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## The Gendered Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic in Palestine

**Rabeh Morrar (Visiting Scholar)**

Research Fellow, Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS

**Rand Jibril Taweel**

Research Assistant, Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS

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## 1. Introduction and Background

There is a common yet false narrative that viral pandemics ‘do not discriminate’ on any basis.<sup>1</sup> The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic quickly proved that crises significantly exacerbate already existing inequalities, affecting vulnerable groups in the society more severely.<sup>2</sup> This is especially true for women who already struggle with systematic gender inequality in fundamental rights and responsibilities. As the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) emphasize, “[p]andemics and their resultant safety measures introduce an array of challenges that are uniquely the result of systemic gender inequalities and discrimination.”<sup>3</sup> Across every sphere, from physical and mental health to economic hardships, the impacts of COVID-19 are likely to severely increase the vulnerability of women, especially in the Least Developing Countries (LDCs).<sup>4</sup>

Emerging data has shown that women are more likely to contract the COVID-19 virus as they make-up the majority of healthcare workers



Labor and  
Employment



Palestine



2016



rabehmorrar@gmail.com

1. UNFPA. COVID-19: Reporting on Gender-Based Violence During Public Health Crises, 2020.

2. World Bank Group. Gender Dimensions of the COVID-19 Pandemic, April 2020.

3. *ibid.*

4. United Nations. Policy Briefs: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, April, 2020.

(up to 70%) and are typically the main caregivers in their family which increases their exposure levels.<sup>5</sup> Females are also more likely to reduce their food consumption levels in order to curb the impacts of economic shocks affecting the household, causing a rise in food insecurity levels amongst women.<sup>6</sup> Across the globe, women are also victims of large pay-gaps, are overrepresented in the part-time and informal labor sectors, and hold less secure jobs.<sup>7</sup> Hence, they make up a significant portion of the labor categories that are most likely to severely shrink during recession and less likely to have access to social protection.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, throughout history, studies have documented a rapid increase in gender based domestic violence levels during and as the aftermath of disasters.<sup>9</sup> In fact, reports from various countries in the MENA region (Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt) show that COVID-19 has caused a rapid rise in Gender Based Violence (GBV), severely affecting women's mental and physical wellbeing.<sup>10</sup>

To avoid negative or ineffective mechanisms in confronting the COVID-19 crisis it is important to fully understand the disproportionate gender impacts of the pandemic in Palestine. This is especially important given the unique set of challenges that Palestinian women have to struggle with in addition to the global gendered impacts of the outbreak.

Palestine is one of the most densely populated areas in the world—with Gaza being the most densely populated at 5,453 persons/km<sup>2</sup> living under total blockade since 2007— increasing the risk of COVID-19 exposure and spread.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Palestinians have been experiencing decades of economic hardship due to the Israeli military occupation which resulted in increased scarcity of land and resources, high rate of violence, violations of human rights and laws, and severe mobility restrictions. These challenges have left many Palestinian in a fragile state with minimal resources to curb or survive the severe

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5. WHO cited in UNFPA. COVID-19: Reporting on Gender-Based Violence During Public Health Crises, 2020.

6. "Evidence suggests that when faced with economic shocks, poor households adjust their consumption patterns. They mostly do so by eating less and eating poorer-quality Within the household it has been shown that **women** often end up absorbing such shocks". See: R. Holmes, N. Jones, and H. Marsden. 2009. Gender Vulnerabilities, Food Price Shocks and Social Protection Responses. Background Note. London: Overseas Development Institute.

7. United Nations. Policy Briefs: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, April, 2020.

8. UNFPA. COVID-19: Reporting on Gender-Based Violence During Public Health Crises, 2020.

9. See: Sera Gearhart, Maria Perez-Patron, Tracy Anne Hammond, Daniel W. Goldberg, Andrew Klein, and Jennifer A. Horney. Violence and Gender. Jun 2018.87-92.<http://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2017.0077>

10. UNFPA. COVID-19: Reporting on Gender-Based Violence During Public Health Crises, 2020.

11. PCBS, 2019. See:<http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3503#:~:text=The%20population%20density%20of%20Palestine,persons%2Fkm2%20in%20mid%202019.>

socio-economic impacts of COVID-19. The exacerbation in mobility restrictions, economic hardships, and border closures due to the lockdowns are likely to hit those who are the most vulnerable in the society.<sup>12</sup> The Women's Centre for Legal Aid Counseling (WCLAC) is especially warning of the severe impact of the pandemic on Palestinian women as it is likely to exacerbate the existing gender inequalities already reinforced by occupation.<sup>13</sup> Palestinian women, especially those living in Gaza, struggle on a daily basis with mobility restrictions and limited access to various essential resources such as adequate amounts of food, clean water, and electricity due to the occupation.<sup>14</sup> They also experience additional challenges to men in terms of difficulties in accessing healthcare, increased unpaid labor and responsibilities in providing care to family members, greater vulnerability in the labor market, and greater risk of economic hardships.<sup>15</sup> As the UN Women gender assessment report underlines, "[t]he Israeli-military occupation is inherently masculine and has further reinforced patriarchal norms in the Palestinian society while disproportionately impacting women."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, women are dealing with Israel's violations of humanitarian law, the patriarchal structures in Arab societies, high pre-existing levels of GBV, in addition to the outbreak of COVID-19.<sup>17</sup> Such struggles have been apparent and noted by many women organizations such as WCLAC, UN Women, CARE Palestine.<sup>18</sup>

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, there was an existing gap in labor participation between men and women (7 out of 10 of males participated in the labor force, compared with about 2 out of 10 of females).<sup>19</sup> This disparity is further compounded with a 40% gap in daily wages.<sup>20</sup> This discrimination is despite that fact that more Palestinian women (60% of the total number of students) are enrolled in higher education compared to men.<sup>21</sup> This

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<sup>12</sup> Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC). COVID-19 and Women's Rights in Palestine, June 2020

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> UN Women. COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Program. p.11, 2020

<sup>15</sup> WCLAC, 2020

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* Read more on the disproportionate effects of occupation: [https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Palestine-UPR\\_web-2-5.pdf](https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Palestine-UPR_web-2-5.pdf) & <http://www.el-karama.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Palestinian-Women-The-Disproportionate-Impact-of-the-Israeli-Occupation.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> WCLAC, p.3, 2020

<sup>18</sup> UN Women: Rapid Assessment on COVID-19 and Domestic and Family Violence Services Across Palestine, May, 2020

<sup>19</sup> PCBS. Labor Force Survey. 2019

<sup>20</sup> WCLAC, 2020; CARE Palestine, 2020; UN Women, 2020, Jazoor, 2020

<sup>21</sup> PCBS, 2020

gendered inequality decreases the capacity of women to absorb economic shocks induced by the pandemic as they are less secure and more limited financially than their counterparts.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. COVID-19 and Increased GVB in Palestine

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, GVB was prevalent in Palestine. Indeed, in the 2019 Violence Survey conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), **29% of currently or ever married women in Palestine (38% in Gaza, 24% in the West Bank)** had experienced some form of violence by their husbands in the last 12 months.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, **the survey found that 57% of currently or ever married women** had experienced psychological violence by their husband at least once in the past 12 months, making it the most common reported form of GBV in Palestine.<sup>24</sup>



**Data Source:** 2019 Violence Survey conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS)

The outbreak of the pandemic, however, has exacerbated the domestic

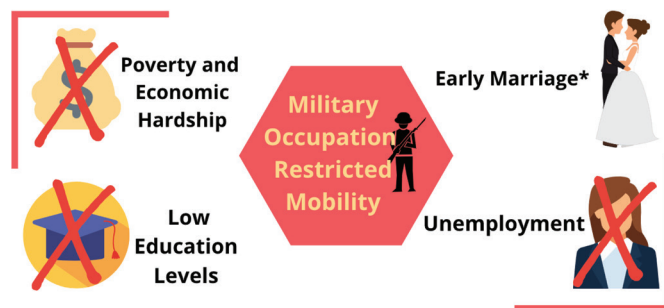
<sup>22</sup> United Nations. Policy Briefs: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, April, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> PCBS, 2019 Violence Survey, 2019

<sup>24</sup> PCBS, 2019 Violence Survey, 2019

violence levels that Palestinians women face on a daily basis.<sup>25</sup> Rapid gender assessment reports produced by local and international organizations emphasize the increase in GBV as women are in forced confinement with their abusers and are unable to access available resources due to the nation-wide lockdowns (ex. UN Women, 2020, CARE, 2020; Juzoor, 2020; WCLAC, 2020). The reallocation of the scarce resources and health services towards the COVID-19 relief projects have impeded the ability of women to access the limited GBV support systems, including safe spaces, shelters, medical, psychological, and reproductive services.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, WCLAC predicts that fear of being separated from one's children is more pronounced given the compounded fear for the children's health and safety during a pandemic, decreasing likelihood of taking any measures to remove themselves from the unsafe family homes to protect their children instead.<sup>27</sup>

## Factors Increasing Women's vulnerability to GBV



\*married women in the youngest age group (15-19 years old) are the most vulnerable to physical violence. Married women between the ages of 20 and 29 years old are more vulnerable to repeated physical violence.

UN women Palestine (2017):

*Navigating through Shattered Paths: NGO Service Providers and Women Survivors of Gender-Based Violence*

SAWA, a Palestinian organization that provides support and counseling to victims of violence, recorded a decrease in the first weeks of lockdown in the number of women calling their hotline while there was an increase in the number of young men reporting parental violence. This is because, as the report explains, mothers are bearing most of the domestic work and are burdened with their families being in lockdown, lacking the privacy and time to communicate or reach out to counseling and emergency hotlines.

<sup>25</sup>. UN WOMEN, 2020; CARE, 2020; Juzoor, 2020

<sup>26</sup>. Juzoor for Health and Social Development. Gender-Based Violence during COVID-19 Pandemic Palestine, May 2020, p.3

<sup>27</sup>. Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling. COVID-19 and Women's Rights in Palestine, June 2020

The higher number of calls from young might be explained by the rise in anxiety and stress related to the unknowns regarding the virus. In March 2020, there was little known about the virus, how it operates, and how it is going to impact education, health, employment, and social life. Given that more young males participate in the economy and have a social life (due to cultural life) it might have been harder for them to process the lockdown compared to young females.

According to the SAWA helpline reports, calls regarding abuse and violence, specifically domestic violence from partners, ***rose by 38% for Palestinian females in less than a month into lockdown.***<sup>28</sup> The ***total number of calls continued to surge with a 52% increase in calls in May compared to April and a 30% increase in the month of June compared to May.*** In the second week of April alone, ***the hotline received three cases of suicide attempts due to sexual abuse, harassment, incest, and rape attempts.***<sup>29</sup>



Once the hotline hours were extended, allowing women to access their resources 24/7, ***calls from women seeking support increased from 40% to 58% of the total number of calls.***<sup>30</sup> This rise is suggestive evidence that women are indeed bombarded with domestic work and lack the time and privacy to seek help. In fact, with the ease in restrictions in the month of June, calls ***from women above the age of 21, increased to 30% of the total cases documented. This is a 13% rise compared to the last two weeks of***

<sup>28</sup>. (SAWA, 2020). Moreover, "Similar to PWWSD and SAWA, WCLAC also created a hotline that allowed its Services and Community Empowerment Unit to continue to provide legal and social support during lockdowns. WCLAC also experienced a rise in the number of calls for the GBV helpline, especially in the first three weeks in April. *The majority of the concerns in the total number of calls received are related to the deprivation of social and economic rights*".

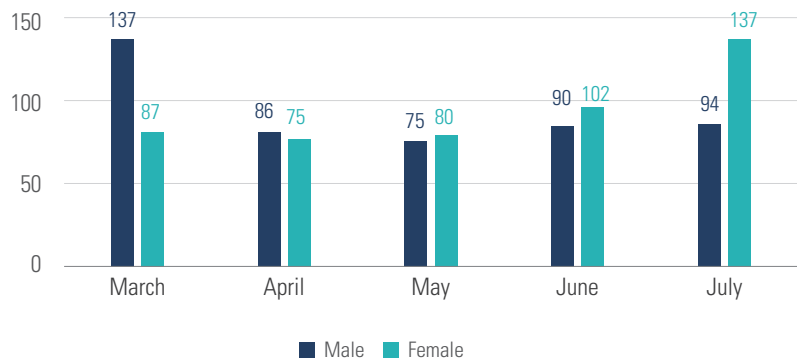
<sup>29</sup>. SAWA, 2020

<sup>30</sup>. SAWA, 2020

**May.** *Most of these cases were reports from married women from between the ages of 21-35.* Hence, it is likely that lockdowns have indeed impeded married women from seeking help given the 24/7 confinement with their partners. This increase in hotline calls recorded is not unique to SAWA. A recent report published by the Palestinian Working Woman Society for Development (PWWSD) indicated a total for **510 consultations in less than two weeks (March 22- 4 April 2020), 206 of which were directly related to GBV.**<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 1.**

**Domestic Abuse Calls by Gender During the COVID-19 pandemic**



Source: SAWA<sup>32</sup>

**31.** The Palestinian Working Woman Society for development. Progress Update: COVID-19 Emergency Situation, April 2020.

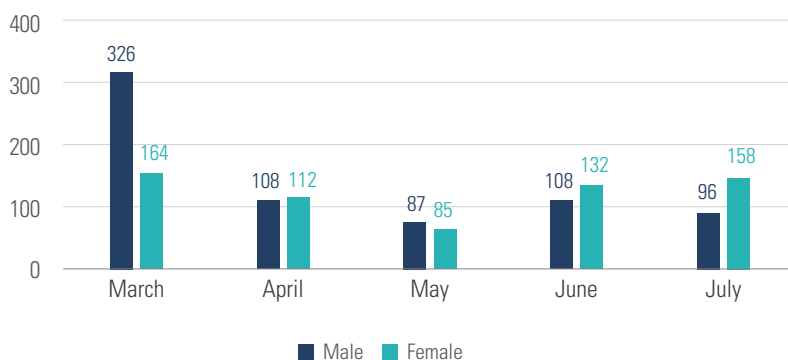
*"It is worth mentioning that the PWWSD created and shared its open-line numbers with the general public only since the beginning of home-quarantine in Palestine on the 22 of March. Therefore, the immediate response from the public is an indication for the necessity of psycho-social support. The PWWSD also highlighted that most of the women contacted are uncomfortable in sharing their feelings and discussing the details of abuse given the presence of their children and husbands at home at all hours. Moreover, the women noted that their phones are usually with the husbands or used by their children for school and entertainment purposes, limiting their access to online-support groups and resources".*

**32.** *Male calls include young boys abused by parents and other family members.* In fact, in march 2020, 65 of the total male calls were from boys between the ages 16-18 (the majority of total calls).



**Figure 2.**

**Mental Health and Psychosocial Support calls by Gender during COVID-19 pandemic**



Source: SAWA

WCLAC has also witnessed *an increase in the number of women who reported threats to their lives through their emergency hotline.*<sup>33</sup> Indeed, between mid-April and May, there has been an *average of three cases of life threats every week*, a significant increase in comparison to pre-pandemic rates. This increase is also in line with the rise in femicide in Gaza and the West Bank in which more than *10 females were killed during the enforced state of emergency compared to 28 women killed in the whole year in 2019.*<sup>34</sup>

While the numbers of physical violence remain constant throughout the period of the lockdowns, the helpline unit has noted an increase in the *severity and extent of violence that women experience.* The injuries reported have become increasingly more acute, requiring professional help. This is especially dangerous given that hospitals are considered an unsafe environment during the outbreak. In fact, the WCLAC report emphasizes that, “women have found themselves victims of psychological violence that has later been compounded with economic and physical violence as lockdowns [have] continued and additional stress has been added to the family”.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling. COVID-19 and Women's Rights in Palestine, June 2020

<sup>34</sup> <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2019/09/25/palestinian-women-to-march-against-gender-based-violence/>

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p.8

One of the most notable and effective *interventions* from national women-centered organizations was the provision and/or extension of hotline hours. As mentioned above, SAWA's extended hotline hours resulted in an 18% increase in calls, as it allowed women to find time and space (not during the day) to seek help. Therefore, it is critical for other women's organizations to make their services more accessible by extending their hours, providing online counseling to reach a wider audience using various platforms, and enhancing outreach programs. The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD), which first states that women could not enter protection centers without having been quarantined for 14 days, issued new guidelines after women rights advocated for new guidelines to safely transfer women with life-threatening cases to shelters.<sup>36</sup> The new procedures included COVID-19 testing for GBV victims in urgent need for protection and guaranteed approval for protection shelters when test results are negative.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, women's right organizations are working to facilitate transitional shelters in which women could be quarantined before entering anti-violence shelters.<sup>38</sup> It is important to emphasize that these shelters and the adaption in the referral systems should take into consideration the specific needs of victims of GBV from mental support, security, hygiene, adequate nutrition and health services.

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### 3. COVID-19 and Increased Domestic Burdens

The lockdowns, work-from-home orders, and school closures have significantly increased the household and childcare burdens for women in Palestine. According to the Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD) polls, as high as 86.8% of Palestinian women said that their household duties have increased or somewhat increased, compared to 72.9% of men.<sup>39</sup> ***While about 68% of women said that their household duties have increased, about 44% of men reported an increase with the rest***

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<sup>36</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>. WCLAC shelters have been able to provide safe spaces for women since mid-April following the changes in regulations and the organization has paid special attention to the safety and health of the staff attending to these women at such challenging times.

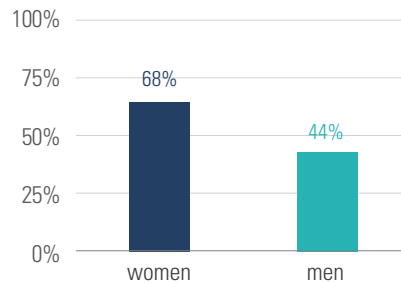
<sup>38</sup>. WCLAC, 2020

<sup>39</sup>. AWRAD, 2020

*(29.4%) reporting a somewhat of an increase. In terms of childcare, 51% of women said that their childcare duties increased compared to around 30% of men.*<sup>40</sup> It is worth mentioning that these numbers are a percentage increase, therefore, women that were already disproportionately burdened with childcare tasks pre-COVID-19 and are now responsible for even more tasks with the enforced closures. While the experience of Palestinian women in terms of increased household burdens is shared with women in the MENA region and around the globe given the normalized gender roles, it is important to note that the Governmental Cabinet in Palestine decided to excused all women with children from work by asking them to stay at home to take care of the children.<sup>41</sup> As the UN Women assessment report emphasizes, “[this is part of] a visible pattern of women primarily taking on the role of caregiving, even if at the expense of comprising their own needs”.<sup>42</sup> “The added burdens of household chores include meeting the needs and wants of various members of the family, ensuring necessary hygiene and sanitation standards for minimizing exposure to the viral infection, adjusting to the new teaching mechanisms, and managing household resources”, they explained.<sup>43</sup>

**Figure 3.**

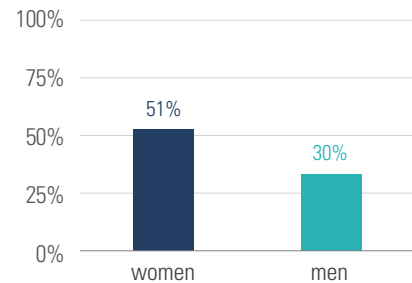
**Gendered Increase in Household Duties throughout lockdown**



Source: AWRAD, 2020

**Figure 4.**

**Gendered Increase in Childcare Duties throughout lockdown**



<sup>40</sup>. AWRAD, 2020, p.6

<sup>41</sup>. UN Women. COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Program, 2020

<sup>42</sup>. UN Women. COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Program, 2020

<sup>43</sup>. UN Women: COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, April 2020, p.19

Additional responsibilities such as teaching and providing for children during online-school and afterhours are causing a surge in the already high levels of unpaid work that women do.<sup>44</sup> Globally, females are responsible for 75% of domestic and unpaid work.<sup>45</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the fragility of women's participation in the paid economy. With the enforced lockdowns, many families need to take care of their children with no institutional support. Such responsibilities are almost automatically transferred to the women in the household as they are assumed/expected to be the main caregivers. These reinforced gender roles are, therefore, translated in the disproportionate increase in household burdens between men and women.

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## 4. The Economic Impact Of COVID-19 on Palestinian Women

In line with global trends, emerging rapid assessment reports on the impact of COVID-19 suggest increased economic burden on Palestinian women (e.g. UN Women, 2020; CARE Palestine, 2020, WCLAC, 2020). Palestinian women are not only having to adjust their personal and professional goals to provide for the families during lockdowns, but are also victims of economic violence and food insecurities.<sup>46</sup> Given the huge pay-gap between men and women in Palestine (71 NIS for females compared with 105 NIS for males), females are less likely to have a safety-net to fall-on during times of economic distress.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, females are more likely to be laid-off as they are overrepresented in acute service sectors that were the first to lay off their employees such as retail, hospitality, and tourism.<sup>48</sup>

***Approximately 32,000 of employed women in Palestine work in the informal sector.<sup>49</sup> And more than 25% of women in the private sector are employed with no official contracts.*** Accordingly, they are more likely to

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<sup>44</sup>. Power, Kate. (2020). *The COVID-19 Pandemic has increased the Care Burden of Women and Families*.

<sup>45</sup>. *ibid*.

<sup>46</sup>. UN Women, 2020

<sup>47</sup>. PCBS, 2019

<sup>48</sup>. *ibid*.

<sup>49</sup>. PCBS, 2020. These numbers are likely an underestimation given that it is hard to determine the exact number of employees working informally. Read more:<http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?tabID=512&lang=en&ItemID=3730&mid=3171&wversion=Staging>

be laid-off as they lack legal labor protection, have no protection against furlough and wage cuts, are not paid for sick leaves, and have limited access to social protection.<sup>50</sup> Such factors are critical to ensure labor rights especially during the spread of a deadly pandemic that resulted in compounded economic grievances.

As mentioned earlier, **women were the first group of governmental staff to be told to work from home with the outbreak**, prioritizing male jobs and emphasizing the woman's role at home. Prior to the outbreak, 7% of women-led enterprises reported childcare as a limitation in continuing their projects.<sup>51</sup> Given that women are now forced to stay at home with their children, these limitations are likely to **increase significantly, driving small businesses to shut down**.

The outbreak of COVID-19 severely impacted female workers in Palestine. For example, according to a flash survey with 301 respondents conducted by UN Women in April 2020, **95% of Palestinian women who own micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) reported negative impacts** from the pandemics only a few weeks into lockdown.<sup>52</sup> According to the gender assessment interviews conducted by CARE Palestine in April, **more 28% of female respondents could not work at all, compared to 8% of men (3 times as likely)**.<sup>53</sup> In nearly every respect, female respondents found earning a living during COVID-19 more difficult than men.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, **89% of female small business owners were forced to reallocate money previously dedicated to their work or businesses to the household compared to only 50% of men. This is an indication of the lack of financial safety nets available to women likely due to pay gaps and limited ability to save**.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the study found that females were **more impacted by the lack of inputs and shuttered bank services than their male counterparts, with 90% of women unable to access financial services compared to 73% of men**.<sup>56</sup>

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50. PCBS, 2020. Read more: <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3679>

51. UN Women. COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Program. 2020, p.21

52. *ibid.*

53. CARE, 2020

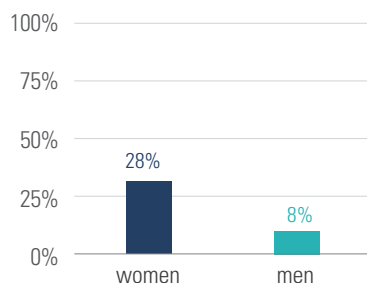
54. *ibid.*

55. CARE, 2020

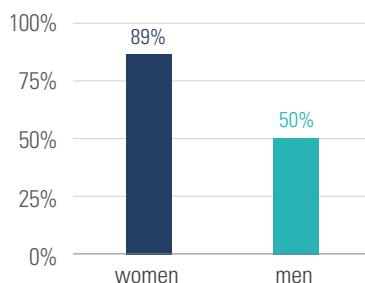
56. *ibid.*

**Figure 5.**

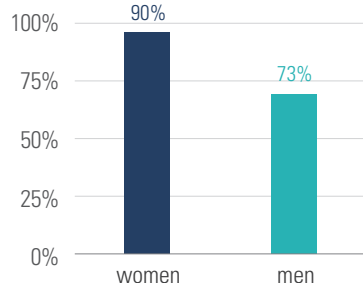
**Percentage of Entrepreneurs unable to work at all due to lockdowns**

**Figure 6.**

**Percentage of Entrepreneurs forced to re-allocate money from their businesses to the household**

**Figure 7.**

**Percentage of Entrepreneurs unable to access financial services**



Source: CARE, 2020

These increased restrictions on women-led SMEs are alarming given that, globally and nationally, women businesses face financial and non-financial barriers, making them more vulnerable to the economic shocks induced by COVID-19 than their male counterparts. In terms of financial barriers, women entrepreneurs have more restricted access to finances than their male counterparts. Indeed, a market and credit assessment study of the International Finance corporation finds that women MSMEs face unfavorable lending policies, lack of collateral, and overall challenges in obtaining credits and loans to fund business.<sup>57</sup> These barriers result in a credit gap for women entrepreneurs who require finance to maintain and grow their businesses but unable to obtain funds.<sup>58</sup> These challenges are exacerbated by non-financial barriers such as limited networks, access to opportunities and information, and gender roles that emphasize the role of women in the home or as caregivers.<sup>59</sup>

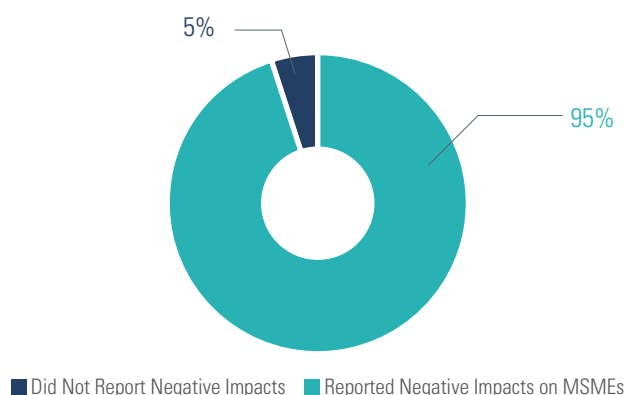
<sup>57</sup>. Across regions, formal women owned SMEs are more likely to cite access to finance as a major or severe constraint: 29% of women compared to 24% of men (see: International Finance Corporation, 2014).

<sup>58</sup>. International Finance Corporation, 2014

<sup>59</sup>. *ibid.*

**Figure 8.**

**Percentage of Women-led MSMEs reporting negative impacts a few weeks into lockdown**



These global trends are likely to be more severe in Palestine. In fact, in 2012, female entrepreneurship in Palestine was amongst the worst in the world, ranking as the 58th out of 67 countries in early-stage entrepreneurship activity. Moreover, it was the second worst country (66th out of 67) in established-business female owners (which has been in operation for more than 42 months). In Palestine, the majority of finances, tax relief, and small-business incentives to promote further growth for MSMEs are directed towards new businesses with a financial capital no less than \$250,000.<sup>60</sup> Because the majority of women-led enterprises invest less than this specified amount, they do not benefit from the efforts directed towards growing Palestinian enterprises.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, women-led MSMEs have restricted access to finances and governmental relief policies, increasing the costs of starting and maintaining businesses.<sup>62</sup> Women face more challenges in receiving microfinancing from banks than men in Palestine.<sup>63</sup> This is because most Palestinian women cannot provide guarantees (mainly physical assets), and have to ask a male-figure to co-sign to be able to borrow. Furthermore, more women report difficulty finding a co-signer than men.<sup>64</sup> Hence, in a study conducted by MAS in 2012, 61% of women who planned on starting a business chose not to take the risks due to lack

<sup>60</sup>. Unless it is an IT business. See: Adullah and Hattawy, 2014

<sup>61</sup>. Adullah and Hattawy, 2014, p.39

<sup>62</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup>. *ibid.*

of financing.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, 10% of women who halted their projects had to do so due to the lack of financing opportunities.<sup>66</sup> As discussed above, these financial barriers were exacerbated due to the pandemic. Hence, more women entrepreneurs facing difficulties accessing financial services.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to the challenges associated with starting a business under occupation (limited mobility, high risks, scarce resources, high costs and competition with external markets), Palestinian women have to face other financial and non-financial barriers because of their gender. Most importantly, women MSMEs in Palestine are more vulnerable because of the social and cultural gender norms and restrictions imposed on women. Not only are women restricted to a certain of businesses deemed culturally “appropriate”, but also struggle from lack of social services that should provide quality and accessible childcare.<sup>68</sup> In the same 2012 MAS study, 38% of women who halted or stopped their projects did so because of increased pressure from society or their immediate families (traditional norms, patriarchal systems, domestic work, childcare) to adhere to traditional gender roles.<sup>69</sup> This is especially true for women living in rural areas and area C. Such cultural stigma and the increased lack of childcare services due to COVID-19 are likely to have forced more women entrepreneurs to stay-at-home to attend for their children.<sup>70</sup> Hence, women were 3 times more likely to report not being able to work at all during shutdowns compared to men.<sup>71</sup>

Although scarce, there have been some recent efforts geared directly towards promoting women’s economic empowerment in Palestine in response to the pandemic. Most notably is the “Valiance Basala”- Empowering women in H2” established by ActionAID Palestine (AAP) and the Australian Government.<sup>72</sup> The project supported 22 women-led economic enterprises including agricultural and commercial enterprises that promote strengthening the economic power of women and their presence

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<sup>65.</sup> Ibid. These statistics are based on an Adult Population survey conducted in Palestine in 2009, 2010, 2012 using a harmonized survey designed by GEM

<sup>66.</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67.</sup> CARE, 2020

<sup>68.</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69.</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70.</sup> UN Women, 2020

<sup>71.</sup> CARE, 2020

<sup>72.</sup> The project is based in Hebron in area H2 which refers to the 20% of the city of Hebron under Israeli control. H2 is home of 33,000 along with a few hundred Israeli settlers. Read more on the humanitarian situation in H2: [https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/h2\\_spotlight\\_april\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/h2_spotlight_april_2019.pdf)



in local communities.<sup>73</sup> “[the project provided] 22 women with agricultural items and equipment needed for planting vegetables and livestock farming and other commercial items to establish their own businesses.”<sup>74</sup> This project offers great examples on the ways in which organizations can enable women to provide for their families during periods of economic decline. This is especially true given that the items were delivered to women under the state of full lockdown with cooperation with Hebron Governorate.<sup>75</sup>

Additionally, most recently the Canadian government collaborated with the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC) and the Ministry of National Economy to launch a new four-year project aimed towards economically enabling women from low-income backgrounds in the Agricultural sectors. The project provides small grants for females between the ages of 19-29 to promote green entrepreneurship along the value chain (inputs, production, manufacturing, marketing and distribution).<sup>76</sup>

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## 5. COVID-19 and Women's Physical and Mental Health

### 5.1. Physical Health

Given their essential role as caregivers in the household and as frontline workers during COVID-19, women require greater attention in testing and healthcare.<sup>77</sup> ***Indeed, females represent 60% of workers in the care sector and comprise around 70% of frontline health workers (nurses, medics, ...) in the West Bank and Gaza.***<sup>78</sup> This means that women are at higher risk in terms of being exposed to the virus, requiring more direct mitigation efforts. As the UN Women assessment emphasizes, “[while both] male and female frontline health workers are increasingly exposed to isolation and ill treatment in some cases, [for female health workers] there is the added consideration of potential deterioration of health becoming a justification

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<sup>73</sup>. Palestine Action Aid, 2020. Read more at <https://palestine.actionaid.org/news/2020/actionaid-palestine-promote-womens-economic-empowerment-h2-during-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>74</sup>. *ibid.*

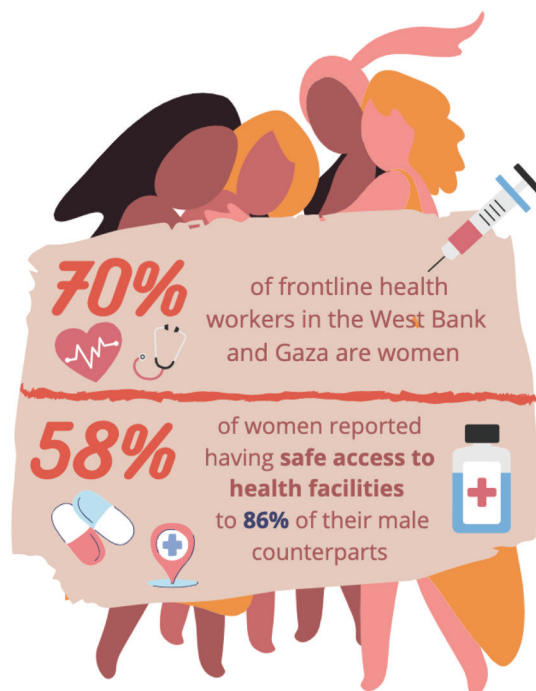
<sup>75</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>. PARC, 2020. Read more: <http://www.pal-arc.org/articles/Article/327>

<sup>77</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup>. *ibid.*

for patriarchal norm of remaining in the household”.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, according to CARE Palestine, *only 58% of women reported having safe access to health facilities inside and out of their communities compared to 86% of their male counterparts.*<sup>80</sup>



In terms of the COVID-19 response, UN women noted that the designated quarantine facilities do not include an adequate space for a women’s needs.<sup>81</sup> In Gaza, the schools used as facilities for quarantine due to overcrowded neighborhoods do not have sufficient sanitation or hygiene products that are suitable for female needs.<sup>82</sup> Quarantine facilities should include gender responsive facilities and take into account women’s privacy, modesty, and hygiene needs.<sup>83</sup>

In terms of intervention, Palestine has received international assistance targeted towards pandemic relief. In addition to the WHO, other international

<sup>79</sup>. UN Women: COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, April 2020, p.17

<sup>80</sup>. CARE, 2020

<sup>81</sup>. UN Women. COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Program, 2020

<sup>82</sup>. UN Women. COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Program, 2020

<sup>83</sup>. *ibid.*

donors have been providing necessary PPE and other equipment to aid the Ministry of Health during the outbreak. For example, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is providing equipment, supplies and Infection Prevention Control, training for health facilities, and community engagement and hygiene kits for families at risk for exposure.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association (PFPPA) partnered with various international organizations to provide more than 5,000 hygiene kits and disinfection items for vulnerable families, focusing on pregnant and lactating women.<sup>85</sup> The Union of Health Work Committees (UHCW) also partnered with various organizations such as the UNFPA, UNICEF, and WHO to provide 7,089 high risk pregnant and mothers with essential health and nutrition care services.<sup>86</sup> Still, there is a vacuum in Palestinian women leading the COVID-19 relief response to ensure necessary needs for women, despite high presentation in healthcare services.<sup>87</sup>

## 5.2. Mental Health

Palestinian women report greater negative emotional effects due to COVID-19 than their male counterparts.<sup>88</sup> This disproportionate impact is likely explained by the higher levels of stress and anxiety women are experiencing due to increased loads of household duties and higher levels in GBV given the stay-at-home orders.<sup>89</sup> According to AWRAD, Palestinian women felt stressed or somewhat stressed 81.9% of the time compared to men at 72.9%, and 47.5% of women felt fully emotionally stressed during lockdown compared to 35.1% of men.<sup>90</sup> Also, almost 50% of women felt anxious compared to 30.8% of men, and 66.6% felt anger to a large extent compared to 53.8% of men.<sup>91</sup> ***Higher levels of stress, anxiousness, and anger amongst women is expected given that 47.5% of women are doing their full-time jobs from home instead of the workplace while still taking care of the household compared. This is only true for 34.1% of men who reported having to work from home.***<sup>92</sup> Additionally, Health Cluster in Palestine warns of the severe mental health impacts reported by women, particularly

<sup>84</sup>. Health Cluster Opt, 2020. Read more:[http://healthclusteropt.org/admin/file\\_manager/uploads/files/shares/Documents/5f056566a328a.pdf](http://healthclusteropt.org/admin/file_manager/uploads/files/shares/Documents/5f056566a328a.pdf)

<sup>85</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>. UN Women, 2020

<sup>88</sup>. AWRAD, 2020, p.8

<sup>89</sup>. AWRAD, 2020

<sup>90</sup>. AWRAD, 2020, p.8

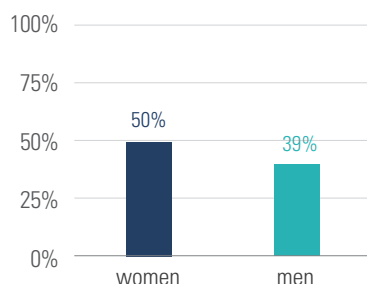
<sup>91</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup>. *ibid.*

pregnant women who are afraid for themselves and their children because of the limited access to health services.<sup>93</sup>

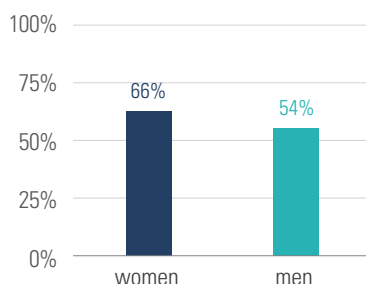
**Figure 8.**

**Percentage of Individuals Reported Feeling Anxious in lockdown**



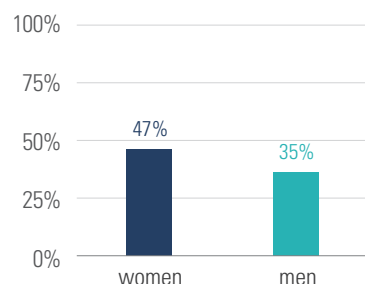
**Figure 9.**

**Percentage of Individuals Reported Feeling Anger to a large extent in lockdown**



**Figure 10.**

**Percentage of Individuals Reported Feeling emotionally stressed in lockdown**



Source: AWRAD, 2020

To mitigate the negative influence of COVID-19 on women's mental health, Health Cluster supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) to provide Mental Health and Psychosocial Support services (MHPSS) for families affected by COVID.<sup>94</sup> Almost 3,300 received MHPSS consultations and support from this initiative. Various women's organizations such as WCLAC, SAWA, and PWWSD are providing counselling and other resources such as legal aid to help alleviate and guide women in terms of psychosocial support. Still, most of the women's essential service providers report a fear of funding cuts that will hinder their ability to provide for women in need for such support.<sup>95</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

While the outbreak of the COVID-19 is severely impacting the Palestinian society as a whole, the emergency response and roadmap to recovery

<sup>93</sup>. Health Cluster oPt. The impact of COVID-19 on sexual and reproductive, including maternal health in Palestine, 2020

<sup>94</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup>. UN women, 2020

should emphasize on creating coping mechanisms that are directly targeted towards uplifting women. This is because rapid assessment reports from various national and international organizations have emphasized that across every sphere, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls.

The closure of schools has increased the burden of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities. These increased burdens have affected the psychological wellbeing of working women given that they have to balance working from home in addition to taking care of children. Moreover, the mobility restrictions due to nation-wide lockdowns have already increased GBV (economic, social, psychological, and online abuse) levels as people are confined in their houses with their abusers. These mobility restrictions are also preventing women from accessing essential services (including health protection, violence protection aid services, shelters, and courts). Additionally, the pandemic had direct impacts on women working in the informal sector as they are unlikely to be able to absorb the economic shock due to the lack of safety nets. Female-led SMEs are also severely impacted as more women are having to redirect business capital towards their household, are unable to access financial capital more than men, and are increasingly burdened with household responsibilities. In terms of physical health, more women are working at the frontlines in Palestine, increasing their exposure to the virus. Given these severe impacts, it is of most importance to concentrate on creating alternative and effective methods that will help women, as a vulnerable group, cope with the severe impacts of the pandemic. While there has been an effort from international and national women's organizations to aid Palestinian women and decrease the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic impacts, there are necessary steps to be taken on a national and international level to help Palestinian women who are suffering from the gendered impacts of the pandemic in addition to the effects of Israeli military occupation.

## **6.1. Recommendations and Policy Implication**

Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Palestinian women compared to men, it is critical to place women at the center of the pandemic response and future policies. In this section, we introduce key recommendations and policy implications for policy makers that are essential to reduce the rates of GBV and provide services for female victims, support women working on the frontlines to fight the pandemic, provide aid

for the vulnerable women-led MSMEs, and relieve the increased domestic and economic burdens of COVID-19 on women.

In terms of tackling the issue of increased rates of violence, women centered organizations should continue to provide lifesaving services for victims of GBV such as 24/7 hotlines, online and in person (following safety guides) counselling to increase access, and ensure that more safe houses and shelters are available for women who need a safe-space to distance from their abusers in the case of a future lockdown. Sheltering services must provide appropriate transportation and follow health precautions to avoid COVID-19 exposure for current residents and protect victims. Shelters are extremely important as some women's lives are equally threatened by their abusers and the virus. Moreover, women-centered organizations and national authorities should raise awareness about GVB in the society and spread information about resources and safe spaces available for women who are victims or survivors of GVB.

Women are on the frontlines fighting the pandemic in large numbers, therefore, it is critical to support female nurses and medics by providing appropriate supplies such as adequate facilities and resources to ensure female hygiene and safety, a safe working environment in which there are accountability mechanisms for discrimination against women at the workplace, equal pay to their male counterparts, and psychological support to reduce the increased mental burdens. It is also important to create policies that would encourage women to test in higher numbers and break the cultural stigma associated with females contracting the virus.

Due to the pandemic, women are becoming even more vulnerable in the labor market and women-led businesses have been disproportionately affected. It is important to support women-led micro, medium, and small enterprises to ensure their sustainability. This aid should include cash assistance and cash for work opportunities, but more importantly, it is critical to provide the necessary skills to move towards e-commerce or create online/distant working modalities to cope with the current and any future crises. It is also essential to engage local women organizations and Palestinian women in the decision-making process for the COVID-19 recovery roadmap and determining long-term policies to curb the severe gendered impacts of the pandemic. There is also a need to encourage and promote the role of men in the home and as caregivers through awareness campaigns. For example, in a case of another lockdown, the government

should offer a choice for women and men to decide which partner is to work from home first, instead of targeting women in the work-from-home policy

Socioeconomic policy interventions in Palestine should be focused on protecting women from falling into poverty (especially those in the informal sector) and avoiding persisting economic and health impacts in the long-run. This is critical given that only 0.6% of the 1.7 billion USD of humanitarian funding distributed to Palestine were allocated to projects specifically targeting women's needs, gender equality, or empowering to participate in socioeconomic recovery.<sup>96</sup> In order to produce effective intervention policies, there is a need for national in-depth analysis and understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on women to ensure an appropriate and effective COVID-19 response that is specifically targeted towards Palestinian women. Therefore, data about the impact of COVID-19 on women is crucial to decrease the pandemic socioeconomic negative influences, which requires collecting data by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistic (PCBS) and other official bodies.

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<sup>96</sup>. Wph-Fund, 2020. Read more: <https://wphfund.org/countries/palestine/>

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