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New report from UN Women brings forth voices of Palestinian women under COVID-19 lockdown

UN Women (09.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fC5KLu> - "I always dreamed of taking a long holiday and spend it at home with myself, my children and my husband. Now the dream has turned into a nightmare," shares Rawan*, a Palestinian woman who works in the public sector in the West Bank. "I have more burden doing home chores, childcare, teaching... while ensuring that my husband who is doing work from home [has] a quiet space to do that."

Early into the COVID-19 crisis, UN Women, in partnership with Arab World for Research and Development, conducted in-depth interviews with Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza for a new [study](#) that sheds new light on the situation and needs of Palestinian women and girls. More than 30 women-led organizations and woman leaders in the area participated in surveys and meetings that gathered data about women's experiences.

In an effort to curb the spread of the new coronavirus in Palestine, a state of emergency was declared in March, followed by lockdown measures across the West Bank and Gaza. Initially, only female employees with children working in the public sector were relieved of their professional duties to care for their children, reinforcing gender stereotypes that expect women to be caregivers and men to be breadwinners. Later, even when all non-essential government employees were asked to stay home, the burden of domestic work and childcare remained with women.

"We must take care of our own homes and take care of the hygiene measures. My husband is under quarantine in our house and I have moved with my kids to a neighbour's house. I take care of all the responsibilities, the children, the cleaning, budget management, and checking in on my husband's needs," explains Asma* from the West Bank, another respondent to the UN Women survey.

According to the study, 68 per cent of Palestinian women have reported increased unpaid care work since COVID-19 confinement measures took effect.

The situation is even more stressful for women who are expected to work from home, because they are expected to simultaneously take care of their children and housework. When both male and female partners in a household are working remotely, men's paid work is prioritized more than that of women.

Thirty-eight-year-old Um Ahmad, a mother of three, from Nablus, is also feeling the stress: "I must now care for all aspects of my children's welfare. With the introduction of e-learning, I am the only one who is really following up with the children to do their schoolwork. They are confined and stressed, and I must deal with that, but I am also stressed!" Um Ahmad wants psycho-social support for families as they struggle to cope with the new normal that COVID-19 has ushered in.

"While it is nice to have the family together, my husband [has] nothing to do. He is bored and... Boredom is making him edgy and prone to violence," shared Heba* from the West Bank, signalling the rising threat of domestic violence—the shadow pandemic—that women around the world are facing during COVID-19.

The Palestinian Working Women Society reported more than 510 calls for support, including from victims of domestic violence between 22 March and 4 April. SAWA, another women's organization, has reported 3 cases of suicide attempts due to sexual abuse, incest, harassment and attempted rape within a period of one week (9 - 16 April). And these are just the ones that have been reported – reporting of domestic violence is usually lower than the actual rate of incidents, and in times of crisis, many women may not have the opportunity or safety to report violence.

The lockdown measures that are necessary to contain the spread of the virus have created new barriers for women survivors seeking vital services. The restrictions on movement has also normalized the prevalent patriarchal notion that, "a woman's place is at home".

Economically, the crisis is expected to hit women's livelihood harder, since most women work in the informal sector and small businesses. A survey conducted by Arab World for Research and Development showed that 76 per cent of women had lost their income (compared to 65 per cent men). According to a flash survey by UN Women, 95 per cent of women owners of micro, small and medium enterprises said their work had already been impacted by COVID-19. Furthermore, the report found that almost 25 per cent of Palestinian women working in the private sector have no contract or pay protection.

Amal Hamad, Palestinian Minister of Women's Affairs stresses that economic violence and domestic violence are intrinsically linked under present circumstances. "As a result of the economic conditions, loss of 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 also higher rates of domestic violence."

To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Palestinians, UN Women's report makes a strong case for prioritizing gender considerations in the country's COVID-19 response plan.

"The pandemic is not showing us new problems; it is worsening known issues," says UN Women Special Representative for Palestine, Maryse Guimond. "We know that crises can worsen the economic, social and political situation of women and girls, deepening existing inequalities. But this can also be an opportunity to move forward and not go backward."

To emerge from this crisis with resilience, and to build back better, gender equality must take centre-stage in all aspects of recovery efforts—from ensuring that stimulus plans address the needs of both men and women equally to encouraging and promoting the role of men at home and in childcare as equal partners in the household. For more recommendations, read the full report.

Palestinian men take up cooking in quarantine

Forced to stay at home due to precautions against COVID-19, some Palestinian men are learning to cook for the first time in their lives.

By Sanaa Saida

Al-Monitor (20.04.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2xn3tDG> - Samar Titi laughs and says her husband, Hassan, has hardly ever stepped into their kitchen throughout 27 years of marriage, not even to pour himself a cup of tea.

One reason was that Hassan, a video journalist, was rarely home. The father of three would have coffee with his wife in the morning, then rush to work most days of the week.

But since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the Palestinian territories a month ago, Hassan, like most of his colleagues, is staying home. In April, the Palestinian government declared a state of emergency and shut down public places, including schools, universities and markets.

At home in Nablus in the West Bank, Hassan dabbled in the kitchen and prepared his first dish: msakhan, a Palestinian delicacy of chicken, onions, olive oil and bread.

"It was delicious," Samar said, explaining she had little to do with the preparations. Her husband had found the recipe online and didn't consult her.

Hassan said, "I was tired of doing nothing and picking up arguments with my wife because I was restless and on edge. I was surprised to discover that there are a lot of men cooking. At first, I felt shy cooking in front of my wife and daughters."

But once he discovered that he could, Hassan started working with Samar in the kitchen. Samar said she was "so happy" because the lockdown afforded her some time with her husband.

Then Dina, their youngest daughter, a student of marketing and human resources, filmed her father and posted the videos on Facebook.

"I saw my parents working together on one of our family's favorite dishes that we had not done before, as we did not have time," she said. "So I decided to record these special moments and share them with my friends. Cooking, baking sweets or coming up with healthy recipes is also a way of spending time together."

In the Gaza Strip, where the situation is more difficult because of the Israeli blockade, Mohammed al-Ramlawi and his wife Noor also cook together at home in Gaza City.

Mohammed also helps Noor clean the house — which is perhaps even more rare than a Palestinian man cooking, as men, in Palestinian society, typically do not help with domestic affairs.

Noor said the quarantine has changed the habits of some men, who are putting aside the mentality that real men do not do housework. But she admitted that her husband would rather cook than clean.

Mohammed said he had never helped in the house over six years of marriage because it was neither necessary nor requested. "Most of the time, I was working outside," he said. "When I came home in the evening, everything was done and ready."

Both the Ramlawis and the Titis have found a way to cooperate and help each other during these days of self-isolation. "There have been many reports of violence — both toward women and children — in quarantine in the Palestinian lands," Laila Abu Aisha, a family counselor from Gaza City, told Al-Monitor.

"Many men who are forced to stay home suffer from stress and frustration, particularly if they have lost their income," she said. "Fear, insecurity and stress negatively affect their psychology and they resort to violence — they abuse their wives and children."

She called on the Palestinian government to help alleviate Palestinians' financial difficulties and protect women who are victims of domestic violence.

Women's groups active in the Middle East have warned against a potential increase in domestic violence since the coronavirus outbreak, saying that tight-knit family structures and multigenerational living conditions in confined spaces could increase violence. Stressful situations often lead to physical abuse, which was high in Palestine even before the added stress of the coronavirus.

Though many women's groups have warned of increased domestic violence in the Middle East, no figures have been released since the start of the pandemic in the region.

Women in Palestine face violence and political exclusion, campaigner tells UN

First female Palestinian activist to address UN security council speaks out over political marginalisation and domestic abuse

By Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (26.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2OhyIHU> – Women are being shut out of Palestinian politics and excluded from peace talks, according to Randa Siniora, the first female Palestinian campaigner to address the UN security council.

Speaking at the UN on Thursday, she said that while women in the occupied territories often face the greatest violence, they are overlooked in the country's political and humanitarian responses.

"The Israeli occupation and the resulting humanitarian crisis are deeply gendered and exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Women disproportionately endure the violence of occupation borne by all Palestinians, and often with gender-specific consequences," said Siniora, general director of the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling in Palestine.

Palestinian women face attacks and discrimination by the Israeli military on a daily basis, she explained, adding that spikes in political violence lead to increased violence in the home.

"Domestic violence is shockingly high, and femicide is on the increase," Siniora told the UN security council's debate on women, peace and security. There is a lack of services and little access to justice for women who suffer such abuses.

UN statistics show that, despite international efforts, the representation of women in peace processes has either stalled or declined.

"The ones who do not wage war are being disqualified from making peace. Those who wage war are the preferred occupants for peace tables," said Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director of UN Women, who told the council that women are either vastly under-represented or completely excluded from peace talks and monitoring committees.

"Between 1990 and 2017, under our watch, women constituted only 2% of mediators, 8% of negotiators, and 5% of witnesses and signatories in major peace processes. Only three out of 11 agreements signed in 2017 contained provisions on gender equality, continuing last year's worrisome downward trend. Of 1,500 agreements signed between 2000 and 2016, only 25 raise the role of women's engagement in the implementation phase," she said.

In Yemen, said Mlambo-Ngcuka, current efforts to resume peace talks do not include women, beyond setting up observer bodies to advise the UN special envoy. "Even in a consultative meeting in London this summer organised by the UN, convening 22 prominent Yemeni leaders to discuss the peace talks, there were only three Yemeni women invited."

In Palestine, Siniora, who has documented human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territories for three decades, said women are excluded from key positions despite evidence that they have been critical to working across political divides, building grassroots support for peace, and providing essential expertise on human rights.

"Representation of women in key decision-making positions, including in Palestinian Authority institutions, is barely 5%," she said.

"Little space has been made to integrate Palestinian women's concerns into key political processes, including for achieving Palestinian statehood or for national reconciliation."

While international efforts to increase female representation are failing, the share of aid channeled through NGOs focused on women has also stalled, said Mlambo-Ngcuka.

In conflict settings, girls are one and a half times more likely to be out of primary school, and more vulnerable to child marriage. Maternal mortality rates are almost twice the global ratio in conflict and post-conflict countries.
