



Pamphlet

Jerusalem Center for Women

The Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on gender-based violence within the Palestinian society and its relatedness to the ongoing crisis of the occupation

July 28, 2020

– This Publication has been produced with the assistance of the Government of Canada. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Canada. –

Introduction

The Secretary-General António Guterres of the United Nations called on April 5th for a global ceasefire to end all forms of violence and combat jointly the COVID-19 pandemic. He was pointing out that “violence is not confined to the battlefield. For many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes”.¹ COVID-19 represents a global challenge that makes shortcomings in social, political and economic systems visible and deepens pre-existing inequalities.² Across all the spheres, from economy to health to social protection, “the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex”.³ Within the Palestinian context, all these impacts are further amplified as social cohesion and institutional capacity are already undermined by the ongoing occupation, political fragility and recurring conflict outbreaks. In this pamphlet, we address structural, physical and psychosocial violence that result from gender-based inequalities and differences in power, privileges and opportunities. Thereby, we address the intersection of the COVID-19 crisis, patriarchal violence against women and Israeli occupying policies.

The Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW) is a non-profit organization that aims at empowering women, in providing resources for them, to become resilient change makers in their families, communities and the Palestinian society at large. We conducted interviews with Palestinian women who are affiliated with the JCW and who are working in the field with women, especially in marginalized communities, where they experience the gendered impacts of the pandemic. The pamphlet aims to share their expertise and experiences in order to shed light on gender-based violence. Geographically, we focused in our analysis on the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), whereas all the interviewees currently live in the West Bank. To conclude, the JCW’s legal advocacy project from women to women will be presented.

Current COVID-19 situation in Palestine

In the second half of June 2020, the total number of people with COVID-19 quadrupled in the oPt with 2765 confirmed cases, 625 of them recovered and 11 deaths, as of June 30th. The epicenter of the current outbreak is Hebron with 78% of the new cases, followed by Bethlehem, Nablus and the Jerusalem governorates.⁴ Already on March 5th, the state of emergency was declared for the first time by President Mahmoud Abbas, six days before the WHO classified the respiratory viral infection COVID-19 a global pandemic. On July 5th the President issued a presidential decree on declaring the state of emergency for the third time and due to the recent increase, the PA re-imposed severe movement restrictions and temporal lockdowns in the most affected areas.

¹ United Nations. (2020, April 6). UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horrifying global surge.’ UN News. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>.

² United Nations. (2020, April 9). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ OCHA Occupied Palestinian Territory. (2020, July 1). COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 12 (17-30 June 2020). https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/sitrep_12.pdf.

Ongoing occupation-related repressive practices

In Palestine, the global COVID-19 crisis adds up to the ongoing crisis of Israeli occupation and the occupation-related policies and practices continued and even increased throughout the pandemic. This includes: an escalation of home demolitions, continued detention in overcrowded prisons also of Palestinian women and children, night raids, settler attacks on Palestinians and their property, prevention of access to farmland, destruction of crops through aerial chemical sprayings, obstacles for medical referrals, pollution of drinking water in the Gaza Strip and other environmental violations.⁵ For instance, from March 5th until July 13th, OCHA reports the demolition of 251 Palestinian owned structures, displacing 212 people of which 115 are women or girls.⁶ Further, in the time period from March 1st to April 3rd, 100 homes in the West Bank were raided by Israeli Security Forces (ISF), 16 minors were arrested during night raids, 46 violent attacks occurred by Israeli settlers, 97% of Gaza's water resources has been undrinkable and the number of medical permits issued to Gazans for vital medical services in Israel or the West Bank has decreased by 85%.⁷ The political threat of an impending annexation announced by the government of Israel adds up to these gross violations of international humanitarian law and is part of this ongoing colonial project.⁸

Structural violence

In the case of Palestine, the COVID-19 crisis adds up to the Israeli occupation and patriarchal structures that already harm Palestinians, especially women, through preventing them from meeting their basic human needs. Structural violence and injustice result from a deterioration of the economic situation, confinement through the closure of borders and checkpoints and deficiencies in the health sector. In the words of an interviewee having more than twenty years of experience in local and international development organizations:

“The outbreak of COVID-19 just increased these things on the ground, they have been on the ground since the occupation started and the COVID just added to the factors that escalate these kinds of violence with the close-down and the impact on the economic situation” (Interview 1, 4:03)

The Palestinian economy is choked by the occupation as it does not have full sovereignty over its borders and economic and natural resources and therefore it is restricted in its development and investment capacities. Since March, domestic economic activities and external trade across the oPt has been drastically reduced. According to a public opinion poll from mid-June, 61% of Palestinians in the oPt stopped to receive their income or salary.⁹ And the economic situation is further deteriorating: According to the World Bank's forecast, the Palestinian economy will shrink by at least 7,6% in 2020 based on a gradual recovery from the

⁵ The Civic and Women Coalition for the Implementation of CEDAW in the Occupied State of Palestine. (2020, June 29). Report on the Violence against Women and girls during COVID-19 in the State of Palestine.

⁶ OCHA. (2020, July 15). Breakdown of Data on Demolition and Displacement.

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMmJkZGRhYWQtODk0MS00MWJkLW12NTktMDg1NGJlMGNiY2Y3IiwidCI6IjBmOWUzNWRiLTU0NGYtNGY2MCIiZG9jLTV1YTQxNmU2ZGM3MCIiImMiOjhh9.>

⁷ WCLAC. (2020, May 19). Women and Covid-19. Israeli Violations of International Humanitarian Law.

<http://www.wclac.org/files/library/20/05/uwvvdhhrw9yfghezoya6e.pdf>.

⁸ State of Palestine, Palestinian Liberation Organization, Negotiations Affairs Department. (2020, June 30). Looming Annexation: Israel's Denial of Palestine's Right to Exist. <https://www.nad.ps/sites/default/files/06302020.pdf>.

⁹ Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Ramallah. (2020, June 23). Public Opinion Poll No (76) Press-Release, 17-20 June 2020. <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/811>.

containment and up to 11% in the case of a slower recovery or further restrictions. As the World Bank Country Director for the West Bank and Gaza emphasizes: “[S]everal years of declining donor support and the limited economic instruments available have turned the ability of the government to protect livelihoods into a monumental task”.¹⁰

Women were affected to the greatest degree by the economic crisis as they already “earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs [and] are more likely to be employed in the informal sector”.¹¹ A flash survey of UN Women showed that a 25% of Palestinian women are working in the private sector without a contract or any protection.¹² This increased the chances for women to lose their jobs without any access to labor rights. Likewise, during the first COVID-19 outbreak in the oPt, female employees working in the public sector were the first ones to be “relieved” from their professional duties in order to care for their children. This reveals social expectations towards women to be the caregivers of the family and it puts pressure on them to submit to this societal role in times of emergency.

Men also experienced a major change in the working sector. As for April, around 133.000 Palestinians were working inside Israel and in Israeli settlements, of which one thousand were women.¹³ Usually men employed in Israel return to their families only once a month but in the peak of the COVID-19 measures, most of them chose or were forced to stay at home for several months. This is either due to the closure of checkpoints or through increasingly bad working conditions without any COVID-19 precautions for Palestinians in Israel. As we’ll explain later this situation lead to a spike of gender-based violence within families.

Under the occupation and COVID-19, the Palestinian society faces a “double lockdown” as already in every day live, “they live under occupation or blockade and are subjected to violations of rights and inequalities at the hands of the Israeli occupying power”.¹⁴ The closure of Israeli military barriers and checkpoints led to the loss of income for many families. On top of that, the freedom of movement was largely impacted as Jordan and Egypt closed the borders for Palestinians to return home. Many Palestinians are therefore still stuck abroad and are struggling with their financial, residential and employment situation. The Bring Us Back Home denounces the PA’s inaction to repatriate Palestinians and organized protests in Ramallah to shed a light on the precarious situation of not having an own airport and not being prioritized by the relevant authorities.¹⁵

¹⁰ World Bank Group. (2020, June 01). Palestinian Economy Struggles as Coronavirus Inflicts Losses – World Bank Press Release. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/palestinian-economy-struggles-as-coronavirus-inflicts-losses-world-bank-press-release/>

¹¹ United Nations. (2020, April 9). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>.

¹² UN Women. (2020, April 30). COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming - Findings of a Rapid Gender Analysis of COVID-19 in Palestine (April 2020). <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20palestine/attachments/publications/2020/4/covid%2019%20-%20un%20women%20rapid%20gender%20analysis.pdf?la=en&vs=4626>.

¹³ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). (2020, April 30). On the occasion of the International Workers' Day, H.E. Dr. Ola Awad, President of PCBS, presents the current status of the Palestinian labour force. <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3730>.

¹⁴ Siniora, R. (2020). Violence against Women and COVID-19 in Palestine. In S. Erakat & M. Raheb (Eds.), *The Double Lockdown: Palestine under Occupation and COVID-19* (pp. 67–77). essay, Diyar.

¹⁵ Abu Shukhaidem, H. (2020, June 16). Coronavirus: Palestinians stranded abroad turn fury on PA authorities. Retrieved from <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-palestine-protest-stranded-abroad-palestinian-authority>

Another major problem is that the Palestinian health sector is largely dependent on humanitarian and development aid from donor countries. The US had been the largest donor to UNRWA since 1950 which was completely stopped in 2019 with the USAID cut. This has until today dramatic repercussions as almost 90% of healthcare is covered by UNRWA and the agency is struggling with upholding its services.¹⁶ Restrictions on imports of medical supplies, controlled by the occupying force, impose an additional burden on the already fragile health sector. These structural deficiencies decreased the ability of the Palestinian society to combat the spread of COVID-19. The increased financial burdens of the health care system go hand in hand with the increase of poverty, disadvantaging those who are already in a precarious situation. In the wake of the pandemic, the Palestinian government allocated an emergency budget to the health and security sectors. However, it did not sufficiently prioritize women and girl's affairs in the emergency plans who unduly paid the price of combatting COVID-19 and who represent 70% of frontline health workers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with the consequence of a greater exposure to COVID-19.¹⁷

Gender inequalities and gender-based violence are a structural problem which was already alarming before the pandemic. On the institutional level, these issues had been always pushed aside as secondary concerns, emphasizing the need of the greater Palestinian cause of self-determination, sovereignty and control over resources.¹⁸ The dramatic results of the ignorance of social issues become evident in the COVID-19 crisis, through ongoing violations of women's rights and the increase of the number of Palestinians living in precarity. As Nivine Sandouka, an NGO worker and women's rights activist from Beit Hanina explains:

“The PA is in a very sensitive place right now that usually issues around women's rights and gender equity and equality are kind of put to the side because you don't want to increase more anger amongst your society or your people (...) its seems that whenever there is a political issue, now the annexation, before that the Corona, before that I don't know what, these things are put on the side (...) and usually it's the women paying the prices” (Interview 4, 25:25)

Physical violence

Structural and physical violence are highly interdependent as the Palestinian Minister of Women's Affairs Amal Hamad approves:

“As a result of the economic conditions, of losing jobs and with the current state of anxiety, there is deterioration in the economic situation of women, and this is leading to economic violence in the home and is resulting in higher rates of domestic violence. Especially right now we cannot separate between economic violence and social violence.”¹⁹

Palestinian women's organizations convened by UN women were reporting an increase in household tensions and incidences of gender-based violence which is also referred to as the “shadow pandemic”.

¹⁶ Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) . (2019, February). Termination of US Aid to Palestine: Economic and Social Repercussions and Ways Forward . <https://www.mas.ps/files/server/20191803101233-1.pdf>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ UN Women. (2020, April 30). COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming - Findings of a Rapid Gender Analysis of COVID-19 in Palestine (April 2020). <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20palestine/attachments/publications/2020/4/covid%2019%20-%20un%20women%20rapid%20gender%20analysis.pdf?la=en&vs=4626>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Organizations such as SAWA²⁰, WCLAC²¹, PSCCW²², PWWSD²³ are providing counselling services to women survivors of political and domestic violence with 24-hour emergency helplines or online-consultation services. The highest number of consultations per week recorded WCLAC on April 16th to 22nd with 100 new cases, 8 of them were either out of physical violence or the threat of life.²⁴ Also, the PWWSD reported more than 510 calls, 206 in relation to gender-based violence in only two weeks (22.3.-4.4.2020).²⁵ The unrecognized cases might be very high as many women don't have the opportunity, safety or technical supplies to report violence.

The lockdown measures created new burdens for women survivors to contact the police or help organization: Most women feel uncomfortable in sharing their feelings or discussing their domestic situation if children, husbands or other family members are all day around them. Some of the women also noted that they had no access to phones without their husbands or children and therefore hotlines, awareness videos or social media groups are not available for them and the violence happening in the households remained unrevealed in the shadows²⁶: “You are staying with the person who is using violence against you (...) 24 hours a day” (Interview 4, 35:00). There are similarities between lockdown measures and the tactics used by abusers on women and often victims of domestic abuse were trapped under the same roof as their abusers “while lockdown measures have bolstered their abuser's ability to control them”.²⁷ Through the double lockdown, women's safe spaces in their own homes have been decreased or even erased.

Currently there are five shelters offering anti-violence services for women survivors: Mehwar Centre, Nablus Safe Home, the Jericho shelter in the West Bank and the Hayat Centre and Aman Centre in Gaza.²⁸ Intervention measures are usually coordinated between Women's Rights Organizations and the Ministry of Social Development. The latter instructed that, with the rise of COVID-19 cases, new cases could only be admitted if they were subjected to 14 days quarantine. The centers were not equipped with the necessary facilities which then complicated any intervention. Moreover, access to legal support has been very limited, especially from the time period of the first announcement of the state of emergency until May 10th. The closure of all sharia, ecclesiastical and state courts resulted in impunity for the aggressors who were often also

²⁰ <http://sawa.ps/?lang=en>

²¹ Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling: <https://www.wclac.org/>

²² Psycho-social Counselling Center for Women: <http://www.pscw.org/eng/>

²³ Palestinian Working Women Society for Development: [https://pwwsd.org/en; their total Analysis Report of the home quarantine period between March 22 and May 21, 2020](https://pwwsd.org/en;their%20total%20Analysis%20Report%20of%20the%20home%20quarantine%20period%20between%20March%2022%20and%20May%2021,%202020) is available here: <https://pwwsd.org/uploads/15930829742134507294.pdf>

²⁴ WCLAC. (2020, July 8). COVID-19 and Women's rights in Palestine WCLAC Gender Assessment Report March 5th – May 31st. <http://www.wclac.org/files/library/20/07/aoazpvqscgipswyhc3fqr.pdf>.

²⁵ PWWSD. (2020, April 5). The Palestinian Working Woman Society for development Progress Update: COVID-19 Emergency Situation 22 March – 4 April 2020. <https://pwwsd.org/uploads/15861970731104770065.pdf>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Siniora, R. (2020). Violence against Women and COVID-19 in Palestine. In S. Erakat & M. Raheb (Eds.), *The Double Lockdown: Palestine under Occupation and COVID-19* (pp. 67–77). essay, Diyar.

²⁸ UN Women. (2018). Assessment of the Services of Anti-Violence Centres and Shelters In Palestine. <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20palestine/attachments/publications/2018/12/unwgsopalcpalsheltersassessmentv8final.pdf?la=en&vs=423>.

not detained from the Police Protection Union as violence against women and girls were often not considered as “urgent violence cases”.²⁹

Especially in Palestinian impoverished and marginalized communities, in Gaza, Area C or refugee camps, the chronic exposure to collective violence and economic insecurity lay the ground for a high risk of gender-based violence. It is important to note that protection mechanisms vary greatly between different areas which is elaborated in the PCC’s report:

“[I]n Jerusalem areas under the jurisdiction of the Jerusalem municipality, NGOs and neighborhood committees provide the protection, while in areas that are under the control of the Palestinian Authority, residents mainly resort to the police in cases of violence. Additionally, clans and popular committees play a major role in providing protection in areas such as Qalandia and At-Tur. In areas such as Beita and Kafr ’Aqab, which lack protection mechanisms, this is a priority area of work in the light of the increase in the cases of violence and abuse resulting from psychological and economical stressors.”³⁰

Laila Atshan, a psychosocial consultant from Ramallah working recently for UNICEF approves that physical violence is especially dramatic in grey zones such as the neighborhoods that are considered part of the Jerusalem municipality but that are located on the other side of the Wall:

“The worse the confinement, [the greater] the chances for violence (...) this means the gender hierarchy, men over women, can become even worse (...) like [for] Palestinians living very near the wall, for example in Kafr ’Aqab, the area where there is no authority and there isn’t shame of the community because they come from different areas and it’s a crowded area. There are so many factors and Israelis did not allow Palestinians to intervene (...) on a daily basis there is shooting, there is violence of all kinds (...) in theory the women carry a Jerusalem ID but in fact they are not really protected by the law” (Interview 3, 13:38)

Another interviewee, Khawla Al-Azraq, working as the Executive Director of the Psycho-Social Counselling Center for Women (PSCCW) calls attention to the missing protection mechanisms in Area C to combat physical violence. More than 100 Palestinian communities are living here under full control of the Israeli occupation and under the constant threat of home demolition orders. With Abbas’ announcement of voiding all security agreements with Israel and the US in response to the imminent threat of Israeli annexation³¹, the intervention of the executive forces of the PA is now completely impeded. Therefore, civil society organizations and community activists are left alone with interventions in families and anti-violence services:

“We go there and we do very hard negotiations with the expanded families (...) to take the women to her parent’s house [for instance] but it’s very complicated (...) Now we are stuck with a case in Area C, she is pregnant and she left two daughters with the father, he is very aggressive and also his mother is very aggressive (...) he threatened all the time that he would kill her.” (Interview 5, 27:13)

In East Jerusalem this harmful protection gap mainly results from the unwillingness to collaborate with the occupying forces and the lack of knowledge of women’s rights organizations as Nivine Sandouka emphasizes:

²⁹ The Civic and Women Coalition for the Implementation of CEDAW in the Occupied State of Palestine. (2020, June 29). Report on the Violence against Women and girls during COVID-19 in the State of Palestine.

³⁰ Palestinian Counseling Center. (2020, May). A rapid assessment of the needs of 14 marginalized areas in the West Bank during the COVID-19 epidemic. https://www.pcc-jer.org/sites/default/files/publication/needs_assessment_english_final.pdf.

³¹ MEMO Middle East Monitor. (2020, May 20). Palestine president ends ‘all agreements’ with Israel, US. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200520-palestine-president-ends-all-agreements-with-israel-us/>.

“In East Jerusalem specifically if you as a woman apply to the Israeli police you are viewed as a collaborator you are viewed as a bad person who wants to destroy your family” (Interview 4, 31:59)

The high rates of physical violence in the Palestinian society must be considered in the light of the Israeli policies. Patriarchal norms reinforce the divide between generations and genders and are part of the divide-and-rule strategy of the Israeli military occupation. Therefore, the more Palestinian men suffer under the daily humiliation of the occupying forces, “the more they are prone to vent their anger and feelings of helplessness and inferiority on women”³². Laila Atshan analyses: “There is so much repressed anger, which unfortunately women wind up taking the biggest portion of again” (Interview 3, 6:01).

Psychosocial violence

For women in any socioeconomic sphere, the policy of lockdown has increased psychosocial pressure which is mainly related to the economic situation, the education of their children and their husband’s constant presence at home. A public opinion poll in April 2020 showed the increased domestic burdens for women: 68% of women report a significant increase in household duties, compared to 44% of men. 51.5% of women report a significant increase in childcare, while 30% of men report the same.³³ The impoverishing and absence of social protection against the COVID-19 crisis exercised immense psychological pressure on women, especially for single-mothers, as one interviewee narrates:

“We have been seeing situations where mothers are the main caretaker of the family (...) after two months of being locked down at home she just didn’t have enough money to feed her kids so she decided to feed her kids and starve for three (...) days (...) because she couldn’t afford eating and feeding the kids” (Interview 1, 7:31)

She connects this with the social expectations that mothers are facing:

“They always expect the mothers to be the caretaker of the family in terms of psychological, emotional attitude, raising the kids, absorbing also the pressure on the father. This is the kind of perception (...) in the Palestinian society on the mothers at majority.” (Interview 1, 9:21)

Through the closing of schools, which was the first measure taken by the PA, women have been burdened with increased childcare. Private schools and universities implemented remote-learning approaches, but this was mostly not the case for public schools attended by a large part of the population. E-learning measures caused caregivers, mostly mothers to carry the responsibility to follow up with their children and become the “new learning support providers”.³⁴ For those children without E-learning measures, women had to replace the school system and cope with their children’s boredom in case of restricted or non-existent access to resources and tools necessary for remote learning. Many children living in remote areas could not reach their schools for months as public transport was shut down and the infrastructure has already been weak in marginalized

³² p. 233: Ibid.

³³ AWRAD. (2020, May 18). Coping with COVID-19 Pandemic: Impacts and Coping Strategies among Palestinians. <http://www.awrad.org/en/article/10707/Coping-with-COVID-19-Pandemic-Impacts-and-Coping-Strategies-among-Palestinians>.

³⁴ UN Women. (2020, April 30). COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming - Findings of a Rapid Gender Analysis of COVID-19 in Palestine (April 2020). <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20palestine/attachments/publications/2020/4/covid%2019%20-%20un%20women%20rapid%20gender%20analysis.pdf?la=en&vs=4626>.

communities due to decades of colonization. Therefore, mothers had to remedy the restrictions imposed on the education system.

For families in which the man is working in Israel, the lockdown brought major changes in their living conditions. Husbands who are usually rarely at home, suddenly stayed with their family in the same house for several months. As Laila Atshan explains, a lot of repressed anger came to the surface which is related to economic precarity and unfulfilled social expectations:

“Men and often the working class men assume a rigid role (...) we cannot generalize absolutely but in general their role and their value is perceived to be the breadwinners and if they cannot do that, there is the feeling of helplessness and there is the condition to express frustration different than women” (Interview 3, 3:44)

One interviewee who is working with Bedouin communities in Area C reported a tremendous increase in verbal and physical violence: “It was a disaster for wives that the husband is all day with the children” (Interview 2, 5:05). Often the husband had no close relationship with his wife and children which applies also for many husbands working in the oPt leaving for work at dawn and returning home only to eat and sleep. Through the lack of safe spaces, women often reported an “internalized powerlessness” (Interview 3, 5:05) and often were not able to seek help:

“Women are conditioned to generally take responsibility to be multi-taskers and accept at times in such contexts abuse or violence, part of it is (...) to reserve the family, part of it is lack of alternatives in terms of no welfare (...) absence of (...) employment (...) traditionalism, lack of education and poverty and lack of space” (Interview 3, 4:08)

Justice and Advocacy projects from Women to Women

The Jerusalem Center for Women’s belief is that women can play a central role in the survival and resilience of families and communities as, in the words of the Minister of Women’s Affairs Amal Hamad, “in a time of such major crisis, we need to constantly keep prioritizing women’s and gender issues”³⁵. Thus, in this emergency situation, it is crucial to adapt a gender lens when approaching the combat of the COVID-19 crisis and gender-based violence.

As an example of the JCW’s efforts to prioritize women’s rights, we want to present the project on “Empowering women in East Jerusalem and increasing access to justice through legal education”. It is realized together with the Shorouq Charitable Society for Women from Al-Azariya³⁶ and the Silwan Cultural and Athletic Club³⁷, with the funding of the Canadian Feminist Fund. The project started at the end of 2019 with in-person workshops in local communities. The intensive trainings are led by two gender and women’s rights experts who teach women about the national, international, sharia and ecclesiastical judicial system in

³⁵ UN Women. (2020, April 30). COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming - Findings of a Rapid Gender Analysis of COVID-19 in Palestine (April 2020). <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20palestine/attachments/publications/2020/4/covid%2019%20-%20un%20women%20rapid%20gender%20analysis.pdf?la=en&vs=4626>.

³⁶ <https://shorouqsociety.org/>

³⁷ <https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/members/silwan-cultural-and-athletic-club>

regard to women's rights and how they can use law as a tool to protect themselves and other women in their communities from gender-based violence. Thereby, women can receive paralegal skills and a certificate from JCW that qualifies them as community paralegals and other woman can advance them in order to seek legal advice. Additionally, the participants are trained in advocacy skills in order to be empowered to become agents of change within their own families and communities by understanding gender, its construction, effects and causes, especially within ongoing military and armed conflicts. So far, four workshops à four sessions were implemented with 15-20 women in different neighborhoods in East Jerusalem.

The approaching pandemic at the beginning of 2020 challenged our approach and abrupt solutions had to be found to meet the community's needs. The workshops were switched to Zoom meetings, reaching the women inside their own homes. Additionally, budget which was initially intended for travel expenses and accommodation was re-allocated for need-based projects: Firstly, medical kits were distributed for participants of the workshops and their families and secondly, psychosocial counselling sessions were conducted with high school girls from Abu Dis and Al-Azariya with the aim of helping them with stress management during the lockdown.

These ad hoc projects offer new chances to connect women and girls from their own homes and offer a virtual safe space to connect with peers, share concerns and experiences and empower each other. Women are the ones most severely hit by the COVID-19 crisis and only through their empowerment, can the Palestinian society recover, become more equal and therefore more resilient for future crises. Since "we must not only survive the coronavirus but emerge renewed with women as a powerful force at the center of recovery."³⁸

³⁸ UN Women. (2020, April 6). Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>.