Operational Context

As of end of May 2020, COVID-19 had spread to 209 countries, infecting 5,817,385 people around the world. Within WHO’s Eastern Mediterranean Region, there were 489,921 cumulative cases. And the mortality rate on 30 May stood at 62.5 percent inside the region (lower than the global mortality rate of 6.2 percent). Many of the confirmed cases were mainly from Iran, Pakistan, Egypt and several Gulf countries. The global threat of the COVID-19 pandemic poses significant risks for the Arab States region, particularly for those countries with weak health and socio-economic systems, as well as for those affected by protracted crises. A rise in number of confirmed cases has been seen in conflict affected countries: Iraq (5,873), Palestine (625), Yemen (287), Syria (122), and Libya (118).

The impact of COVID-19 poses great concerns for women and girls in the region. The pandemic has magnified existing inequalities as well as social biases and gender norms. Gender-based discrimination against women and girls in the public and private spheres in the Arab States region has worsened.

UN Women COVID-19 Preparedness and Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response in Figures</th>
<th>Thematic Area</th>
<th>Progress as at 31 May 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number of women and girls provided with protection assistance (including online psychosocial support and legal counselling) on a monthly basis</td>
<td>Gender-Based Violence/Protection</td>
<td>1,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of women shelters supported during COVID-19</td>
<td>Gender-Based Violence/Protection</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of personal protective equipment/protective gear provided to support shelters, frontline staff, etc</td>
<td>Gender-Based Violence/Protection</td>
<td>15,208 PPEs 6,350 Hygiene kits 46,300 masks 62,500 gloves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of women provided with economic support including cash-based assistance and cash for work</td>
<td>Women Economic Empowerment</td>
<td>2,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average amount and average duration of cash support</td>
<td>Women Economic Empowerment</td>
<td>300 USD/ month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of meetings and consultations held with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)</td>
<td>CSO engagement</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of policy briefs produced by UN Women or jointly with other organizations on impact of COVID19 on women and girls</td>
<td>Knowledge, innovation, results-based management and evaluation</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of formal initiatives led or supported by UN Women to promote knowledge generation and exchange on issues related to the gendered impact of COVID19.</td>
<td>Coordination</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence and data generation

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls is prevalent although there are large data gaps on the gendered impacts of the pandemic globally and within the Arab States region. To fill some of these data gaps, UN Women conducted a regional web-based survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality and violence against women. 16,500 respondents across nine countries participated in the survey. A parallel regional CSO assessment has been also undertaken to understand the impact of COVID-19 on their violence against women (VAW) work, their perspectives on challenges being faced, gain a better understanding of solutions being developed, and their perspectives of the roles of women during the pandemic. The results of the surveys are being analyzed and will be published in June 2020. Furthermore, UN Women country offices have been actively undertaking rapid assessments to generate evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and girls that includes household dynamics, unpaid care work, Violence Against Women (VAW) and other areas. These initiatives are either led by UN Women or undertaken jointly with national institutions, national women’s machineries or other agencies such as ESCWA, UNDP and ILO.

Country examples:
In Lebanon, UN Women conducted a rapid assessment on the impact of COVID on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in partnership with UNHCR, UNICEF, UNPFA and other partners including ABAAD, CARE, DRC, IRC and InterSOS. Read more

In Jordan, UN Women published a rapid assessment on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on beneficiaries of UN Women Oasis centers in camp and non-camp settings with nearly 850 respondents. The assessment included questions related to the economic situation, health concerns, safety and access to health services, violence against women, the roles of men and women within the household, and access to education. Read more

In Egypt, in partnership with the National Council for Women in Egypt and UN Women, the Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research - Baseera, issued an infographic for a survey on Women and COVID-19 Pandemic in Egypt. The poll was conducted on a national representative sample of 1518 females in the age group 18+ during the period from April 4th to April 14th, 2020, with the aim of measuring the effect of COVID-19 on women’s lives. Read more

In Morocco, UN Women is providing technical support to the High Commissioner for Planning in conducting a gender analysis on the qualitative survey on socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on households.

In Palestine, UN Women produced a rapid assessment on COVID-19 and domestic and family violence services across Palestine. The assessment included questions related to the direct effect of the state of emergency on the respondent organizations’ capacities to provide services and information to women at risk from domestic violence. Read more
Consultations with Civil Society Organisations

UN Women helped establish the Arab States Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and feminist Network for COVID Response and Recovery and serves as the network's Secretariat. The network brings together around 45 CSOs and women grassroots organizations mostly from Arab countries. The network also ensures diversity and inclusiveness among its members bringing together youth representatives, the Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities and the MENA representative for Women International League for Peace and Freedom and representatives of organizations working on women migrants. The Members of the network meet on a bi-weekly basis to exchange information, experience and data on their varied activities aimed at protecting women from the impact of COVID-19 highlighting critical systemic changes required to address gender inequalities in all spheres. Since the onset of the pandemic, the network met four times and resulted in a draft regional CSO response plan to COVID-19.

UN Women also serves as the secretariat to a civil society organization (CSO)-led Steering Group bringing donors and international partners from the Arab States region with the purpose of supporting the Arab States CSO and feminist Network in COVID Response and Recovery. The CSO Steering Group members currently include OXFAM, Kvinna till Kvinna, KVInfo, UNDP, UNFPA, Open Society and ILO.

Under UN Women’s support, over 110 women-led civil society organizations across conflict-affected countries in the Arab States region issued a joint declaration in support of the UN Secretary General’s call for a global ceasefire and appealing for unity in the face of COVID-19. The ceasefire declaration has also been made available through UN Women social media (Twitter and Facebook). Read more

Risk communication and community awareness targeting women and girls

UN Women is a member of the regional WHO-led Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Working Group. UN Women actively engages in this platform and works very closely with the RCCE Working Group members to engender the group's framework, tools and approaches. As part of its engagement with the RCCE Working Group, UN Women led the development and design of the regional guidelines on COVID-19: How Can Risk Communication and Community Engagement Include Marginalized and Vulnerable People in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The guidelines will be posted in English and Arabic and disseminated widely via web and social media.

These initiatives have also been complemented by awareness-raising campaigns addressing various issues including violence against women and girls.

Country examples:
In Morocco, UN Women partnered with the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and jointly conducted campaigns in the form of animation videos on legal services provision to women victims of violence.
In **Palestine**, UN Women together with UNHABITAT, UNFPA and UNODC launched an online campaign #أحمي_البلد to raise awareness on the positive aspects of sharing domestic responsibilities during homestay and healthy practices to reduce spread of COVID19 virus.

In **Lebanon**, UN Women carried out a joint 15-day awareness raising campaign with UNDP on social norms, burden sharing and domestic violence. The campaign has reached more than 100,000 social media users. Read more

In **Libya**, UN Women is engaging with a core network of radio stations across the country to produce COVID-19 and gender-based violence as well as women’s health (physical and psychosocial) related stories to be shared

**Women’s access to essential protection mechanisms**

UN Women also engages with a wide range of international and humanitarian actors to meet the protection needs of women and girls by adapting its delivery modalities. From the onset of the pandemic, 1,500 vulnerable women have been provided with remote/virtual mental health and psychosocial, hotlines for gender-based violence, referrals, legal support and counselling on a monthly basis. The services were provided through its robust network of partners including governments, non-government organizations (NGOs), or private companies.

Safe spaces for women and girls are also being supported to reopen for emergency medical and SGBV related care, including the provision of medical and sanitation support (for example, hygiene kits distribution). To ensure quality service provision while the centers and shelters are closed, the capacities of social workers from civil society networks were strengthened to provide assistance and guidance to women survivors of violence during lockdown and equip them with necessary telecommunication means.

In addition, UN Women continued to work closely with national authorities to ensure that legislative and structural reforms to combat rising gender-based violence within the COVID-19 context include advocating for amendments to domestic violence laws.

UN Women has also produced three situation briefs on COVID-19 and violence against women (VAW) highlighting efforts in the Arab States region to leave no one behind when addressing VAW during the times of COVID-19 with key recommendations proposed in moving forward.

**Country examples:**

In **Jordan**, UN Women delivered an additional 400 recovery bags to support frontline workers and survivors of gender-based violence, 8,100 liters of hygiene gel, 45,300 masks, and 62,500 pairs of gloves.

In **Lebanon**: UN Women partnered with the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), and other actors, to revise Lebanon’s National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325
on Women, Peace and Security to scale up the work around gender-based violence in response to COVID-19. Specific revisions have included providing shelters and accommodations for domestic violence survivors and legal reforms. A decree was issued to establish a special fund for survivors of violence.

In **Palestine**, UN Women partnered with the Palestinian Ministry of Women’s Affairs to alleviate the negative impact of COVID-19 on women and girls. In Gaza, some 300 hygiene kits were provided to vulnerable women and girls and 100 women’s organizations and protection centres have been disinfected to limit the spread of the virus.

In **Morocco**, UN Women consolidated and disseminated a mapping of institutional and civil society services available to women and girls’ victims of violence during the lockdown period. The mapping is widely disseminated through professional and social networks and is periodically updated.

In **Tunisia**, UN Women provided support to the Tunis Maternity and Neonatal Centre by providing personal protective equipment for its health workers as well as the mobilization of professionals to provide psycho-social support.

In **Yemen**, UN Women has published an action brief on the priorities for gender equality in the COVID-19 response. The brief explores the impact of the pandemic and its gender dimensions in conflict settings with a focus on gender-based violence, women’s participation in decision-making, labour market and livelihoods. It also includes a comprehensive series of recommendations to foster gender-responsive action of national and international stakeholders in diverse thematic areas.

**Economic resilience and empowerment**

The crisis is expected to gravely impact women’s livelihood across the formal and informal economies, although more greatly those active in the informal sector since there is no work protection or income compensation. In this current context, it was deemed critical for UN Women to adopt mitigation measures to alleviate the economic losses on women’s livelihoods. UN Women initiated several initiatives and joint partnerships with WFP, UNDP, and FAO to provide women with opportunities to participate in the labour force and attain equitable access to the market.

**Country examples:**

In **Lebanon**, [UN Women partnered with agri-food cooperative 'NESWA' to distribute 1,300 food items reaching 300 families in May. Furthermore, UN Women has reoriented existing women’s economic empowerment services. 804 women previously enrolled in UN Women’s job placement project are receiving unconditional cash transfers.**

In **Egypt**, UN Women supported partners with the digitization of their entrepreneurship training programmes for women to sustain their access to educational content during the pandemic and beyond.
In **Palestine**, UN Women through the Financial Inclusion Gender Group, provided technical advice to the Palestinian Monetary Authority (PMA) in designing gender-inclusive financial products, especially targeting and ensuring women-owned small and medium enterprises.

**Innovations in programming**

UN Women is strategically positioned as partner of choice on cash transfer innovative work in Jordan. It is one of the few humanitarian actors that was able to seamlessly and remotely ensure cash assistance is continued to reach Syrian refugee women in camps even during the COVID-19 crisis through blockchain technology. More than 500 women benefitted from this programme in the refugee camps and have accessed their salaries and funds through WFP’s Building Blocks platform. This increased women’s’ control over their salaries and the identity verification scan ensured that only the women themselves could withdraw cash through the system. Read more

**Coordination and partnerships**

At regional and country levels, UN Women was actively engaged in the WHO-led COVID-19 Crisis Management Group, protection working groups, protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) networks, and the risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) working group to ensure that the gender lens was consistently mainstreamed in the COVID-19 response.

UN Women provided technical support to governments and partners by placing the needs of women and girls at the center of COVID-19 response. Gender technical experts were recruited and/or seconded to (1) WHO in Lebanon (2) informing the national, OCHA-led and UNHCR-led planning and coordination platforms in Jordan and Palestine, and (3) into the national COVID-19 response in Tunisia.

As part of the UN Development System regional reform process, the regional gender theme group transitioned to a Regional Issue-based Coalition (IBC) on Gender Justice and Equality with its first meeting held on 14 May. The meeting was co-chaired by UN Women and UNFPA’s regional directors and included high-level regional participation from other agencies including ESCWA and UNDP. The structure of the IBC’s gives greater emphasis on accountability for its members. Each IBC has a workplan with key results and milestones, which they are expected to report against at the end of the year (and this year, it will include COVID-19 related efforts).

In collaboration with other UN Women offices in the African continent and with UN Women’s Executive Director as co-chair, UN Women Regional Office of Arab States as well as Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia Country Offices participated in a meeting of African Ministers in charge of Gender and Women’s Affairs on “COVID-19 Response and Recovery” - a Gendered Framework. Read more

In **Jordan**, UN Women produced specific tools and briefs on integrating gender and intersectionality in assessments, guidance for gender-responsive COVID-19 response. Read more
In Lebanon, UN Women convened and facilitated a roundtable discussion with 8 frontline GBV service providers with Facebook. The discussion centered around how organizations are currently using social media to provide services. It was recommended to strengthen platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, and Instagram) to enhance the quality and safety of care, increase privacy and data protection, and aggregate better information.

In Palestine, UN Women is providing technical support to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) coalition led by the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW) to prepare and submit a report to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women on the increase of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Media and communications

The League of Arab States (LAS), in collaboration with UN Women, UNFPA, WHO and UNHCR invited women and girls in the Arab States region to share their stories on COVID-19. The initiative aims to provide women in the region with a platform to share the challenges faced amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Read more

UN Women implemented a social media campaign to raise awareness on preventing violent extremism and its linkages with women's rights across North Africa. The campaign focused on disseminating key findings of recent studies conducted in collaboration with the Monash University Gender Peace and Security Centre. Read more

UN Women relaunched the “Because I am a man Campaign”, a regional communications initiative supported by the Swedish Government. The campaign was created to encourage boys and men to take on their responsibilities in care and domestic work, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures. Read more

Country examples:

In Egypt, the National Council for Women, in partnership with UN Women, launched a campaign to support women’s mental health in the times of quarantine and curfew which requires staying at home for longer periods of time. Read more

In Jordan, over 500 HeForShe Arabic volunteers from across Jordan mobilized on social media to advocate for gender equality, highlight the importance of helping one another and share the burdens during times of crisis. Young volunteers also joined the global campaign #HeForSheAtHome, calling on all men to help balancing the burden within their households. Read more

In Morocco as part of the regional campaign “Because I am a man”, UN Women launched a communications campaign on positive masculinities, highlighting ways in which men and boys can participate more actively in domestic work and with children’s education during confinement. Read more
In Palestine, UN Women implemented a social media campaign under the Haya Joint Programme, an initiative that brings together the Palestinian Authority, UN Agencies, CSOs and other partners to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls to all forms of violence, to spread awareness of the benefits of sharing the workload during quarantine and how to prevent COVID-19.

Gaps and challenges

The Arab States region has four protracted humanitarian crises, namely Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, along with countries hosting a large number of refugees due to the spill over of the conflicts in neighbouring countries including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. The region’s pre-existing gender inequalities are further compounded by the above-mentioned conflicts, make it critically important to ensure that a humanitarian response is properly informed by gender dimensions. UN Women within the Arab states region is challenged to raise awareness on the need for gender-responsive or better yet, gender-transformative humanitarian action that can lay the foundations of building back better from the COVID-19 pandemic’s effects within the region.

Financial Requirements

UN Women has estimated its initial needs at USD 22.5 million in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through immediate technical, financial and life-saving support to UN Member states, CSOs, women’s groups, the UN system and other partners UN Women is working to ensure:

1. Gender-responsive governance, women’s voice and leadership: Regional and national responses to COVID-19 tackle gender issues with data and evidence, financing and women’s voice in decision-making.

2. Gender-based violence is tackled: Women access and benefit from essential protection mechanisms throughout the COVID response, with a focus on access to gender-based violence (GBV) services and gender-equitable behaviours are promoted during the COVID pandemic and beyond, including through engaging men.

3. Women are at the heart of economic recovery: Women affected by the COVID-19 crisis are more economically resilient and employment is maintained where possible, including through addressing gender-blind economic stimulus packages.

The Government of Japan has generously supported by providing USD 909,901 to take immediate action and meet the essential needs of women and girls. UN Women has also re-programmed and channeled its resources to respond to the crisis. However, the response and recovery plan still has a significant funding gap of approximately 85%. The consequences of the pandemic and underfunding could have serious short- and long-term lasting impact on women and girls and push back hard fought results achieved across the region.