



ARTICLE

## **How COVID-19 Affects Women in Libya**

By: Hala Bugaighis

Date: 09.04.2020

## Introduction

*“Peace is not just the absence of war. Many women under lockdown for #COVID19 face violence where they should be safest: in their own homes. Today I appeal for peace in homes around the world. I urge all governments to put women’s safety first as they respond to the pandemic.”*

By this statement, the [UN Secretary-General](#) highlighted last week the importance of developing response plans and policies to protect women who are subject to domestic violence during the lockdown period. This week, the European Parliament [Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality](#) issued a statement on stopping the rise of domestic violence during lockdown and urged all member states to provide victims with flexible tools to report abuse and violence protection facilities and shelters must be increased to tackle this issue during this time of crisis.

In Libya, the government responded to this threat, so budgets were allocated to support the health sector, all educational institutions were suspended, a curfew was imposed, and a package of strict measures was enacted to limit the spread of the virus. But similar to all governments in the MENA region, there was no gender component in the emergency response plans, and all the crisis committees and groups had very limited participation from women.

### **Domestic Violence and the Struggle for Support.**

COVID-19 responses have resulted in many social media users to use memes to share their impressions and feeling during this crisis. Many of those memes mention that the coronavirus works on the favor of women, as the epidemic appears to affect women less severely, many go further with assuming that women are happier as men spend long hours at home. But the reality is sometimes the absolute opposite. In the past few weeks, domestic violence incidents linked to the lockdowns have risen in Libya, with [three murders](#) reported in the cities of Tripoli, Baydaa and Mislata. Two victims were murdered by their husbands, one who claimed that the victim committed suicide, and found shelter in his family who were protected by an armed group, and the other claimed that he was possessed by an evil power who made him commit the crime, the third victim was a 10 years old child who was tortured and killed by her father and her step-mother. All of these crimes would have gone unnoticed if not for the effort of Feminist Page on Facebook that was demanding justice for the victims by campaigns and media outreach.

In Libya, the entire judicial system is suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, domestic violence victims never had access to any supporting services, mainly due to the cultural sensitivity of this topic, the weak legal framework and lack of law enforcement due to the ongoing armed conflict. All of these factors impeded the implementation of any meaningful program to assist victims of violence.

## The Economic Effect

Furthermore, the social norms in Libya force women to take the full burden of unpaid domestic work at home in addition to responsibilities of caring for their families. Women are usually working in so-called pink-collar jobs in Libya which are often paid less than men who work more in white-collar jobs. Women are also more likely than men to lose their job as the social norms in Libya only see -and accept- men as the breadwinners, therefore the cases where women are the sole breadwinner will be overlooked in times of crises. Consequently, COVID-19 falls harder on women who are most of the time earning less, or work as freelance or in a home-based business. In the last [report](#) issued by Jusoor Center for Studies and Development, the data showed that almost 90% of women's owned projects are in the informal sector, therefore, these women will be at risk of losing their financial resources, and the state will find itself unable to support such projects, which constitute a large part of poverty reduction, even in an informal way.

With the closure of schools and all educational institutions as one of the measures to hinder the spread of the coronavirus, education is already being set back. Broadcast lessons on television and turning to online solutions using social media groups and emails may have negative impact access for girls, especially those from the vulnerable groups like IDPs either in centers or with relatives and family and also the girls who live in poor households. In addition, this will be challenging for girls with disabilities, whom may struggle with this format.

## Actions to protect women and girls during the COVID-19 crisis

It's undebatable that If the COVID-19 crisis response is gender insensitive, we will risk leaving thousands of women and girls in Libya at danger. The ongoing armed conflict and political division are complicating the situation for women and here I try to propose a few solutions that may tackle these issues:

**Decision making:** We urge [NCDC](#), WHO and other national and international partners to ensure that women have to be in the heart of all response teams and committees to ensure that gender perspective is taken in consideration in all response plans.

**Raise Awareness:** The Libyan civil society organisations need to unite their efforts and voices to highlight the suffering women facing and to demand the inclusion of women in all emergency plans. I need to stress here that women here are Libyans in their households, displaced women in alternative homes or shelters and migrants and refugees' women in detention centers. Borders, races and nationality mean nothing when humanity is at risk.

**Tracking and Reporting Mechanism:** Another challenge is monitoring and tracking of cases. Due to the social and cultural sensitivity, the data is difficult to collect and to compare, especially in conflict times. We hope that the hotline launched by Ministry of Social Affairs and UNFPA for the [psychosocial support](#) will dedicate campaigns to encourage women and girls to use the hotline, as this will assist in tracking the cases and will enable different stakeholders to understand the size and type of the issues facing women and girls during COVID-19 to be able to tackle it.



**Employment and Business Measures:** The Ministry of Economy and Governments must commit to protecting women and dedicate measures of financial aid to protect them from the economic needs and for being tied to abusive relationships. Jusoor center is preparing a set of measures to protect vulnerable groups from the economic crisis and we will need the support from all stakeholders to implement these measures.

In light of the above, all these suggestion needs to be assessed based on the existing services and the reality on the ground. Are psychological support services over the phone enough to support women and girls subject to domestic violence? Do all victims have phones to use in psychological support sessions? What about Internet service, is it available for all of them? Are women able to find privacy to interact with the psychological specialist? Are these solutions inclusive of vulnerable groups in the country? There are no easy solutions but efforts have to be made to ease the suffering of women during these critical times.