



**Post COVID-19  
Challenges and  
Opportunities for  
Gender Equality  
in Arab countries**  
Perspectives from  
the case of Jordan

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# 1. SUMMARY

The COVID-19 crisis inflicted the Arab region from mid-March 2020. This paper provides an analysis of the impact of the crisis as an outset for identifying focus areas of future programming to promote gender equality more effectively in the region. To this effect, the challenges and opportunities brought along by the crisis are outlined and recommendations made.

Confinement and lockdown constitute particular risks for women and LGBT+ people, due to the heightened tension in the home and in society more generally. The crisis has highlighted the connection between confinement to home and a dramatic increase in intimate partner violence as data emerging during the crisis shows. At an early point, civil society in Arab countries raised the alarm, adapted their programmes to respond to this increase, and with mixed success pushed governments to put in place supportive measures. However, on- and offline gender based violence (GBV) increased in society in general, not only in the domestic sphere. This raised level of GBV in general have largely been overlooked in responses to covid-19, including the recommendation issued by the UN Secretary General. Although they had women at the center, they failed to address GBV, which in general needs further attention from authorities and civil society alike so that firm strategies to prevent it and to end impunity during and post-crisis can be elaborated.

The measures of lockdown and state of emergency applied by many governments became an excuse to crack down on critical voices, including women's rights and LGBT+ activists. Future programming should more systematically include advocacy for lifting restrictions on civil liberties and point at their negative effect on the promotion of gender equality. Women are disproportionately affected by the steep rise in unemployment rates followed the lock down in the formal and informal sectors, and in the latter sector without social protection. Future programming needs a renewed attention to maintaining and strengthening women's inclusion in the labor market in decent jobs, as entrepreneurs and as leaders. As many men were staying at home during lockdown and as the majority of front line health staff are female, a window of opportunity to challenge and re-negotiate a plethora of gender equality issues related to the labor market presents itself. Moreover, these challenges must be approached as an occasion for renewing efforts post-crisis to ensure equal participation in decision-making at all levels of society, and thus for elaborating more radical approaches that aim for women's full participation.

At the level of civil society, future programming should take into consideration the diverse strengths for crisis management and adaptation found in different types of organizations and measure them against target groups for the field of intervention in question. Increased emphasis on online activities raises the important issue of online security.



## 2. INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for the promotion of gender equality in the Arab region at the level of civil society. With the aim of containing the corona virus and mitigating the health crisis, precautionary governmental lockdowns were enforced in the Arab region from mid-March 2020. While using the crisis of the pandemic as an outset for promoting gender equality more effectively, the main question is what the future focus of programming should be, based on the challenges and opportunities identified.

As a first step to build these perspectives, an analysis of gender equality issues that emerged or were emphasized during the COVID-19 pandemic is conducted and recommendations to future programming suggested. The analysis draws on rapid assessments and analysis from UN agencies, think tanks and international aid organizations. This is followed by a section that briefly presents government and civil society responses to the crisis, zooming in on Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 adaptations of two civil society organizations operating in Jordan are analyzed in more depth to explore how two very different types of organisations have adapted to the crisis and what lessons for future programming can be drawn. Categorizing the two organizations serves to capture how adaptations may depend not only on country context but also on the type of organization in question. Based on the analysis, the final section will point at major focus areas and activities recommended for future programming.

<sup>1</sup> These are the four countries in which KVINFO is implementing the Gender Equality Programme under the Danish Arab Partnership Programme in partnership with Danner, Danish Family Planning Association, Women's Council Denmark, LGBT+ DK and more than 20 local civil society partners in the Middle East and North Africa.



### 3. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN THE ARAB REGION

Civil society and government responses in the Arab region have aimed at mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 crisis. The latter has highlighted and reinforced existing gender injustices and stirred gender conformity. A dramatic increase in cases of domestic violence, increased restrictions on civil liberties and increased economic hardship are major consequences of the lock down of societies to curb the corona pandemic. They affect civil society activities intended to push for gender equality and rights for LGBT+ persons towards human rights standards, increasing women's participation at all levels, and promoting legal reforms that sustain this transformation. While the rapid assessments and comments by observers leave a bleak picture of the state of gender equality, the crisis also offers an opportunity to review strategic focus of development programming and to obtain more attention from duty bearers to major gaps in gender equality that existed prior to the crisis, and during which they were emphasized. These challenges and opportunities are presented below.

#### SILENCING OPPONENTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced governments of Arab states, just like states across the world, to initiate lockdowns in selected sectors of society except the health sector, to close borders and cease most air traffic to and from the country. The governments of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan apply emergency legislation, restrictions on mobility, home confinement, and police/military control.<sup>2</sup> The efforts to contain and limit the spread of the virus have become an excuse to crack down on political opponents, women's rights and LGBT+ activists and human rights defenders. Restrictions in movement and assembly make it more difficult to monitor and hold governments accountable vis-à-vis gender equality commitments, and many organizations have been forced to put their activities on hold or, if possible, to convert them to online activities. Restrictions on access to information is justified as attempts to prevent dispersion of fake news.

<sup>2</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/24/coronavirus-threatens-freedom-in-north-africa-pub-81625/>  
<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28840/in-morocco-human-rights-deteriorate-amid-a-strict-covid-19-re-sponse>. For a report from Jordan, see <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/jordan-free-speech-threats-under-covid-19-response>

## FURTHER EXCLUSION OF WOMEN FROM LABOR MARKET PARTICIPATION

The COVID-19 crisis has turned an economy already under pressure to the worse, notably by affecting livelihoods. Across the region another 8.3 million people were pushed into poverty and food insecurity, especially among the poorest and vulnerable parts of the population, including women and youth. Loss of income from exports and a drop in oil prices preceding the pandemic have resulted in unemployment estimated to be at the level of 1.7 billion job losses *Ibid.*, supplemented by ceased activities in the informal economy, which has stricken women disproportionately (OECD 2020a). In Egypt, the informal economy employs approximately half of all women working. Their wages are minimal, and they do not have access to social protection mechanisms, exposing them to poverty during the reduced economic activity of the COVID-19 crisis (OECD 2020b). In Jordan 49% of female and 90% of male respondents in a rapid assessment survey were employed prior to the start of the crisis; 71% of those formally employed had kept their job; in contrast 99% of those who obtained their income from the informal economy had lost it (UN Women 2020).<sup>3</sup> The share of informal workers is considerably higher among Syrian refugees residing in Jordan than among Jordanians (ILO 2020). The drop in employment caused by the crisis in Jordan is estimated to be 13,7 % for the male employed workforce, and 6,6 % for the female, despite government interventions (UN Women 2020a).

Women's labor force participation in the Middle East and North Africa was already before the crisis the lowest in the world.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, the rate of labor force participation among the female population aged 15+ was 20.2% while for the male it was 73.1%.<sup>5</sup> The region is, after South Asia, the region where the share of enterprises with female participation in ownership ranges the lowest with only slightly over 20 percent having women among their owners. This share is even lower in Yemen, Iraq, West Bank and Gaza, Syria, Algeria, Jordan and Egypt. Simultaneously, a significant share of women's work occur in the informal economy. While Moroccan women already prior to the crisis spent 38% of their free time on domestic work, the corresponding share for Moroccan men was only 5% (OECD, 2020a). Assessments from Jordan noted that women spend 17 times more time on housework than men, and during the crisis this increased to 22 times more (UN Women 2020a).<sup>6</sup> 77% of respondents (Jordanian and Syrian women, some of whom live in camps) said that mothers spend more time supporting their children's distance

<sup>3</sup> Respondents were selected among attendees to UN Women-supported centers for Resilience and Empowerment of Women and Girls.

<sup>4</sup> In Morocco for instance it was 21.3% (OECD 2020a).

<sup>5</sup> <http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/2.2> At the global level in the same year it was 74.4 for male and 47.4 for female participation in the labour force.

<sup>6</sup> <https://jordan.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/covid-19-and-wee-policy-recommendations#view>

learning compared to fathers (UN Women 2020). The overall consequences of the pandemic for gender equality on the labor market are:

- An already disproportionately low rate of women's labor force participation is further threatened. In times of crisis and unemployment in the MENA region, competition over jobs turns fiercer and the labor market tends to employ women relatively less. There is a risk of heightened food insecurity and poverty. Among women working, many work in the informal sector where there is no access to social protection.
- Extra household tasks could potentially push women to leave employed work but also lead to a renegotiation of how to share care- and domestic work more equally with their partners, especially if they are at home due to confinement, from which follows children's homeschooling and care work related to sick relatives. Whether employed or unemployed women face an additional burden of care- and domestic work.
- Women are at greater risk of being infected, since they constitute 70% of front line health workers. At the same time, normal gender roles are turned upside down, as the father stays home while the mother goes to work.

## INCREASE IN GBV

Concerns over loss of job, security, health and money heighten tensions within confined living conditions. Isolation at home has increased intimate partner violence, and specifically violence against women, while response mechanisms generally are more difficult to access, disabling women to reach out for help. In the Arab region, violence against women is already a major challenge. In the countries where KVINFO operates, the share of women/girls of 14 years and above who in 2016 experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner was: Morocco 39.43%; Tunisia 36,3 %; Egypt 39,5% and Jordan 40,8%.<sup>7</sup> In Jordan, a recent rapid assessment measuring the impact of COVID-19 on GBV found that GBV has increased since the pandemic. 69% of all survey respondents as well as key informants and women and girls agree that GBV has increased since the beginning of the pandemic. Emotional and physical abuse, often perpetrated by an intimate partner or member of the family, were named as the most common types of GBV.<sup>8</sup> According to UNFPA, Tunisia and Morocco have seen an increase in calls to hotlines, which should be viewed against the difficulties that survivors of or people at risk of violence face to call hotlines and/or seek protection in shelters, due to

<sup>7</sup> <https://sdg-tracker.org/gender-equality>

<sup>8</sup> Kristine Anderson, Daring to Ask, Listen, And Act, UNFPA 2020, p 4

curfews and limited mobility and privacy. Further, there are indications that factors as several household members and food shortage further increase tensions and the risk of violence - 62% of responses among users of UN Women Oasis centers in Jordan (where users from refugee camps and outside camps are offered protection and counseling) felt that the risk of violence had increased during the COVID-19 crisis (UN Women 2020). UN Women recommends increased psychosocial support, counselling services and shelter capacity in COVID-19 response plans. The UN Secretary General on the other hand, failed to mention GBV in his recommendations to COVID-19 response plans, although he did put women at the center of the recommendations. However, during crisis, tensions go beyond the home, and GBV related to LGBT+ persons, women in elected positions, at the workplace or online also increases (UN Women & WHO 2020). Intersectionality, i.e. the particular combination of socio-economic situation, migrant or refugee status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, race etc. may add to the risk of being exposed to violence and to barriers for reporting it. Under-reporting is a general phenomenon in relation to GBV, and is expected to be even worse due to the confinement. In addition, LGBT+ persons are not always accepted in shelters and violence against them tends not to be reported and to be overlooked in civil society activism.

## RECENT IMPROVEMENTS WITHIN SRHR ARE AT RISK

The fact that recent improvements within sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are at risk is due to confinement and reduced access to SRHR services. The reallocation of means to COVID-19 response within weak health care systems means that resources are reduced in SRHR, affecting in many cases already limited access to family planning and safe abortions (UNFPA 2020). Initiatives to reduce traditional harmful practices, notably underage marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM), tend to be fewer or cancelled during times of economic crisis, although they are among the negative coping mechanisms that primarily poor and vulnerable populations turn to, also in this case where a health crisis has resulted in an economic crisis. Increase in underage marriages and in FGM hampering progress towards gender equality, is reported from civil societies across the region.

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING IS AS ACUTE AS EVER

During crisis, the need for women's participation in decision-making bodies becomes acute, as noted by the UN Secretary General who has recommended women's participation in all decision-making regarding COVID-19 response plans,

economic support packages etc. The question is if the COVID-19 crisis could leverage and revive the aim of gender equal political participation. Alternatively, if the fact that women have to assume additional care and domestic work, will reduce their possibilities for participation in decision-making processes and fora? In the Arab region, women hold 18.1% of seats in national parliaments<sup>9</sup>, whereas less than 1/3 of senior- and middle-management positions are held by women (UN Women, 2017: <http://spring-forward.unwomen.org/>).<sup>10</sup> These numbers reveal clear, but slow progress over the years. However, this development still corresponds to a position at the lowest level in the world, mirroring women's overall situation in the labor market.

In sum, the crisis brought along by the COVID-19 pandemic is adding to the pressure on the rights of women and girls and gender equality in the MENA region. However, certain developments during the crisis should be approached as an opportunity for creating the conditions for more gender equality, e.g. in decision-making, in the gender division of domestic work, in women's visible contributions as part of the workforce and for a recognition of the massive problem of GBV. Furthermore, the crisis has put the spotlight on the unequal conditions for participation in the labor market disadvantaging women and vulnerable population groups and the interlinkages between traditional harmful practices and economic hardship.

<sup>9</sup> SDG indicator 5.5.1., <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/seats-held-by-women-in-national-parliaments?tab=chart&country=-Arab%20World>

<sup>10</sup> SDG indicator 5.5.2. Estimate, no data for Arab countries <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/female-employment-in-management?-time=2016>



## 4. COVID-19 RESPONSES IN MOROCCO, TUNISIA, EGYPT AND JORDAN

Civil society responses in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan to mitigate the effects of the downsizing of the economy and in support of those suffering from the lock down should be viewed against the measures taken by the government during the crisis. In many cases, civil society is able to assume the responsibility of support when the state does not, or to supplement government measures. In other cases, civil society is able to pressure the government to issue certain measures.

### GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Beyond the restrictive measures of closing down parts of society, the governments of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan have issued financial aid packages to sustain the economy, and distributed cash donations or food baskets etc. to support the poor and vulnerable parts of their populations, suffering from the lockdown. Other government initiatives have responded to appeals from civil society organizations, supplementing and enabling their measures against gender based violence, including free-of-charge access to listening stations and platforms and the wavering of mobility restrictions, benefitting women and others who suffer violence from family members etc. Finally, a quarantine shelter for COVID-19 GBV survivors was established in Tunisia.

Examples of other government measures include safeguarding the economy and alleviating the effect of the confinement and lockdown on the population, including vulnerable and poor families, initiated by the government of Tunisia, which also sustained businesses with € 800 million.<sup>11</sup> The government of Egypt delegated \$6 billion to prevent the spreading of the virus and support economic growth (UN-ESCWA 2020). Egypt's Ministry of Labor supported unemployed irregular workers, women included, with USD 2.9 million. Finally, women community leaders in rural areas received increased payments, in addition to minor cash allocations to some 300,000 beneficiaries (OECD 2020). In Morocco, a special fund was created to contribute to Morocco's response to the pandemic, following an instruction from King Mohammed VI, and resulting in donations from corporations, individuals etc. at \$1.5 billion.<sup>12</sup> In Jordan, three packages were provided to support those that the crisis has left unemployed with 50% of their wages, but only partially covering Syr-

<sup>11</sup> <https://ilacnet.org/2020/04/29/covid-19-and-tunisia-socio-economic-challenges-in-a-young-democracy/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/how-arab-states-take-coronavirus-morocco-case-study>



ian refugees working in the Jordanian labor market.<sup>13</sup> These and other measures were initiated to support business economies and the unemployed or those lacking an income, but they have not prevented severe consequences for the population at large. The measures intended to support businesses respond to a small part of the problem in Tunisia and similarly in other Arab countries. This is among other factors due to an extensive informal economy, which before the pandemic secured an income for a significant share of the economically active population, and the fact that small businesses are numerous in the four countries, employing a limited number of people.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, social benefits launched by the governments will only partially respond to the needs created by the lock down. In Morocco, however, OECD estimates that implemented social measures, including those aimed at supporting informal workers who have lost their earnings, will most likely benefit women due to their over-representation among vulnerable segments of the population (OECD 2020). Fédération des Droits des Femmes (FLDF), a women's rights organization and partner of KVINFO, instead emphasizes the discriminatory features of the aid; its distribution in the country (and in Tunisia) requires registration, despite the confinement and despite limited access to the relevant authorities online or in rural areas.<sup>15</sup>

According to news reports, numerous arrests have occurred in all four countries on the grounds of transgression of COVID-19 restrictions. Confinement measures and curfews, some of which have been lifted again, affect people's everyday mobility. Already before the crisis, the government of Egypt systematically curtailed women's organisations in the country, so COVID-19 restrictions only turned a critical situation more severe. Activists are imprisoned in overcrowded prisons where the risk of being infected with corona is very high and access to protection measures and health services poor.

#### Recommendations for governments:

- Maintain reliable access to the internet and cease internet shutdowns that prevent people from obtaining essential information and services during and beyond the crisis. Address violations against human rights defenders, women's rights and LGBT+ rights activists and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.
- Guarantee that any new emergency laws and decrees deployed to combat the pandemic do not in any circumstances restrict fundamental democratic rights, and make sure that any such laws are not discriminatory on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual identity, language, religion and social origin, and are time-bound and subject to sufficient oversight by both the legislature and courts.

<sup>13</sup> <https://syriadirect.org/news/ineligible-for-government-aid-syrians-struggle-amidst-covid-19-lockdowns/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://ilacnet.org/2020/04/29/covid-19-and-tunisia-socio-economic-challenges-in-a-young-democracy/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

- Refrain from using responses to COVID-19 as a pretext to impose restrictions on civil society, target human rights defenders and curb online freedoms.
- Release all human rights defenders and political prisoners who were imprisoned for their human rights activities, or for expressing views contrary to those of the state or government.

## CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

In Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, civil society organizations working towards gender equality and gender transformation had to cease many of their activities due to confinement and physical distancing. Some organizations quickly converted their activities to on-line, others to respond to those mostly in need. In Tunisia, a coalition of civil society organisations wrote an open letter encouraging the government to apply a feminist approach to their COVID-19 response plan. Representatives of the coalition subsequently had a meeting with the Minister for Women, Children and Family. A prompt response from civil society also circumvented a government decision that all women with children under 15 years were to remain at home while the lockdown was being progressively lifted. In Morocco, FLDF initiated the important work of studying and documenting the gendered consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. In both countries, civil society organizations promoting gender equality initiated a campaign in support of the guidelines and measurements taken by the government. However, these organizations also raised critical voices towards the fact that those not registered with the authorities were denied benefits from food and cash aid supplies, and just like organizations in Jordan (UN Women 2020a), they prepared a campaign to encourage men to take their share of household chores.

#### Recommendations for future programming:

- Include a gender lens to all programming more consistently, and assess how the program takes different gender identities into account
- Advocate for gender equality to be institutionalized in Constitutions, laws, policies, budgets and in practice.
- Campaign to challenge gender stereotypes.
- Produce documentation on how, domestic violence, gender based political violence, online harassment and violence, violence and harassment at the workplace and in public transportation hampers women's labor market participation and equal political participation.

- Conceptualise and develop different strategies for addressing domestic violence, gender based political violence and harassment and violence in the workplace, in public transportation and online.

Intimate partner violence and other violence in the home during the isolation brought along by confinement jeopardized the work of the organizations that have prioritized prevention and protection from this form of violence, and they sought the attention of governments and authorities to the under-reporting of domestic violence during confinement. GBV services have been disrupted, as have social and protection networks. Capacity of shelters is stretched and some cannot accept all the women who ask for shelter. Partners in Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco are raising awareness on GBV hotlines and texting services and trying to make the shelters work under lock down. Ligue des Electricites Tunisiennes (LET), which is supporting women in elected political positions, reports increased harassment and violence against female local council members during the crisis.

#### **Recommendations for civil society future programming on GBV:**

- In crisis, direct services such as shelter, hotlines and legal aid tend to need immediate, temporary upscaling, while maintaining advocacy for governments obligations to deliver such services.
- Advocate for laws protecting women and girls from domestic violence and for enforcement of laws to end impunity.
- Campaign to challenge the culture of acceptance of GBV and domestic violence.
- Advocate for review and reform of legislation on GBV, in order to align with international standards.
- Advocate for systematic and reliable data collection on GBV to inform policies.
- Advocate for governments to allocate adequate human and financial resources to combatting domestic violence during and beyond the crisis.
- Advocate for governments to prioritize and support all activities and services related to reducing domestic violence, noting that intersectionality, i.e. a person's social and political identities, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or disability might combine and increase risks and need special attention in prevention and response strategies.
- Advocate for governments to develop and promote remote methods for reporting and counselling.

In Egypt an expansion of the Takaful and Karama social protection programmes were extended to an additional 60,000 households, of which 88% represent women beneficiaries (OECD 2020). It is important to take the interlinkages of these gendered consequences into account, as GBV prevents women's access to the labor market.

#### **Recommendations for future programming:**

- Use the fact that many fathers have stayed at home during lock down to campaign for a more fair division of the unpaid care and domestic work.
- Campaign to challenge stereotypes for masculinity, e.g. 'Man in many ways'.
- Provide economic analysis of women's contribution to the economy as participants in the labor force to counter voices pushing for women to give up formal employment.
- Use the visibility of un-paid care and domestic work, e.g. home schooling and caring for sick relatives, to push for recognition of these contributions to society's wealth.
- Use the fact that women employed in the health sector went to work while their partners were home to boost women's participation in the labor force.
- Document and advocate for people working in the informal sector to be included in economic support packages and for social protection to cover informal sector workers.

Civil society organizations aiming for gender equality contribute to implementing governmental action plans concerning traditional harmful practices, e.g. in Morocco and Egypt, but they are also pushing for further legal and financial support to end these practices. The COVID-19 crisis largely relegated harmful traditional practices to obscurity. KVINFO's Moroccan partner, Droits & Justice, conducted a country-wide study on child marriages in 2019, which shows that 25,000 marriages, or around 10% of marriages are underage, and customary marriages are estimated to add another 15,000 to this number. The study confirms the close connection between child marriages and poverty. The loss of livelihood for many families during the COVID-19 crisis means that without savings or other means to make them resilient to economic shocks, marrying off girls is one of the harmful coping mechanisms applied. Droits & Justice expects a steep rise as soon as the lockdown is lifted.

**Recommendations for future programming:**

- Advocate for ring fencing the funding for SRHR during crisis and for including SRHR in emergency funding.
- Advocate for incentives to refrain from child marriage as a coping mechanism for poor households in economic support packages.
- Advocate for confronting child marriage from a combined legal, economic, and cultural perspective.

COVID-19 responses from partners under KVINFO's Gender Equality Programme are temporary as they try to adapt planned activities to the new situation. Long term and future responses can to a different degree take the new challenges revealed or emphasized during the pandemic into account. This may include some renewed and more focused strategies for increasing women's access to decision-making, economic activities and their inclusion in the labor market, as well as programming that takes into account that increased gender based violence in and beyond the home, relegation to home and economic hardship. They may also use the opportunities mentioned in section 2 to challenge existing perceptions of gender roles.



## 5. CASE STUDY: THE COVID-19 RESPONSES OF TWO DIVERSE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

*Jordanian Women's Union* and *Ahel for community organizing* are two civil society organizations operating in Jordan and partners of KVINFO. The mission of JWU is “to eliminate all types of discrimination against Jordanian women”, “to promote human rights, in general, and women’s and children’s rights, in particular”, etc.<sup>16</sup> The mission of Ahel<sup>17</sup> is to “ build leadership, build organising capacity, coach grass-root campaigns and movements for social and political change, and create knowledge ...”<sup>18</sup> JWU has local branches in all regions. It is in other words, a broad membership-based organization with activities in a range of fields related to women’s rights and empowerment. *Ahel* is an entrepreneurial organization working within a much narrower field of activities; in addition, employees and activists of Ahel are from a younger generation. How did these diverse organizations respond to the COVID-19 crisis?

### CRISIS ADAPTATIONS OF JWU

JWU was established in 1945 but was dissolved by law more than once.<sup>19</sup> The organization works within a range of fields, from women’s political participation to protection and prevention of GBV and promotion of SRHR. Regarding Gender based violence, in light of the effects of the pandemic and the findings of rapid assessments and other experiences on the ground, JWU is responding to the increased domestic violence and the barriers to seeking help by increasing their support throughout the country with shelter, hotline and counselling services. During lock down, only JWU shelters kept operating and accepted new cases of survivors of GBV. However, JWU is facing funding gaps for shelter and hotline services, which leaves a critical

<sup>16</sup> <http://jwu.org.jo/Pages/Details.aspx?lng=1&pageid=10>

<sup>17</sup> The word Ahel in Arabic means a family that is not necessarily blood related

<sup>18</sup> <https://ahel.org/en/>

<sup>19</sup> In 1957, martial law was declared in Jordan and all non-governmental organizations were dissolved. Thus, the JWU was forced to disband. In 1974, the organization re-emerged as the Women’s Union of Jordan and continued its activities until 1981 when, once again, it was compelled to discontinue its operations. With the democratization of Jordan’s parliament in 1990, the Women’s Union of Jordan again resumed operation. In 1994, it adopted its present name, the Jordanian Women’s Union. (<http://jwu.org.jo/Pages/Details.aspx?lng=1&pageid=9>)

gap in a core service that became acute. KVINFO is in the process of seeking approval by MFA for reallocating funding to support JWU in stepping up the response to increased domestic violence. This is undertaken in close collaboration with KVINFO, Kvinna Till Kvinna and IM Swedish partner, among whom a donor coordination effort was initiated in 2018. The long term and wide reach of JWU to 17 locations throughout Jordan, has proven effective during lockdown where people have not been permitted to leave their local neighborhood.

JWU's strong foundation in service provision, capacity building and advocacy allows for scaling up or down interventions as needed without too much difficulty during special circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners that are stable, flexible and adaptable are an asset for avoiding a total stagnation or even setback for women's rights and status during times of crisis, underscored by the expertise and long term connections on the ground represented by the partner. In other words, the partnership between KVINFO and JWU ensures the resilience of gender activism during times of crisis. The donor coordination between KVINFO, IM Swedish Development Partner and Kvinna till Kvinna vis-à-vis the change of field for activities proposed by JWU also contributes to the ease of adaptation to the crisis. In responding to the needed adjustments identified by JWU, the coordinated approach lead to a reduced bureaucratic burden on JWU during a stressful situation, and thus is presenting the benefits of donor coordination. From the JWU responses to the pandemic, the importance of using every situation as an opportunity is a lesson to be learned. In May 2020, a committee was established consisting of representatives of the Ministry of Social Development, the Family Protection Unit, Anti-Trafficking Unit and JWU in order to update social support measures and mechanisms during the pandemic. JWU was assigned the responsibility of preparing a paper on the obstacles around providing social support services and identifying any gaps. JWU seized this opportunity to advocate for women survivors of violence to be included in receiving social support funds. Another lesson is that staff on the ground are the first responders, also when working from their private phones, creating WhatsApp groups to allow for the safety and full access to support services for survivors seeking help through hotlines. JWU staff have continued to work from home during extremely difficult circumstances. To continue they need support, flexibility and understanding from their partners.

The adaptations of JWU to the COVID-19 crisis has potential to inspire future programming, so that it considers, also in budgeting, which activities can be implemented online (develops online tools and capacity of staff to use them), invests in systems and technology that support online work, including from home as needed, as well as staff welfare. In general, future programming will benefit from showing flexibility when working with partners and responding to their changing needs in timely manner. It should be noted that a crisis typically leaves certain fields of intervention inactive, irrespective of their importance in a short and long term perspective.

## CRISIS ADAPTATIONS OF AHEL

Ahel uses a method involving storytelling to bring people together at community-level and give voice to those who otherwise experience not having one. This is how Ahel contributes to bring justice and the fulfillment of human rights. The current partnership of KVINFO and Ahel involves working with the thoughts and ideas of participants to convince them that they can change some of their own circumstances. According to the founder and Director, Nisreen Haj Ahmed, the core of the matter is the perception of power, whether the concern is sexual harassment, security at home or political change, and the turning upside down of participants' understanding that power is something oppressive. Power and strength, she finds, are something that everyone can get if you know how to take it.<sup>20</sup> This method fits well with online tools and for some time already activities have been online in regional projects. Screening for participants, establishing youth leadership teams, training on masculinity and popular education, can all be shifted to online activities. It is not always ideal, but Ahel has been able to maintain all of their activities during the COVID-19 crises because of this flexibility. In addition, the courses that Ahel is conducting online include training on online learning, so that women and youth can participate either without or with prior capacity. This is a further strength of the approach applied by Ahel.

### Recommendations for future programming:

- It should be noted that the adaptations of civil society organizations to the COVID-19 crisis has potential to inspire future programming by increasing flexibility when working with partners and responding to their changing needs in a timely manner.
- It should be considered, also in budgeting, which activities can be implemented online (develop online tools and capacity of staff to use them), to invest in systems and technology that support online work, including from home as needed, as well as staff welfare, while taking the strength of the organization vis-à-vis the field of intervention into account.
- A crisis typically forces civil society organizations to leave certain fields of intervention inactive, irrespective of their importance in a short and long term perspective, calling for more adaptability.
- Reaching to many regions and ability to work online may accompany each other. Due to extensive skills in information and communication technology (ICT) and to the type of target population, especially entrepreneurial types of organiza-

<sup>20</sup> <https://kvinfos.dk/you-are-stronger-as-an-individual-when-you-stand-with-others/?lang=en>

tions may be able to adapt well to the pandemic, avoiding cancellation of any part of the process. This target population may then be skilled but narrow.

- Organisations that use ICT for advocacy and capacity building may use ICT for development and adaptation during a crisis, including potential second and third waves of the pandemic. It will continue to be an approach to bear in mind when selecting and investing in partnerships. However, rather than de-selecting work with organizations on this account alone, another inspiration from organization to organization should be considered, so that organizations less agile during crisis may also be able to learn from those who are highly adaptive.
- A critical point to raise is online security, which is too often ignored, but nevertheless of salient importance as activities of civil society are transferred from face-to-face to online basis. Further emphasizing this risk is the squeezing of civic space, in accordance with the findings of the COVID-19 crisis in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan.



## 6. CONCLUSION

During the COVID-19 crisis, civil society responses in Arab countries have mitigated the effects of the downsizing of the economy and supported those suffering from the lockdown, supplementing the measures initiated by governments. Moreover, the crisis constituted a unique opportunity for civil society to lead attention to the fact that confinement to home and lockdown constitute particular risks for women, girls and LGBT+, considering the heightened tension in the home and society more generally, and considering the risk of exclusion from formal decision-making, labor market and economic activities. However, particularly increased intimate partner violence that follows confinement to home and other tensions, such as increased economic hardship, received timely although not sufficient attention from civil society in Arab countries. When prompted by civil society and women's organizations, some governments responded positively towards supportive measures, but the crisis also demonstrated the challenge of including LGBT+ and gender based violence beyond the domestic sphere in the responses of governments and civil society organizations alike. At the level of civil society, the crisis constitutes an opportunity to realize that evaluations of adaptations and flexible solutions among civil society organizations promoting gender equality should maintain a view to the squeezing of civil liberties. Civil society may be able to assume the responsibility of services or support when the state does not, or supplement government measures, and even to pressure the government into assuming certain responsibilities, but only if given sufficient space to work and provide critical perspectives. The government of Egypt, but also governments of other Arab countries have proven 'woman-friendly' in some COVID-19 policies, which should be seen against the barriers also established by the same governments for women's organizations that defend women's and human rights.

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