence against women and girls, including the endorsement of the national plan to combat violence against women, the adoption of the national referral system for women and girls victims of violence, the endorsement of gender-responsive budgeting and the development of case management protocols, yet, these measures were not sufficient in terms of deterring violence, providing protection and respecting women's integrity and dignity.

During the pandemic, national reports and mapping studies were conducted by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Social Development, to assess the impact of the pandemic on the prevalence of violence against women. The findings which were based on the cases received by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) and corresponded with data from the women's organizations, indicated that 80% of the surveyed women were subjected to all forms of violence. According to the findings, psychological violence was the highest 55%, while 27% of women were subjected to social violence, 47% of married women sought refuge with their families, and 24% of women were subjected to verbal abuse. Moreover, data indicated that 15% of women were subject to severe physical violence. Although this ranked the lowest compared to other percentages, yet, it is the most dangerous, because the perpetrator had rested assured that courts were closed, that movement restrictions were imposed, and that access to reporting centers was not possible. Furthermore, findings indicated that 21% of women victims attempted to commit suicide; and that 88% of women with disability had endured various forms of economic, social, physical, psychological, and verbal violence.

### Women's Access to the Essential Services during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- The Rapid Assessment on "COVID-19 and Domestic and Family Violence Services across Palestine" conducted in April 2020 by UN Women, indicated that violence against women during the lockdown, has increased because of their inability to leave their homes. It also confirmed that abused women were increasingly seeking help through hotlines, while justice and security sectors did not treat violence against women as a priority, and services provided to victims were not considered essential services during the state of emergency. Moreover, the Assessment indicated that 53% of service providers noted an increase in domestic violence, and that women who

were trapped with their abusers used to wait until they were home alone before seeking help. The civil society organization “Sawa” reported that between March and May 2020, they have received 78,326 calls from women who sought help, and that 82% of the calls were addressed by social counselors.

- The Assessment also indicated that the litigation process was halted during the first phase of the pandemic as gatherings were prohibited inside the court. While the Sharia Courts in the West Bank were entirely closed, yet the one in Gaza had issued a circular on specific instructions to allow the court to adjudicate urgent alimony and child custody cases. The Public Prosecution and the Police witnessed a decline in the number of domestic violence cases because women were not able to reach the police and public prosecution services. At the same time, civil society organizations found it difficult to reach out to women victims of violence, convene training workshops, offer support and face-to-face counselling, and transfer women to shelters affiliated with the Ministry of Social Development due to the restrictions on movement and the closure of such centers in the Gaza Strip. Accordingly, service providers offered help through telephone hotlines and virtual meetings.
- The Ministry of Social Development gave instructions to shelters not to receive any new cases, unless quarantined for 14 days. The imposed restrictions on movement and the lack of quarantine facilities in shelters that receive serious life-threatening cases of women, posed a challenge to service providers, such as the police, when referring abused women to shelters and forced them to instead place them in detention facilities and policewomen rooms to ensure their safety, until a solution was found. With such pressing needs, and as per the recommendation of the Ministry of Social Development and interventions by women organizations who run shelters, the Council of Ministers has endorsed the Ministry of Social Development’s recommendation to refer women victims of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic to shelters and ensure they can be quarantined as needed.
- Moreover, abused women found it difficult to access health care services after the Ministry of Health shifted its priorities and focused primarily on cases relevant to COVID-19. This had a negative impact on women’s access to health care services.

## Recommendations

- Consider justice, security, and protection services for women victims and survivors of violence as “essential services” during the state of emergency and strengthen coordination among the different service providers.
- Incorporate a gender perspective in the preparation of the ministries’ emergency and recovery plans, taking into consideration the complex impact on women victims and survivors of domestic or gender-based-violence.
- Take all measures by the Government to end gender-based violence in all aspects of life in the Palestinian society.
- Raise community awareness by the women’s and civil society organizations at the local and national levels and include the protection of women and girls with disabilities from violence in all their campaigns and programs aimed at eliminating violence against women.
- Raise awareness regarding the correlation between closures and the increase of violence against women including among service providers and provide a supportive environment for women victims of violence in the local communities

Disclaimer: This fact sheet was produced as part of the Action Plan of the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) and the National Women’s Coalition for the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Palestine. The fact sheet is based on a national report on violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic prepared by the GUPW and the CEDAW Coalition with support from UN Women.