



## COVID-19 and Women's rights in Palestine

WCLAC Gender Assessment Report  
March 5<sup>th</sup> – May 31<sup>st</sup>

### The gendered impact of COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 worldwide has severely impacted mankind as a whole. Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11<sup>th</sup>, it has threatened the health and well-being of people everywhere, and has also unleashed a series of secondary detrimental consequences including an impending economic crisis with a surge in unemployment, increased risk of violence in the home and decrease in mental health. The impact of COVID-19 has been particularly severe for already vulnerable groups, there among Palestinian women for whom the consequences of the pandemic have been compounded with the patriarchal structures within Palestinian society and constant violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) carried out by Israeli occupying forces. The following report outlines how women in Palestine have been affected by the pandemic, as well as WCLAC's emergency response carried out between March and May 2020.

#### Palestinian women – at the intersection of two vulnerable groups

The first cases of COVID-19 in Palestine were registered on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2020 in Bethlehem, with a state of emergency promptly declared by the Prime Minister that same day. A complete lockdown was declared on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, including closures of educational and religious facilities as well as courts of law throughout the West Bank. In East Jerusalem, social distancing regulations were enforced from March 11<sup>th</sup>, with a state of emergency and complete lockdown announced by Israeli authorities on March 19<sup>th</sup>. Although necessary for the safety and health of the population, these restrictions have naturally had a significant effect on both the economy and on the well-being of people throughout Palestine.

The COVID-19 pandemic may be globally spread and thus have near universal impact, but the secondary consequences of the pandemic and restrictions target us far from equally. Instead the crisis has accentuated and exacerbated existing inequalities and societal structures, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future as we grapple with the long-term effects on the economy, health care system and labor market.

It is therefore more important than ever that decision makers take note of UNSCR 1325 which calls for a gendered approach to conflict and crisis. UN Secretary General António Guterres has also emphasized the importance of specifically supporting the rights of women and girls through the COVID-19 crisis, calling for a global ceasefire on domestic violence<sup>1</sup> and urging governments to put women and girls at the center of their efforts to recover from COVID-19 and highlighting the importance of women's leadership.<sup>2</sup> Response programming, research and analysis of the on-going pandemic must therefore apply a gendered and intersectional approach in order to protect those most at-risk. Throughout the first months of the crisis we have seen vulnerable groups become increasingly vulnerable, and those already at risk have been further stripped of protection and support.

For the Palestinian population, this has taken the shape of a health care system already undermined and weakened by decades of Israeli military occupation, placed under additional strain.<sup>3</sup> Palestine represents one of the most densely populated areas in the world, as a consequence of being pushed into an ever-shrinking geographical space by the occupying forces, signifying an increased risk of contracting and spreading the COVID-19 virus. This is particularly alarming in the context of the Gaza Strip and Palestinian refugee camps.<sup>4</sup> Economic hardship, already widespread after decades of occupation and repeated violations of humanitarian and human rights law, is at risk of deepening further due to lockdown and border closures. Those within Palestinian society that are already particularly economically vulnerable are likely to be hit the hardest, there among women, informal workers and workers who need to cross borders or checkpoints in order to access their livelihood. At the same time, IHL violations have continued to be carried out by Israeli occupying forces to the same extent as before the pandemic, compounding with the other challenges faced.

As in most countries worldwide, each of the detrimental consequences of COVID-19 and lockdown have been particularly severe for Palestinian women, simply by virtue of their sex. This includes particular difficulties in accessing health care,<sup>5</sup> an increase in unpaid labor and care of family members, greater vulnerability on the labor market and greater risk of economic hardship.<sup>6</sup> The 11 percent of Palestinian women that are the main provider of their households have been particularly impacted.<sup>7</sup> There has also been a significantly increased risk for gender based violence as the crisis and lockdown exacerbates many of the

<sup>1</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/put-women-and-girls-centre-efforts-recover-covid-19>

<sup>3</sup> Diakonia IHL Centre Palestine, Health-Related Duties and Obligations of an Occupying Power During a Pandemic, April 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Diakonia IHL Centre Palestine, Health-Related Duties and Obligations of an Occupying Power During a Pandemic, April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> CARE Palestine, Rapid Gender Assessment – A summary of Early Gender Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 2020.

<sup>6</sup> See: CARE Palestine, Rapid Gender Assessment – A summary of Early Gender Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 2020; CARE: COVID-19 Could Condemn Women To Decades of Poverty: Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women's and Girls' Economic Justice and Rights, April 2020; UNESCWA Policy Brief.4 2020; WCLAC Statement: On the Occasion of Labor Day The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling Demands Greater Prioritization of the Needs of Palestinian Working Women in the Governmental Economic Interventions and Responses to COVID-19.

<sup>7</sup> WCLAC Statement: On the Occasion of Labor Day The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling Demands Greater Prioritization of the Needs of Palestinian Working Women in the Governmental Economic Interventions and Responses to COVID-19.

associated risk factors.<sup>8</sup> For many women, lockdown has meant being trapped in the home along with a potential aggressor, without the possibility to leave the house to seek support or protection. Being confined to often small living spaces, added with the stress of increased economic hardship, real and perceived food insecurity and severe health concerns, further exacerbates the risk of violence in the home.

This means that during the past four months, Palestinian women have found themselves at the intersection of two highly vulnerable groups. They are dealing as ever with the impact of IHL violations and the occupation of Israeli military forces, the patriarchal structures and high prevalence of gender based violence within Palestinian society, and now the added third threat of COVID-19 which exacerbates all structural inequalities even further. The struggle of Palestinian women during the pandemic has been palpable and WCLAC can personally bear witness to the manifestations in the testimonies collected by our field researchers, social workers and from the hundreds of women that have reached out to the GBV helpline to ask for urgent support, protection and counseling.

Though Palestinian women have been impacted by COVID-19 in several ways, a few principle effects can be seen. WCLAC has responded to and addressed the following challenges faced by women during the pandemic and lockdown:

- ❖ Increased risk for gender based violence, due to several risk factors exacerbated by the lockdown.
- ❖ Hindered access to justice, due to the temporary closure of courts of law during lockdown. In addition, reduced usage of jail time has jeopardized the enforcement of laws that protect women.
- ❖ Increased economic hardship, particularly among the most vulnerable.
- ❖ Continued IHL violations carried out by Israeli occupying forces, including lack of access to health care.

### **WCLAC's emergency response strategy**

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, WCLAC immediately organized an emergency response strategy to be implemented throughout the pandemic. This strategy has allowed the WCLAC to continue supporting and protecting women at risk through remote work during office closures and despite the inability of many women to leave the home. WCLAC's emergency response has included:

- ❖ Providing a free, 24-hour GBV helpline service as well as e-counseling for women in need of support.
- ❖ Protection of GBV survivors at shelters has also been provided throughout the entire pandemic.
- ❖ Carrying out media interventions and awareness campaigns on GBV through social media, radio and television in order to highlight the increased risk during lockdown, and spread information on how to access available services and protection.
- ❖ Carrying out responsive interventions through partnerships and protection networks, including financial and in-kind assistance to women victims of violence.

<sup>8</sup> CARE Palestine, Rapid Gender Assessment – A summary of Early Gender Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic, March 2020

- ❖ Continuing national advocacy work, referral work and collaborating with networks during the lockdown, including exerting pressure on Palestinian Government to adopt the Family Protection Law and managing Protection networks.
- ❖ Documenting human rights and IHL violations against women throughout Palestine, that have continued throughout the entire lockdown period, and engage in international advocacy to promote respect for IHL and human rights.

This report summarizes how the emergency response strategy has been implemented between March 5<sup>th</sup> and May 31<sup>st</sup>, and what WCLAC has observed concerning the impact of COVID-19 on Palestinian women.

## **WCLAC service provision to women victim of violence during COVID-19**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions, WCLAC has maintained a GBV helpline open 24 hours daily between March 5<sup>th</sup> and May 30<sup>th</sup>. This allowed the Service and Community Empowerment Unit to continue providing legal and social support to women even while WCLAC's offices were closed due to lockdown restrictions. On May 30<sup>th</sup> the office reopened to receive women for consultations and support in person, but the helpline has also remained open during office hours. WCLAC has also maintained support to community based organizations (CBOs) in Tubas and Tulkarem, to provide social and legal consultations to women during the entire lockdown period.

### **Violence against women during COVID-19**

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the following restrictions have had two primary effects on the prevalence of GBV in Palestine and elsewhere. Firstly, the risk factors associated to GBV have been exacerbated, leading to a probable increase in prevalence and severity of GBV. Secondly, it has become more difficult for many women victims of violence to access support and protection services. Palestinian women already face a particularly high risk of domestic violence, due to patriarchal structures in society and exacerbated by the high unemployment and economic hardship as well as the constant pressure of living under a military occupation. The 2019 Violence Survey carried out by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, found that 29 percent of currently or ever married women in Palestine had experience some form of violence (such as psychological, physical, sexual, social or economic violence) by their husbands in the past twelve months. The prevalence was significantly higher in Gaza (38 percent) than in the West Bank (24 percent).<sup>9</sup> Adding a pandemic, state of emergency and lockdown to this situation near guarantees increased risk for violence against women. Juzoor found when interviewing Palestinian families in April, that 19.5 percent indicated that domestic violence increased during lockdown, and that 70.8 percent believed that the violence would further increase with the extension of lockdown.<sup>10</sup>

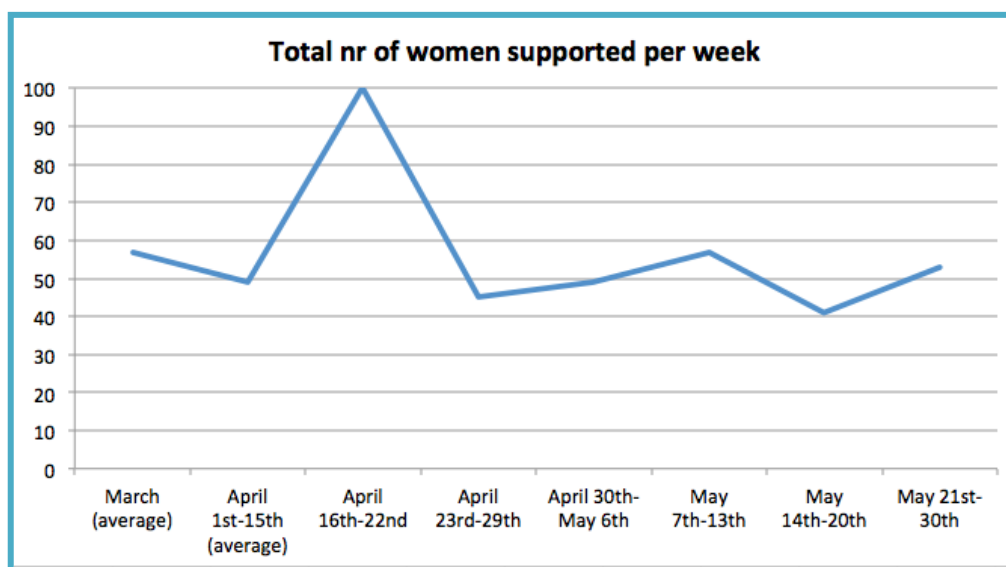
In addition to increased risk of violence, WCLAC and several other women's organizations have noted with concern that restrictions of movement and fear of contracting the virus itself have made it more difficult than ever for many Palestinian women to contact support services and access care and protection. When confined to the home along with other family members, finding the privacy to call for psychosocial support or legal advice becomes near impossible for many women. With disrupted daily routines, women are also less able to find excuses to leave the house to access protection or simply find respite from tense or violent family conditions. It is also likely that many have avoided seeking health care or protection services after suffering from physical violence, for fear of contracting the virus. Finally, the fear of being separated from one's children is more pronounced than ever, compounded with fears for children's health and safety. This has hindered women from taking measures to remove themselves from unsafe family homes, opting instead to stay and protect their children.

<sup>9</sup> Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019 Violence Survey.

<sup>10</sup> Juzoor for Health and Social Development. Gender-Based Violence during COVID-19 Pandemic Palestine , May 2020.

## Analyzing the statistics – Women supported by the GBV Helpline

Despite these obstacles to reaching out, 670 women have contacted WCLAC during lockdown requesting psychosocial or legal support between March 5<sup>th</sup> and May 31<sup>st</sup>. Based on the statistics collected by the WCLAC Service and Community Empowerment Unit, the number of calls to the GBV helpline have remained at a similar level throughout the lockdown period, with one clear spike in mid-April. The third week of April (April 16<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>) saw a 69 percent increase in calls compared to an average week in March. An increase in nearly every type of incident was recorded, though particularly so in cases pertaining to economic and social rights. This is thought to be caused in part by the renewal of the state of emergency for another month in the beginning of April, and ensuing increased desperation for many families and supported women. Mid-April also represents a period in time where the effects of lockdown were becoming increasingly intense, including unemployment and financial hardship.

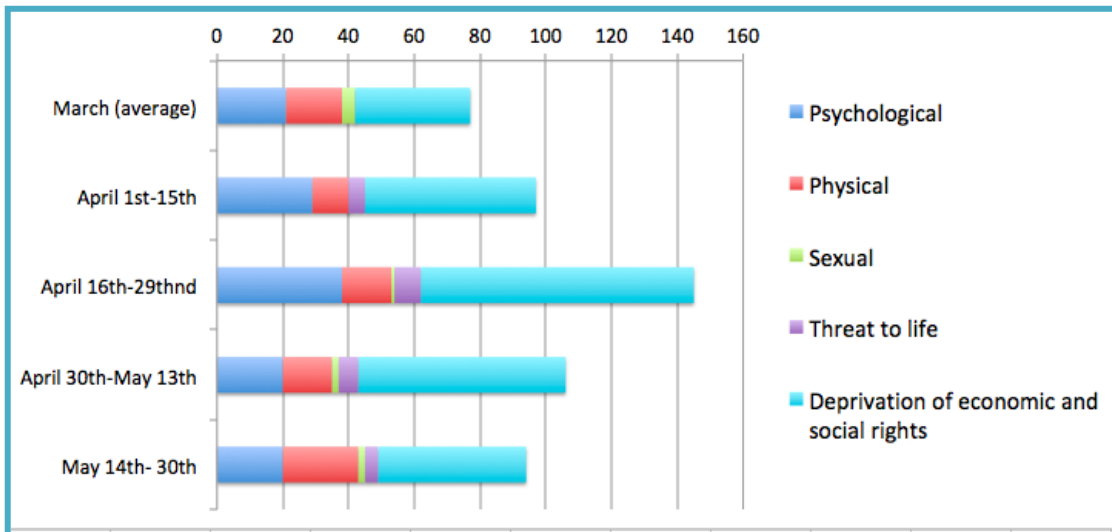


**Figure 1.** Total number of calls to the GBV Helpline reported per week.

The week after (23<sup>rd</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> of April) marked the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan and figures returned to a level similar to March. This despite the fact that a decrease in consultations and cases is usually noted around Ramadan and Eid holidays. Women are generally highly occupied with family obligations during these weeks and also lack the privacy needed to call for support. It is interesting to note however that even the first week of Ramadan saw a relatively high number of calls concerning psychological (15 cases) and physical violence (12), and threats to women’s lives (2), the drop in calls was mainly related to decreased cases on deprivation of economic and social rights.

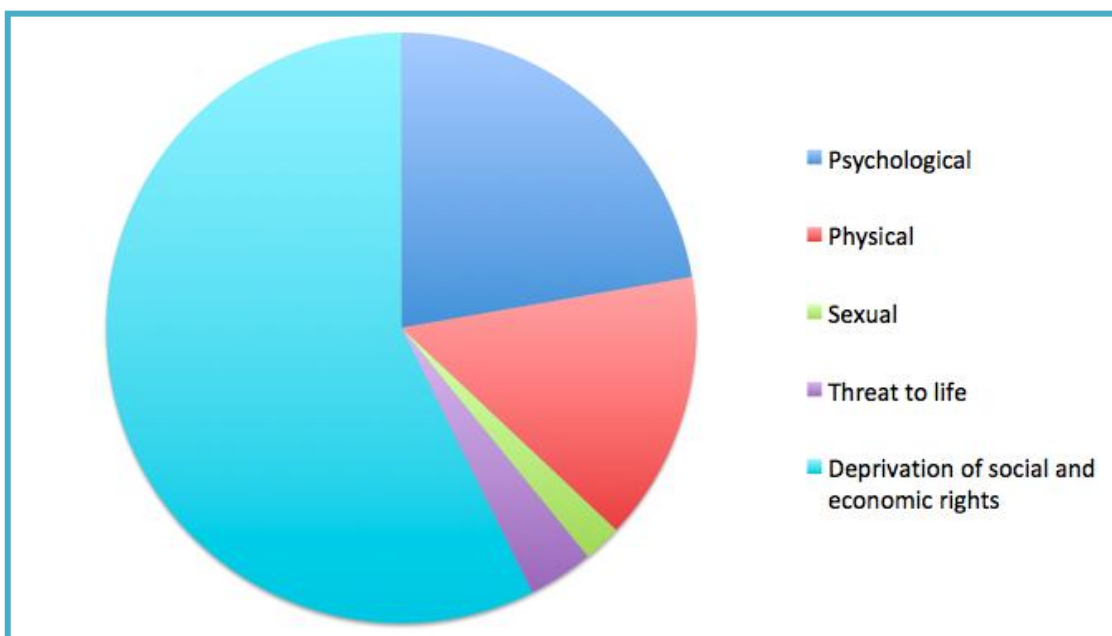
Out of the total number of calls made to the GBV helpline, a majority of concerns related to deprivation of social and economic rights. This includes support in legal battles such as custody, alimony or maintenance, but also economic violence such as the withholding of funds as well as women reporting financial hardship and requesting support. The statistics in Figure 2 reflect how the cases were recorded when the women first reached out. It is important to note however, that in many of these cases the economic and social rights were only the first layer of women’s suffering. Many women have felt most comfortable reaching out to speak of legal or economic issues, but as case support has continued and the contact deepened, other types of violence against the women have also been revealed, especially physical and psychological violence. There is a particularly clear interconnectedness

between financial hardship and violence during this pandemic. In many supported families who are dealing with immense financial strain, unemployment and food insecurity there has also been an increase in domestic violence.



**Figure 2.** Number of calls to GBV helpline per two weeks, reported by type of incident.

Besides deprivation of economic and social rights, psychological violence has been the most commonly reported incident, closely followed by physical violence. This follows the same patterns of GBV prevalence as before the pandemic. As noted above, the PCBS 2019 Violence Survey found that 57 percent of currently or ever married women had experienced psychological violence by their husbands at least once in the past twelve months,<sup>11</sup> making it the most commonly reported form of GBV throughout Palestine.



**Figure 3.** Calls to GBV Helpline March 5th-May 30th, reported by type of incident.

<sup>11</sup> PCBS 2019 Violence Survey.

Throughout the lockdown period, WCLAC has however witnessed an increase in the amount of women who have reported threats to their lives, especially noticeable one month into the state of emergency. Between April 16<sup>th</sup> and May 30<sup>th</sup>, there has been an average of 3 cases of threats to a woman's life every week. This is significantly higher than the typical number of cases received pre-pandemic and is a trend that has caused great concern. Cases have concerned threats both from intimate partners and other relatives including parents or extended family. WCLAC has supported these women through psychosocial support, legal counseling and protection offered in shelter. The women who have not entered a protection shelter have been closely followed up on by telephone to ensure their safety and that of their children.

WCLAC has also specifically monitored the occurrence of femicide in both Gaza and the West Bank during this time. Out of the 17 cases of femicide, suicide or death under suspicious circumstances that WCLAC has documented during 2020, 10 of the deaths occurred during the COVID-19 state of emergency. The causes of death varied, however certain patterns can be discerned. There were multiple cases where the woman had been "killed mistakenly by gun fire, by one of the family members", usually a minor, raising questions about whether this was in fact an accident. There were also multiple cases where the woman "fell from a high place", raising questions about suicide or suspicion of crime. WCLAC believes that in some cases women and girls are forced to commit suicide, or killed in a way that looks like a suicide. Finally, some of the women died from being "severely beaten", usually by a close family member (son, father or husband). Most of the cases monitored by WCLAC concerned women or girls between 16-40 years of age, with an equal distribution between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Furthermore, although the number of calls regarding physical violence have remained at a similar level throughout the time period, WCLAC has noted an increase in severity and complexity of the violence. It has become more common for women victim of physical violence to report severe injuries, including injuries that they needed to seek professional health care to treat. In addition, many cases have concerned several different types of violence that have interacted and increased in tandem. Women have for instance found themselves victim of psychological violence that has later been compounded with economic and physical violence as lockdown has continued and additional stress has been added to the family's situation. Many of the women that reached out have also had long background stories of violence that they have not previously sought help for, but that have now culminated in a sharp increase in violence and suffering during the pandemic and lockdown. The interconnectedness between the increase in violence and other socioeconomic challenges has also been palpable, as illustrated in the case outlined in Figure 5 below. The increase of violence seems to have been particularly pronounced in families that were also struggling financially or had severe health concerns.

#### **One Woman's story...**

A woman from Gaza reached out to WCLAC's GBV helpline during the end of April in need of urgent support. She and her two daughters had all suffered from physical and sexual violence carried out by the husband/father. They now felt trapped in the house with him during lockdown and feared for their lives. After the mother reached out to WCLAC, our social workers were able to support them with continuous psychological support and advice. With this support and guidance they were able to identify and move to a safe space.

**Figure 4.** Woman supported by GBV helpline in April.



It may be that the pressure of lockdown and fear of the pandemic has led to more severe physical violence being carried out as well as more threats to life. Another possible interpretation however, is that violence of all degrees has increased throughout Palestine during this period, but only victims of the most severe incidents have made the effort to overcome barriers to contact support services. This seems likely given that experts agree on the exacerbated risk for GBV and a probable increase in unreported cases. However we interpret the statistics, it is clear that there has been an acute need for protection, legal advice and psychosocial support and that the violence faced by Palestinian women during lockdown has grown in severity and most likely also in prevalence.

Another form of violence that has become increasingly common during the lockdown is online abuse. For the women supported by WCLAC, this has mostly concerned former partners who have threatened to spread private or intimate photographs or other information about a woman through social media and other online forums. There was a particular rise in these cases towards the end of the lockdown, most noticeable from May 7<sup>th</sup> to May 31<sup>st</sup>. The incidents have caused great psychological stress for the women who have reached out to WCLAC, and are a method to exercise psychological abuse and often coercion. These incidents are also particularly difficult for women to report and prosecute. If the threats are in fact realized, it could have great negative impact on their lives and well-being, including their mental health, social relations, security and possibly their livelihoods. WCLAC has provided the women with psychosocial support and legal advice, and upheld communication with the Police Cyber Crime Unit.

This increase in online threats and harassment is relatively new and is still being monitored, however there is evidence that tentatively suggests that this may be part of a global trend related to COVID-19. UN Women reports that several sources have noted a rise in cyber harassment, cyber flashing, stalking and the grooming of young people into exploitative

### **One Woman's story...**

S.W. is a 23 year old woman from a village in the West Bank. She was raped several years ago, and has since then suffered abuse from her parents who hold her responsible for what happened. Her father has physically abused her, prevented her from leaving the house, and isolated her from the rest of the family.

During the COVID-19 lockdown the situation deteriorated further. The family is facing deep economic hardship, and the now unemployed father spends almost all of his time at home. Throughout this, the violence against the young woman increased to such a degree that a friend of hers contacted WCLAC through social media in the beginning of April, seeking urgent help.

WCLAC's service providers were able to establish close contact with friends and family members who were able to support and mediate, as well as partners of WCLAC that could provide additional support. WCLAC also facilitated urgent financial support for the family, and are now working with all parties to provide support and protection for the young woman.

**Figure 5.** Woman supported by GBV helpline in April.

situations, as an increasing amount of time is spent online due to lockdown restrictions.<sup>12</sup> WCLAC continues to monitor this development and keeps close contact with the supported women as well as the Police Cyber Crime Unit.

### **WCLAC's Protection Services during COVID-19**

WCLAC's shelter services have remained open since the outbreak of the pandemic, and a total of six women have been referred to the protection shelter during the time period of April 16<sup>th</sup> – June 3<sup>rd</sup>. Cases have concerned primarily severe physical violence and threats to women's lives, and the violence has been carried out both by intimate partners and by parents or other extended family members.

WCLAC and other protection service providers faced difficulties in transferring women to safe locations during the beginning of lockdown, due to quarantine regulations. Regulations issued by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) stated that a woman could not enter a protection shelter without first having been quarantined for 14 days. However, at this time there were no guidelines or routines in place for quarantining women at risk of violence, making it near impossible for shelters to protect women while also ensuring their health and the shelter's compliance with ministry regulations. This came at a time when there was also a palpable need for protection, with an increase in threats to women's lives and severe physical violence.

WCLAC together with fellow women's rights organizations advocated for the clarification of the quarantine regulations and guidelines on how to safely transfer women to shelters, seeing as this protection was needed now more than ever. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, a sectoral meeting was organized by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) and attended by the MoSD, WCLAC and several other women's rights organizations. The meeting highlighted the need for transitional shelters where women could be quarantined before entering anti-violence shelters, clear guidelines on how to adapt the referral systems to the COVID-19 emergency, and a clear gender component in emergency response taking into consideration the specific needs of victims of GBV.

Following this meeting, the MoSD drafted a policy paper that was submitted as a proposal to the Palestinian Cabinet and later issued new guidelines for protection. These new procedural guidelines included COVID-19 testing for victims of domestic violence in urgent need of protection, cooperation between the Family Protection Unit at the Police and Ministry of Health to facilitate a safe space for protected women while awaiting their test results, and the guaranteed approval of entering a protection shelter after negative test results had been confirmed. Procedures were also established for those that may test positive to COVID-19, guaranteeing a dedicated safe space for them to protect both their health, safety and confidentiality.

Since mid-April, WCLAC shelter has been able to provide a safe space for women in need of protection, following the guidelines and regulations by testing new women for COVID-19 and quarantining them in specially designated rooms for the first 14 days of protection. This has made it possible to continue ensuring the safety of women, in terms of security, confidentiality and health.

WCLAC has also paid special attention to the safety, health and well-being of shelter staff during these challenging times. Regular meetings with the staff have been held to ensure

<sup>12</sup> UN Women: COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, April 2020.

that the new regulations are meeting the needs of women at-risk while also protecting the health and safety of the staff involved. In addition, a capacity building and support session for staff was organized which placed emphasis both on providing the best possible interventions for women in need of protection, and on care and psychological support for staff.

WCLAC has also held several meetings with five previously established protection networks in the areas of Hebron, Tubas, Tulkarem, Qalqilya and Jericho, respectively, that have now worked to communicate experiences and lessons learned among organizations providing protection during lockdown. The networks have been highly appreciated by all involved, as they allowed for knowledge sharing and informal capacity building during these particularly challenging times. The benefit of further coordination between member organizations has also been highlighted, as has the need to collectively advocate for the important role of protection service providers in the COVID-19 emergency response.

The networks have held regular bi-weekly meetings to further deepen communication and coordination. All have reiterated the difficulties in adequately protecting women victims of GBV during the pandemic. Member organizations have further difficulties for service providers in reaching victims during lockdown and the need to adapt referral pathways to the new circumstances of lockdown restrictions. Several have also stressed the interconnectedness between increased economic hardship and need for protection. This was exemplified by one meeting participant sharing how they had arrived at a woman's home after reports of disturbance and probable domestic violence, and found that the family in addition to suffering from violence, also had nothing to eat. This intertwined need for protection and financial or in-kind support during lockdown was reiterated by several protection providers.

Observing this interconnectedness between violence and financial hardship, and the increased need for urgent support among women particularly at-risk, all five protection networks designed programs to provide in-kind support to women through the common initiative '*We are with you*'. The initiative includes two steps to support women at-risk. Firstly, in-kind support is provided to GBV survivors, consisting of dignity kits that are put together from a gender conscious perspective, including hygiene products for women and other essential goods. Secondly, a media campaign has been launched in cooperation with local radio stations to promote awareness of available protection services for women victim of GBV, and how to access this protection. It has also highlighted the increased risk of GBV during lockdown and the need for better protection for women victims of violence. The initiative has been implemented in five governorates and the in-kind support has reached 150 women.

### **Access to justice and WCLAC legal support during COVID-19**

Besides the increased risk for GBV, one of the most palpable consequences of the lockdown for many of the women supported has been the inability to access justice. With the closure of both Civil and Sharia Courts on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, people across Palestine had to put pending cases on hold and wait to file new ones. For women, this meant inter alia that it was impossible to file for divorce, fight custody battles for their children or claim alimony or maintenance to which they were entitled.

The consequences were immediate. WCLAC heard from several women who were not receiving the agreed upon alimony from their former husbands and now had nowhere to turn for enforcement. Other cases concerned former partners neglecting to visit and care for

their children according to their court-ordained visitation rights, or who refused to return children to their mothers after visitation times were over. In addition, women who wanted to file for divorce found themselves locked in volatile and unsafe marriages, unable to leave their husbands without also being able to file for custody of their children and maintenance or alimony.

This has been detrimental to the physical and emotional well-being of women and children, both those that have been separated during unfinished custody battles and those who have been trapped in precarious family situations. Being separated from their children has caused women untold suffering, especially during these uncertain times with fears for their children's health and safety. In many cases it has also deepened the economic hardship among single mothers who have not been able to claim alimony and maintenance. This is particularly alarming considering that these women already represent a group that is highly vulnerable financially, and added to this the impending economic crisis.

As seen above (Figure 3) calls to the GBV helpline have been dominated by issues of social and economic rights, many of which have concerned legal consultations or case support. The high increase in calls during the second week of April (which saw a 69 percent increase compared to the previous week) was particularly characterized by an increase in calls related to economic and social rights. Throughout the entire lockdown period, WCLAC has heard continuously from women who are concerned that they cannot file court cases or follow up on existing ones, and have been asking for alternative ways to claim their rights and access justice

In order to advocate for better protection for the supported women WCLAC communicated an official request to the Chief Justice of Sharia Courts in the beginning of May, for the partial reopening of courts to hear emergency cases. WCLAC has placed special emphasis on cases related to custody, alimony, maintenance and visitation rights with children, as these fundamentally impact the economic, physical and psychological well-being of women and their children.

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, Civil Courts reopened, allowing women to once again follow up on and file cases. Sharia Courts partially opened as of April 14<sup>th</sup>, for following up on urgent cases. On May 18<sup>th</sup> they opened completely in governorates that the Ministry of Health had declared free of COVID-19, and after the Eid al-Fitr holidays all courts were officially declared open on May 26<sup>th</sup>. The reopening of courts has been a great relief for women

### **One woman's story...**

A 31 year old woman contacted WCLAC for support in mid May. She is a West Bank ID holder, whereas her husband has a Jerusalem ID. They have one child in common, and she is also raising his children from a previous marriage. She called WCLAC after having escaped from home where she had suffered severe and repeated physical violence from her husband.

She had been forced to flee without her four year old daughter and the husband was now refusing to let them meet. She was also afraid to return home for fear of more physical abuse. A lawyer from WCLAC's team reached out to the father to try to mediate, but he refused cooperation and would not return the girl to her mother.

Following this, WCLAC instead provided the woman with legal support to begin a legal process. As Jerusalem's Sharia courts were at this time accepting emergency cases, it was possible to file an emergency custody case that is still on-going.

**Figure 6.** Woman supported by WCLAC in May.

### One woman's story...

H.W. is a 23-year-old married woman, and mother of two children. She has suffered from difficulties within the family and been subjected to physical violence from her husband. He attempted to kill her after she refused to provide him with money to buy drugs. A woman's rights activist referred her to WCLAC and she received legal and social consultation support in the end of May. She is now in her family home with her children, and the Service Unit has been in regular contact with her to ensure that she is safe. She has now sought legal advice in filing for divorce. As there is no free legal support offered in her area, WCLAC has provided her with legal support through the helpline and has kept in close contact guiding her in how to deal with court procedures. WCLAC also referred her to an organization in her community that could offer continued psychosocial support.

**Figure 7.** Woman supported by WCLAC in May.

perpetrator in jail overnight, the abusers were instead released within a few hours or not taken in at all, presumably due to risk of infection. The lack of punishment and deterrent, gave men a sense of impunity and in many cases empowered them to continue or intensify their abuse. It also hindered women's ability to quickly deescalate and remove themselves from the situation with the help of the police.

Jail time is also often used as a punishment and deterrent for breaches of court ordained maintenance or alimony agreements, but due to a policy in place to not imprison persons for unpaid debts, this was also halted. This has facilitated for former husbands and partners to neglect their economic responsibilities toward women and children, without meeting any consequences. Although the intention of these policies is clearly to protect people from illness, it is important to note the impact that it has had on women seeking justice and law enforcement. For many it has resulted in increased risk of violence, or the further deepening of economic hardship.

supported by WCLAC, and there has been a rush for legal support. More women than usual have wanted to file court cases, rather than first opting for mediation or psychosocial support. This gives an indication of the stress and pressure that many women and families have found themselves under during lockdown, and the urgent need for accessing justice.

In May and June, there continued to be long waiting lines for court appointments, as the pressure and workload on the newly reopened courts was heavy. The rush to file new cases and follow up on existing ones has also had a clear impact on the workload of WCLAC's Service Unit. When the courts began following up on pending cases, there was an inflow of scheduled court appointments to the Service and Community Empowerment Unit. In the first week of June, there were currently 60 scheduled court appointments shared between WCLAC's six lawyers, with new women also reaching out to file new cases.

In addition to the court closures, COVID-19 restrictions also had an impact of the usage of jail time for enforcing laws, regulations and court orders. In order to mitigate the contracting and spreading of COVID-19, the usage of jail time as punishment was kept at a minimum during lockdown. This impacted the ability to access justice and protection for women victims of domestic violence. Several women reported that in cases of domestic violence where police intervened and would typically keep the

## WCLAC's national advocacy efforts during COVID-19

Throughout the pandemic and state of emergency, WCLAC has also continued efforts to raise awareness on women's rights and the prevalence of GBV. The context of COVID-19 has called for particular attention to domestic violence taking place behind closed doors, and helping women find ways to seek support and protection even during lockdown. It has also called to attention the urgent need for better protection for women victims of violence, both in terms of legislation and referral pathways.

### Influencing and advocacy for protection of women victim of violence

In order to raise awareness on the increased risk of GBV during lockdown, and to spread information on available support and protection services, WCLAC has engaged in several campaigns on social media and through mass media outlets. The purpose of this has been two-fold. Firstly, with the disruption of daily life patterns and easy access to support services and referral pathways, there has been a need for increased information on how to access support and protection for women at risk. Secondly, WCLAC has stressed the responsibility of decision makers and emergency response providers to take a gendered approach when dealing with the effects of COVID-19 and to ensure the protection of women.

From the very beginning of the state of emergency, WCLAC began designing informational posters that were spread widely through Facebook and other social media, providing information for women on accessing services, and all relevant contact information to WCLAC's GBV helpline. These continued to be shared throughout the crisis to ensure that women in need of protection knew how to reach out.

On April 9<sup>th</sup> WCLAC launched a radio campaign on Nisa FM, together with Al-Muntada Palestinian Forum to Combat Violence Against Women. Various participants were invited to join, there among representatives of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Health, Family Protection Units of the PCP, Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, the Alimony Fund, Sharia Courts as well as women's organizations working in Gaza. Together with lawyers and social workers from WCLAC they addressed cases that WCLAC received and discussed how best to deal with them, as well as main issues and trends that were witnessed during the pandemic.

On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, WCLAC organized a talk show together with the Al-Muntada Palestinian Forum to Combat Violence against Women. The talk show was aired on Palestinian national television, and was attended by Deputy Minister of Social Development Mr. Daoud al- Deik, as well as the Minister of Health Dr. Mai Keileh. The discussions highlighted the available support and protection for women at risk, while also emphasizing the responsibility of official duty-bearers in addressing violence against women and setting protection as a priority on their agenda, especially during the ongoing pandemic. Participants also addressed the role of both represented ministries in ensuring protection, privacy and confidentiality for women victims of violence during the quarantine period and in providing psychosocial support to women in cooperation with service providers from women's and feminist organizations. The responsibility of the government to mainstream gender into all of its interventions and COVID-19 response was also highlighted, as well as the need for more systematic cooperation between women's organizations and government.

On May 21<sup>st</sup>, WCLAC's general director Ms. Randa Siniora contributed an article to the e-book "The Double Lockdown: Palestine under Occupation and COVID-19", published by the State of Palestine's Negotiations Affairs Department. The article, titled "[Violence against Women and COVID-19 in Palestine](#)" addressed the increase in GBV since the beginning of



the lockdown on March 5<sup>th</sup>. It also described the compounded suffering of Palestinian women with regards to GBV, IHL violations and economic hardship, all exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, WCLAC launched a campaign along with the newly established feminist coalition [FADA – Palestinian Women Against Violence](#). The coalition brings together 21 women’s rights and feminist organizations working throughout the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and with Palestinian women inside Israel (1948 historic Palestine). The aim of the campaign, titled [‘We are your voice’](#), is to combat violence against women and to highlight the increase of GBV during the pandemic and lockdown. The campaign appeals to all women subject to violence to seek help and protection, and shares concrete information on available services and how to seek support. It also emphasizes that in order to break cycles of violence, threats and oppression, we all need to step in as individuals and as a society to be the voice of women victim of violence. The responsibility of society as a whole to protect women and girls from gender based violence is highlighted, as it calls upon anyone who witnesses violence or threats to intervene and contact support services.

### Increased economic hardship and volunteer initiatives

Through the restriction of movement, the shuttering of businesses and decreased demand of goods and services, lockdown has had a significant impact on the economic hardship and raised unemployment among Palestinians. In a survey carried out by Juzoor and UNFPA, it was found that 70 percent of men and 51 percent of women feared losing their jobs during COVID-19 in Palestine. Similarly it was found that 74 percent of men and 65 percent of women feared loss of income, while 59 percent of men and 57 percent of women feared the inability to secure food for their families.<sup>13</sup> Women are particularly vulnerable to increased economic hardship given that they are disproportionately represented in the informal sector without contracts and social security, receive salaries below minimum wage more often than men, and are also bearing the primary caregiving responsibility in most families as schools shut down and relatives are taken ill.<sup>14</sup> The 11 percent of women that are the main household providers are particularly vulnerable.<sup>15</sup>

As noted above, many of the women supported through WCLAC’s helpline have also reported economic hardship, unemployment and food insecurity, and this seems to have increased during lockdown. For many women supported by WCLAC, economic hardship also seems to have interacted with and exacerbated the risk for domestic violence. WCLAC’s response to increased economic hardship among women has included a two-pronged approach of raising awareness and advocating for better support, while also providing urgent financial and in-kind support.

The particular vulnerability of women to crisis and economic impact was highlighted in an [open statement](#) issued by WCLAC on May 1<sup>st</sup> in commemoration of International Labour Day. WCLAC then called upon the Palestinian government to set women’s economic rights at the forefront of responses to both short and long term negative impacts of COVID-19.

<sup>13</sup> Juzoor & UNFPA, “Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak and Lockdown of Family Dynamics and Domestic Violence in Palestine”, June 2020.

<sup>14</sup> CARE Palestine Gender Rapid Assessment Report, March 2020; WCLAC Statement On the Occasion of Labor Day – Demands Greater Prioritization of the Needs of Palestinian Working Women in the Governmental Economic Interventions and Responses to COVID-19, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Palestinian Bureau of Statistics: “H.E. Dr. Ola Awad, President of the PCBS highlighted the situation of the Palestinian women on the eve of the International Women’s Day, 08/03/2020”, 8 March 2020.

In an effort to support families particularly at risk, WCLAC has worked with four volunteer groups in Hebron, Tulkarem, Tubas and Qalqilya respectively to provide financial and in-kind support to women particularly at risk. The supported include women exposed to domestic violence, women victim of IHL violations and women who are the main household provider. The needs within each community were assessed and taken into account, with each volunteer group offering support particularly designed for the women in their community. This resulted in targeted financial aid to women and in-kind packaged specially tailored from a gender conscious perspective.

WCLAC also contributed to the distribution of support packages including food, hygiene products and other essential items, to 70 women and their families throughout Bethlehem and surrounding villages in April. This was organized in collaboration with other partners from the Coalition for Development Organisations. The women supported were in financial need and survivors of GBV.

In addition, WCLAC contributed to the initiative of Al-Muntada Palestinian Forum to Combat Violence Against Women, which aimed at minimizing the financial struggle of women victims of violence amidst COVID-19. The campaign took place between April and June, and supported 46 women living below the poverty line, who were exposed to domestic violence and who were also responsible for their families' sustenance. Women were supported in all governorates of the West Bank.

Efforts such as these offer urgent relief for many women and families when it is most needed. However, economic hardship continues to threaten vulnerable groups in the wake of the lockdown and wide-spread, systematic support is needed more than ever.

### **Advocating for a new Family Protection Law**

The increased risk of GBV during COVID-19 has highlighted more than ever the need for better protection of women and more gender sensitive legislation. A proposal for a new Family Protection Law has been debated in the Palestinian Cabinet during the same time period, opening the possibility to advocate for strengthened protection through legislation. WCLAC has reviewed the proposed legislation and found a number of gender gaps that have been outlined in recommendations for amendments. However, given that the law would still offer better protection for women than current legislation at a time when it is sorely needed, WCLAC has joined efforts with other women's rights organizations to advocate for the immediate passing of the proposed law through Presidential decree.

WCLAC together with Al-Muntada Palestinian Forum to Combat Violence Against Women and Amal's Coalition, first submitted recommendations on how to render the proposed draft law more gender sensitive in February of this year. The recommendations included needs to more clearly define domestic violence to include all manifestations of violence against women and children, according to international standards. In addition, it was recommended that the law needs be rendered more gender sensitive by taking into consideration the state of gender imbalance between the two gender groups and between victims and perpetrators of gender based violence. Other specific concerns were lifted concerning the narrow time frame for protection orders to be issued by courts to protect victims of violence, the need for enlistment of professional protection counselors for mediation between perpetrator and victim of GBV rather than rely on the public prosecution, and the need for increased protection of the confidentiality principle for service providers which encourages victims to seek help and support. Finally, it was emphasized that the Family Protection Law needs to be



able to stand on its own without having to refer to the outdated Penal Codes applied in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The next reading was held on May 11<sup>th</sup>, after which WCLAC continued to advocate for the inclusion of recommendations that had not previously been incorporated into the draft law. A formal letter was drafted together with the Al-Muntada Forum, emphasizing WCLAC's lengthy experience working to protect women and support families, and urging decision makers to take that expertise into consideration when updating legislation. A meeting was also held on May 20<sup>th</sup> with the Minister of Women's Affairs Dr. Amal Hamad, WCLAC, Al-Muntada Palestinian Forum to Combat Violence Against Women, the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, and the Women's Studies Centre. The Minister heard the concerns raised and expressed her commitment to rendering the law more gender sensitive and finding a compromise between the proposed amendments and more conservative representatives in Cabinet.

After this, however, a counter campaign was launched by conservative elements in Palestinian society, led by Sharia Lawyers, advocating against the passage of the Family Protection Law. This group stands in opposition of the proposal submitted by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Ministry of Social Development for the passage of the draft law as it was most recently presented to the Cabinet. One of the main reasons for this is the apparent link between the draft law and the Palestinian accession or ratification of international treaties and conventions, including the CEDAW.

In light of this development, WCLAC and other women's organizations have joined efforts to encourage the passage of the law in order to provide the necessary legal framework for women victims of violence. Although WCLAC maintains that the current draft does contain several gender gaps, given the current context it is important to advocate for the immediate passing of the law by a Presidential Decree, so as to improve the current protection for women and avoid a backslide in the emancipation of women.

## WCLAC's international advocacy efforts – addressing IHL violations during COVID-19

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions throughout both Palestine and Israel, IHL violations carried out by Israeli occupying forces have continued to affect the lives of Palestinian women to much the same extent as pre-pandemic. WCLAC has therefore continued with efforts to collect testimonies from women victim of IHL violations, and to advocate extensively for the respect and upholding of IHL and human rights law by Israeli occupying forces.

### IHL violations during COVID-19

A number of IHL violations have continued to be carried out much as before the pandemic, under the apparent premise of “business as usual”. These have included night raids, arbitrary detentions, detentions of minors, house demolitions and settler attacks carried out under the protection of Israeli soldiers. B’tselem reported that 100 homes were raided in the West Bank between March 1<sup>st</sup> and April 3<sup>rd</sup>, during which 16 children were arrested.<sup>16</sup> OCHA reported the demolition of 127 Palestinian structures by Israeli occupying forces in March and May. These violations are always detrimental to Palestinians and Palestinian society, and often disproportionately impact the well-being of women. As women often bear the traditional responsibility of caring for the household and children, they are heavily impacted by these violations of family life, privacy and the health and security of their children.

#### In her words...

“Three hours have passed in a terrible psychological state, full of anxiety and fear over my son. All of this time I was crying over what happened. I was afraid that the coronavirus infection would be transmitted to my son. I saw the soldiers very close to him, while they were not wearing any masks or gloves. I am still concerned for his health and safety and I am still afraid that he might be infected.”

– *Mother of 17 year old boy detained in Hebron*

**Figure 8.** Woman who spoke to WCLAC field researchers in April.

During the pandemic, the fear of contracting COVID-19 has added yet another dimension to the threat and stress of Israeli soldiers entering private homes during night raids, or keeping underage children in detention overnight. Women that WCLAC have spoken to reported spending days trying to disinfect their houses after night raids, and weeks being concerned about the health of a child or spouse after they have been held in detention. Several women reported to WCLAC's field researchers that Israeli soldiers had not been wearing protective gloves or masks during raids or arrests, and that proper precautions were not taken in detention to avoid the spread of the virus. The testimony in Figure 8 illustrates one mother's fear after her son was detained by Israeli occupying forces in Hebron in March.

Demolitions of houses and other structures have also been particularly devastating and stressful given the context of the pandemic. Despite Israeli authorities' decision in March to suspend demolitions of inhabited structures due to COVID-19, OCHA noted that residential structures continued to be targeted albeit to a slightly lesser extent March through May.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>[https://www.btselem.org/video/20200416\\_israel\\_continues\\_arrests\\_and\\_raids\\_during\\_coronavirus\\_pandemic#full](https://www.btselem.org/video/20200416_israel_continues_arrests_and_raids_during_coronavirus_pandemic#full)

<sup>17</sup> OCHA West Bank Demolitions and Displacement Monthly Report, March, April and May 2020.

Equally alarming was the continued targeting of structures related to water and hygiene, which is detrimental to Palestinian's ability to mitigate the spread of the virus and significantly obstructs Palestinians' ability to realize their right to health in accordance with IHL and IHRL.<sup>18</sup>

Other IHL violations have related more directly to COVID-19, including Israel neglecting to fulfill its responsibilities as an occupying power under international law to ensure adequate food and medical supply for Palestinians, and to maintain medical services, public health and hygiene, as stipulated in Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.<sup>19</sup> Decades of occupation and IHL violations has left the Palestinian health care system weakened and undermined with alarming shortages in medicine and medical equipment.<sup>20</sup> In particular, twelve years of blockade of the Gaza Strip has pushed Gaza's health care system to the brink of collapse.<sup>21</sup> The UN Special Coordinator Nickolay Mladenov warned already in February that stock levels for 46 percent of essential medicines had been completely depleted.<sup>22</sup> In March when the outbreak began, the Gaza Strip had 87 ventilators, of which 80-90 per cent were already in use, to serve a population of two million.<sup>23</sup>

Not only have Israeli authorities not supported Palestinians access to health care as they are required under international law, in some cases Israeli forces have even undermined Palestinian efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19. In mid-April, a COVID-19 testing clinic opened by volunteers in the East Jerusalem neighborhood Silwan where cases were particularly prevalent, was raided and shut down by Israeli police after it was found that the testing kits were provided by the Palestinian Authorities.

The health care system of Gaza is particularly vulnerable after thirteen years of blockade which has had a detrimental impact on the access to medical supplies.<sup>24</sup> Now the complete inability for Gazan residents to seek health care in the West Bank or East Jerusalem as they otherwise would, has caused even further suffering and strain on the health care system. WCLAC has closely followed two female cancer patients from Gaza who had been traveling to Jerusalem to receive chemotherapy treatment before the outbreak of the pandemic. In the beginning of the outbreak, they continued their treatment but reported that no precautions were taken to protect their health during the transportation between Jerusalem and Gaza. The women were denied COVID-19 testing and proper examination before returning to Gaza, and were transported on crowded buses without any protection. This placed them at great risk of contracting COVID-19, given their weak immune systems following chemotherapy. In late April they were informed that they would not be receiving

<sup>18</sup> OCHA March demolition report

<sup>19</sup> .Geneva Convention IV article 56, see also COVID-19: Israel has 'legal duty' to ensure that Palestinians in OPT receive essential health services – UN expert, 19 March 2020, SR Michael Lynk; ICESCR, article 12(1), as clarified through CESCR, General Comment No. 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Art. 12), 11 August 2000, UN Doc.

<sup>20</sup> Diakonia fact sheet, Health-Related Duties and Obligations of an Occupying Power During a Pandemic, April 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Joint statement: Israeli Apartheid Undermines Palestinian Right to Health amidst COVID-19 Pandemic, April 8th 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Nickolay Mladenov UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East, 24 February 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Joint statement: Israeli Apartheid Undermines Palestinian Right to Health amidst COVID-19 Pandemic, April 8th 2020.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1107-joint-statement-israel-must-respect-obligations-amid-coronavirus-pandemic->

further treatment outside of Gaza due to COVID-19 border restrictions. At that time, there was no plan put in place for securing their further treatment in Gaza.

In addition to this, complete border closures due to COVID-19 movement restrictions have even further accentuated the detrimental effect that the Annexation wall has on Palestinian women's lives. WCLAC has been in touch with women who have not been able to access their agricultural lands, their places of work or visit family members due to border closures and checkpoints. One young woman who suffers from anaemia described how she needed to access urgent healthcare due to acute dizziness, nausea and difficulties breathing. She needs to cross a checkpoint in order to reach the nearest hospital, and was told by the Israeli soldiers that the crossing was closed due to COVID-19. Her family had to fight for her right to access a hospital for six hours until they were finally allowed to cross through. By this time, the young woman was barely conscious, and the doctor told the family that a few more minutes' delay could have cost her life.

Another woman described how she and her husband had finally obtained permits to cross the checkpoint, and were working on their agricultural fields on the other side of the Annexation wall when they were forced by Israeli soldiers to leave immediately. The reason cited was that they might spread COVID-19. This despite the fact that they were wearing gloves and masks, and had acquired all the necessary documentation.

### **WCLAC's advocacy efforts**

To address these ongoing violations, WCLAC has carried out extensive advocacy efforts during the reporting period. In May, WCLAC filed a submission titled ["The Culture of Impunity: Israel's Ongoing Violations against Palestinian Women during COVID-19"](#) to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Mr. Michael Lynk. The submission outlined the IHL violations that Israeli occupying forces have been carrying out against Palestinian women in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the violations outlined above, emphasizing the continuation of night raids, and arrests, detention of children, settler violence, chemical sprayings and environmental negligence, house demolitions and neglecting or obstructing access to health care.

WCLAC called upon the Special Rapporteur to draw attention the specific impact of Israeli violations and IHL on Palestinian women, and to exert pressure on Israel to fulfil its obligations as an occupying power with regards to providing adequate medical care. The submission also highlighted the specific challenges of women with West Bank IDs residing in Jerusalem who found themselves completely without access to health care during the lockdown, and recalled Israel's responsibility to ensure the fair and non-discriminatory treatment of Palestinian women. Finally, the submission called upon the Special Rapporteur to take preventative measures and necessary further steps to protect women victims of gender based violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

WCLAC also sent a letter to the Special Rapporteurs, the United Nations Working Groups, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and other UN Agencies, calling for the immediate UN intervention to secure the release of Palestinian women and children detained in Israeli prisons. At the time 180 Palestinian children were held in Israeli prisons, of which 26 were below the age of 16. In addition, there were 43 female Palestinian prisoners, 17 of whom were mothers to 50 children. The conditions for Palestinians held in Israeli prisons are dire and have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. Overcrowding, poor nutrition and lack of sanitation and hygiene all increase the

risk of exposure to COVID-19 within prisons, and it is the clear obligation of Israel under the Fourth Geneva Convention articles 3 and 76, to protect Palestinian prisoners and detainees, which has not been met. Instead, as observed by UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory Occupied since 1967, Mr. Michael Lynk, hundreds of Israeli prisoners were released citing COVID-19 as a reason, but this act of precaution was not extended to Palestinian prisoners and detainees.

On April 8<sup>th</sup> WCLAC and several other Palestinian and international CSOs also issued a joint statement titled [“Israeli apartheid undermines Palestinian right to health amidst COVID-19 pandemic”](#). The statement highlights the detrimental effect that decades of Israeli occupation and systematic oppression has had on the Palestinian health care system and Palestinians’ right to the highest attainable standard of health. It also showcases Israel’s neglect to fulfil its obligations as an occupying power under article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and how Israeli authorities have even obstructed Palestinian efforts to provide health care and COVID-19 testing. In addition, the continuation of other IHL violations is emphasized as is their connection to further exacerbating the risk of spreading COVID-19 through Palestine.

Furthermore, WCLAC has also placed particular emphasis on recording testimonies and studying the effects of Israeli environmental negligence and chemical sprayings during the pandemic. Twenty testimonies have been collected from women in the Gaza Strip concerning environmental violations. These represent a breach of Israel’s responsibilities under article 69 of the Fourth Geneva Convention which states that parties to a conflict must protect civilians and humanitarian interests during wartime and occupation and must refrain from causing harm or damage to civilian targets, such as agricultural lands while respecting the right of protected civilians to access food. Israel has repeatedly harmed agricultural lands in Gaza through the aerial spraying of herbicides.

WCLAC field researchers recorded testimonies from eleven women on chemical sprayings in northern Gaza, that took place on April 5<sup>th</sup> from 6.30 am to 12 pm and again on April 7<sup>th</sup> from 7.30 am to 9.00 am. These sprayings have detrimental effects on the crops, and also on the health of farmers. The fields are not possible to farm for up to 10 days after chemical sprayings, and often the crops are damaged beyond repair, causing enormous financial losses for farmers. Not only is this a flagrant violation of Israel’s obligations under IHL and destruction of property, it also continued to be carried out during the on-going pandemic, risking the livelihood of farmers already facing an economic crisis, and threatens the access to nutrition which is vital in boosting immunity against the virus. Furthermore, chemical sprayings disproportionately target Palestinian women who have a particularly large role in agriculture and food production. Agricultural work is the primary source of work for a large portion of Palestinian women in the affected areas, and is especially crucial for women who are the main providers of their households.

During lockdown, WCLAC has also facilitated on-going discussions with the Al-Muntada Palestinian Forum to Combat Violence Against Women and CEDAW Coalition, in order to prepare for the submission of a report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). WCLAC Advocacy Team prepared questions to guide the organizations in the process of national consultations preceding the drafting of a follow up report.

On June 12<sup>th</sup> WCLAC met with the special committee to investigate Israeli practices affecting the human rights of the Palestinian people and other Arabs of the occupied territories.

Through the online meeting, WCLAC provided information on the gendered impact of Israeli occupation based on documented testimonies from Palestinian women. In particular, WCLAC highlighted the impact of Israeli violations of IHRL and IHL during lockdown, and measures taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among women. WCLAC presented testimonies and evidence to the committee, and requested that members consider gender sensitive recommendations and exert pressure on duty bearers to hold Israel accountable for violations of IHL and IHRL.

## The Way Forward

Several challenges remain as WCLAC moves forward in safeguarding and forwarding women's rights during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. WCLAC's efforts during the coming months will be focused on mitigating the devastating impact that COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions have had on women throughout Palestine. In addition, WCLAC will continue to conduct advocacy for better protection of women, document violations of IHL, raise awareness of GBV and shape programs to alleviate the impact of increased economic hardship among women at risk.

With this in mind, the following observations will guide the way forward for WCLAC's work to support women throughout Palestine.

1. The continued uncertainty regarding the pandemic entails that a second or third wave of COVID-19 is expected, and hence WCLAC should have a contingency plan in place to address another long-term lockdown and still ensure operational sustainability.
2. WCLAC will monitor the continued development with regards to COVID-19 and its gendered impact, to implement and adjust the emergency response plan to support women as needed. The emergency response plan moving forward builds on lessons learned from the first months of lockdown, as detailed in this report, but is also responsive to changes in the effects and dynamics of a second or third wave that may differ from the first.
3. WCLAC expects an increase in cases of GBV and notes that the services and protection provided by the organization have become more needed than ever. With this in mind, WCLAC must ensure continued work to address these cases and support women at-risk. In addition, it is imperative to campaign, using all available means, to raise awareness on the increased risk of GBV.
4. Economic hardship for women is also expected to increase, particularly for women who are the main providers of their households, for those working in the informal sector and for women who have lost their main source of income due to COVID-19 restrictions. WCLAC should try to widen its networks and coalitions to ensure humanitarian support and economic empowerment projects for women, especially targeting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, and women victims of violence.
5. WCLAC notes with concern the counter campaign against WCLAC and other women's organizations in the on-going attempts to advocate for adoption of laws based on gender equality and in compliance with legal obligations under international human rights law, including CEDAW. This counter campaign is currently advocating against the adoption of the proposed Family Protection Law. Taking this into consideration, efforts should be directed towards further enhancement and widening of WCLAC's alliances and coalitions in support of the new Family Protection Law. This should be done by deeper engagement with all human rights organizations, CSOs, trade unions, CBOs, male and female youth, and with women victims of GBV.

6. In order to continue advocating for the strengthening of women's rights and protection within Palestine, WCLAC needs enhanced presence on social media outlets and to strengthen outreach programs to the public the raise awareness on the Family Protection Law, gender equality policies and the gendered impact of legislation generally.