

# THE FEMINIST HUMANITARIAN NETWORK



## WOMEN'S HUMANITARIAN VOICES:

Covid-19 through  
a feminist lens in

PALESTINE



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Feminist Humanitarian Network (FHN) is a member-based network of grassroots, local and national women's rights organisations (WROs)<sup>1</sup>, regional networks, international NGOs, and individuals working to strengthen the agency and amplify the voices of women in emergencies, and to transform the humanitarian system into one that is guided by feminist principles. It further facilitates space for its members to share experiences in humanitarian settings and develop collective solutions to overcome patriarchal practices and barriers.<sup>2</sup>

FHN member in Palestine, Sawa Organisation has led research in Palestine as a member of the FHN to better understand the context-specific impacts and challenges women's rights organisations face in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the feminist solutions and community-based responses that have been adapted by WROs throughout. Sawa Organisation has always strived to combine experience from the field with solid scientific underpinning through evidence-based practices. As well as documenting our own experiences, we have documented the experiences and viewpoints of eight other national and grassroots women's right organisations that specialise in different domains and complement the work that Sawa does in the advancement of women's rights. This study would not have been possible without their critical contributions.

## Key Recommendations

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**1** Women's rights organisations should focus on their own area of expertise but continue to have space to work collectively, especially to co-operate effectively during emergencies.

**2** National authorities should ensure that emergency plans have a gender-sensitive approach and include WROs in decision-making processes and long-term emergency planning at all levels, especially with issues relating to women and girls.

**3** International actors should work in long-term partnership based on learning, respecting and listening to local expertise and knowledge.

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The photographs have been kindly shared by all of the WROs who participated in the study. They show WROs' activities in Palestine both before and during the Covid-19 outbreak.

# INTRODUCTION

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Primary data was collected in the form of in-depth interviews which took place in one-to-one online calls to minimise the risks associated with Covid-19. The interview was structured based on three main topics related to the pandemic: challenges, solutions, and recommendations.

The organisations participating in this study define themselves in different terms, including: women's rights organisation, organisation for the protection of the disabled, community-based organisation, feminist organisation or similar. One of them categorises itself as a health organisation

with parts of the program addressing women's issues. Since many of their activities target women and gender-based violence and it is woman-led, we included it in the research.

The WROs interviewed offer a range of tailored services to meet the needs of women. Some offer helpline services, legal and social counseling, employment and financial support, awareness raising and advocacy action to influence the laws in Palestine. Some work more on health issues while others focus on cultural events. Some work with young women and girls, some with women with disabilities, and some with victims of violence. They have been active for many years (the oldest WRO for 36 years) and have a deep understanding of local issues.

## Contextual background

Women in Palestine are oppressed on multiple levels; as individuals, as family members and as members of society. Palestinian culture is dictated by an intergenerational patriarchal system, which often operates hand-in-hand with a strict and conservative interpretation of religious doctrine. Palestinian women are regulated by multiple cultural prejudices, stereotypes, and expectations that contribute to the spread of violence, creating an inability, and in most cases, an unwillingness, to confront it. Palestinian women working to change the context are met with resistance and opposition, delaying the advancement towards gender equality.<sup>3</sup> Gender-based violence continues to be a hushed-up issue that undermines the health and well-being of the Palestinian society.<sup>4</sup> Women's organisations are working hard to protect and advance the rights of vulnerable women and children. Cultural taboos and male dominance play an important role in impunity and protecting perpetrators.

One WRO respondent stated that:

*"The rate of violence in Palestinian society has always been high, with cases of suicide, cases of femicide over the course of the years. The numbers have been terrible and unacceptable." Quite often the survivor is forced to choose between silence and confronting the community, which in most cases favors the aggressor. There is an urgent need to create a safe space for women and girls experiencing violence in all its forms.*

The military occupation of Palestinian territories is another aspect that cannot be neglected in the gender analysis of the Palestinian context.<sup>5</sup> One WRO respondent noted that the occupational practices have intensified during Covid-19. One respondent mentioned that, thousands of (mainly male) Palestinians, for whom the only chance of earning an income is working in Israel, have been barred from commuting to and from Israel and lost work permits if found to be infected with Covid-19.<sup>6</sup> Violations of human rights and international humanitarian law have not stopped during the pandemic. Home demolitions, for instance, are being carried out irrespective of the Covid-19 risks.<sup>7</sup> One WRO underlined that Palestinian women in Israeli prisons are in great danger of contracting the virus and the occupying power is not doing enough to protect these women, despite their obligations under international conventions.

In Palestine, Covid-19 is compounding the impacts of previous and ongoing emergencies, triggered by the military occupation and the volatile security and political situation in the Middle East that have left devastation, insecurity, and instability.

Palestine has received humanitarian assistance for decades – for the past 17 years the UN has channeled aid via Humanitarian Response Plans.<sup>8</sup> This dependency on humanitarian interventions is a problem

in itself. Critically, the already fragile humanitarian situation is accentuated in emergencies.

As one respondent put it:

*“In practice, not only our organisation, but the state and the country have limited capabilities. We depend on aid...we do not have a welfare system or an insurance system, we have limited resources... which has been a great pressure on civil society institutions.” In short, the pandemic is threatening the continuity of organisations.*

The challenges faced by WROs in Palestine differ depending on the area where they operate. Due to the physical and political division of Palestinian areas, it is required to look at the contexts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank separately. The West Bank is divided in three different zones; Area A administered by the Palestinian Authority, Area B where the Palestinian Authority controls the civil matters and the Israeli military controls the security situation and Area C that is under full Israeli control. These arrangements impact the capabilities of WROs when working with women and their communities in the field.

In Gaza, the Covid-19 pandemic came in the shadow of a renewed salary crisis. In addition, Gazans face constant electricity cuts, internet cuts, and closed border crossings. WROs explain that the general lack of resources in the Gaza Strip hampers their work and that official bodies are not in a position to meet the needs of women and their communities. **“The needs became greater than us. The whole burden is now on us as civil society organisations.”**

An interview representative from a Gazan WRO described how they have worked through many crises; the Covid-19 pandemic being just one. Covid-19 has compounded the lasting challenges from the 51-day attacks on Gaza in 2014. **“Before Covid, our organisation might receive**

**10 calls a day, but now they receive 50-70 calls, 60-70% are women calling for economic and psychological issues and violence,”** they said.

For the last 14 years the situation for Gazan women has been devastating: **“80% of Gazans receive government assistance, 67% are food insecure. There is grief, there is poverty.”**

Jerusalem, separated from both the West Bank and Gaza, is an infamously difficult area for WROs to operate in.<sup>9</sup> Several of the WRO respondents have or have had programs in East Jerusalem and the Greater Jerusalem area. Israeli authorities have made their presence difficult. As one WRO recounts, on one occasion the authorities confiscated their medical equipment and arrested a staff member. On another occasion the Covid-19 testing centre was forcefully closed down.

It should be noted that different women experience the pandemic in different ways. Our respondents described several categories of women that demand special attention when discussing the effects of the pandemic on women in the country. The situation has hit some women especially hard – in particular women with chronic diseases, women in need of medical interventions, pregnant women, elderly women, women with cancer, women with disabilities, and Bedouin women.

As one respondent said: **“During Covid some women have to deal with three lockdowns at the same time: the occupation AND Covid AND the violence of their husbands.”**

# KEY FINDINGS: CHALLENGES

## Gender-based violence, and women's protection

WRO respondents unanimously reported that Covid-19 has exacerbated gender inequality and violence against women in Palestine, something anticipated by WROs. Data from Sawa database shows an increase in violence against women by 61% (violence against men increased also, by 81%<sup>10</sup>) during 2020, suicide attempts and threats from women increased by 53%. Self-harm is the category with the most drastic increase for women in comparison to 2019 (466%) or six times higher than in pre-Covid times. The lockdown has forced women into close proximity with perpetrators, with limited respite or access to protective networks.

*“Violence is always under-reported because women are hesitant to ask for help. In normal times they think a lot about other methods and capabilities to solve their problems before consulting us, but during Covid-19 things became more complicated,”*

explained a respondent.

WROs sounded the alarm that women were confined in the house with perpetrators of violence. For girls and women with disabilities, their caregivers could be the source of violence. This was occurring at the same time as a severe limit on support and counseling services. One WRO director said: **“These men stayed in their face 24 hours. If a problem happens, they cannot reach us.”**

The constant presence of men in the house made the private sphere of women even more restricted and prevented many women from calling helplines at all. Several WROs reported receiving an increase of evening and late night calls for this reason. Due to economic hardships, WROs also

heard that women did not have enough credit to call, so the toll-free lines operated by some WROs during the pandemic became the only lifeline.

One WRO testified that gender-based violence intensified during Covid-19:

*“Violence has become vicious. There are more than just the cases of light hitting. There is use of heavy objects. There are broken bones and hitting with metal rods.”*

Increases in anxiety, depression, and suicide attempts amongst Palestinian women have been recorded and are expected to continue through the pandemic. As the economic situation deteriorated with the onset of Covid-19 the rate of violence increased. The following phrases were often used by WROs to describe the impacts of Covid-19 on Palestinian women: *greater pressure and vulnerability, increase in violence, increased needs.*

Covid-19 and the declared state of emergency affected women's access to the police, courts and other institutions responsible for protecting women. One Gazan WRO reports that the closure of Sharia courts (Islamic Law) at the beginning of the crisis affected the execution of judgments on decisions on alimony, family supervision, and custody. The decisions were paused and could not be legally enforced. The WRO decided to act as a mediator between parties concerned to ease the situation.

Palestinian safe houses closed for a period during the initial stages of the pandemic, while the need for them remained high. Consideration needed to be taken for the safety of women already staying in the safe houses and the workers there, but the new arrivals of women who needed to be admitted were not possible due to the risk of

bringing in the virus and no separate rooms for isolation.

As one interviewee points out:

***“to quarantine them away from the other women for 14 days has added to the pressure on women who have experienced violence.”***

A similar effect of the pandemic hit hard on women who took part in regular WRO events. One WRO recounts that they could not hold any discussions after their events, as they used to do before the pandemic. These discussions involved socially sensitive issues and being deprived of them was a loss that is hard to measure. Participants also highlighted that where support and specialist services were available, they were either disrupted and overburdened because of the impact of Covid-19 or were inaccessible as women felt the measures ***“affected the closeness and intimacy and trust”*** of discussions under new requirements such as social distancing.

One respondent said: ***“We are very disturbed that the issue with Covid-19 has been restricted and minimised. What has been lacking in terms of addressing the impact of Covid-19 is the social solidarity aspect.... With regulations from the Ministry of Health specifically requesting us to have the safe distance, otherwise we cannot hold activities, they also request us to make sure that the hall is disinfected before the activity, that people in activity wear facemasks, that they maintain distance and that the hall is disinfected***

***afterwards. For many of the CBOs we work with the disinfectant and the mask and the whole process is an economic hardship.”***

In some instances, participants were infected after an awareness raising training. Afterwards they were afraid to return to the group so were offered online training instead. Online training produced mixed feelings.

Reportedly, one woman said: ***“I am not comfortable talking with the group online, while my man is in the house.”***

A significant obstacle was the realisation that there was no plan from the government’s side with regard to the effects of curfews, lockdown measures and other types of restrictions.

***“The Covid-19 restrictions and the effects of the emergency situation on women are different, but there was no awareness. What would happen to women’s reproductive health, pregnant women, women who needed vaccinations for their children. Some women needed counseling services...some had files in court, some are undertaking procedures in court ...some are entitled to alimony, but there is no way to investigate whether the husband is paying the spousal and child support...”***

One WRO exemplifies the sense of isolation and invisibility felt by the Palestinian women, also caused by the silences in the international media reports. ***“...when we read the New York Times or watch the BBC, they have surveys and they have information about Covid spikes over the world and what different countries are doing etc. There has been none, none about Palestine. So major international news agencies have made the Palestinian experience of Covid invisible. Part of our campaign [with the activity done during***



***Covid] was: yes, Palestine has Covid, Palestine is part of the world, it is not on Mars or another planet, and we experience it and yet we are made – as with other political issues – invisible in it.***

WROs are ambassadors for gender issues around the world and raise the profile of many issues that otherwise would not appear in public reporting, due to either the disinterest of major media outlets or the incapability of the local government to speak on behalf of their female population.

## Women's leadership and decision making

There was a total exclusion of women in decision-making processes, especially in the emergency mechanisms that were triggered due to Covid-19. Emergency committees were initially comprised of only male representatives from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Interior, and the police. ***“These committees were not taking into consideration the needs of women,”*** one respondent noted. The national emergency plan had no women included in the beginning (in the West Bank there was one woman out of 14 members and in Gaza none). WROs raised the issue of representation and after some pressure achieved female representation in emergency committees.

One interviewee points out that women's participation is crucial, because:

***“as we know, also during the emergency period and the lockdown restrictions, there has been a lot of aggression against women, and also aggression and campaigns against women's organisations and rights organisations.”***

One result of these smear attempts has been the formation of a national alliance of feminist organisations in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem, to address violence

against women and violence against WROs. According to one interview, being part of the coalition and various networks, helps ***“get our voice heard more widely.”*** There is a need to work collectively to ***“connect our efforts to each other, to have an influence through what we do.”*** The representative of the WRO believes that being part of coalitions has made it possible to influence the national policies, at least to some extent.

## Women's livelihoods and economic rights

Covid-19, as some WROs have explained, has brought about additional pressures on women. One WRO explains: ***“Women were forced to work day and night to satisfy all the members of the family.”***

The added pressure that women felt during the pandemic also stems from the fear that if she gets infected and falls ill, no one will be able to take care of the children, her husband and the family needs.

Women confined to the home have had to deal with the challenges of working from home, including caring for the home and the family at the same time as delivering their work responsibilities.

As one interviewee states:

***“needing to be ready to give counseling and assistance to women 24 hours, they also as employees need to care for themselves, for their children and their e-learning and this is, we can say, a merging of the role of the employee as a social worker, as an employee who offers help services and support to women who are subject to violence.”***

Mothers had to deal with the frustrations of online education for their children because many families lack computers or enough computers for all children to take part in online education. Another interviewee commented that the employees, while working from home did not only have to

take care of the children and their work but also of their husbands. **“Whoever had work, had responsibility and had larger and more extensive familial responsibilities.”**

Some women lost their economic independence. One respondent explained:

**“A lot of women in the non-public sector have ended their work contracts and stopped working. Now you have an increase in the unemployment among women..., especially, as we said, in the private sector. In addition, women working in childcare have lost their work and women working on smaller projects have lost their jobs. They cannot sell their products anymore. And many small projects have closed up.”**

The subject of employees is recurrent in many interviews because the respondents are women themselves. One respondent said of their own experience: **“because if we were supposed to continue our work as usual during the government imposed restrictions, then the men were able to complete their work and come back after the lockdown curfew with their full tasks done, while women had to play the fast make-up game in order to catch up, so that they would be on par after the closure, because they weren’t able to complete their work during the Covid-19 restrictions.”**

## Impacts on diverse groups of women

The knowledge that women are marginalised and excluded to different degrees shows the importance of intersectionality in understanding a situation. For example, the situation of women with disabilities. **“In general, women and girls with disabilities are marginalised in two ways. First, they are women, and then they have disabilities,”** one representative explains. Some WROs

who specialise in working with women with disabilities are at times critical of other WROs who do not ensure their activities and programs are accessible to disabled women and as a result are unable to reach an important section of the female population. WROs are alarmed that they have witnessed **“an increase in violence against women and girls with disabilities, and this is because of the general economic situation in the family, which has deteriorated.”**

Bedouin women living in Bedouin communities are another marginalised group that are notoriously at risk, not least because of practises related to the military occupation.<sup>11</sup> At the outset of the crisis young people in these communities were reckless because they thought that Covid-19 only affected old people. Many Bedouin women believe there is no virus in the mountains where they live (**“No, there is nothing in front of us, but the dust on this carpet. Where is the coronavirus going to come from?”** wondered a member of a Bedouin community) and it took time for WROs working with them to increase their understanding of the virus. WROs also trained them on how to use protective equipment, for example how to dispose of masks and use hand sanitiser.

## Funding, resourcing challenges, and relationships with international actors

The feedback from the interviewees on relationships with funders and other stakeholders paints a complex picture, with some positive aspects and others less so.

Many believe that **“these international organisations have their agendas and they want to dictate to you.”**

This mistrust might stem from the memories of colonial practices that are still very vivid in younger generations. Others say that **“there is a challenge before us. Either you take the funding or you remain without funding and close your**

**organisation.”** Respondents also reported that some donors question the decision of the WRO to have collaborated or taken funds from another donor: **“They told me who is legitimate and illegitimate. This is the whirlpool we have entered into.”**

Another challenge was how to ensure sustainability. According to the WRO respondents, it has been easier to fulfill rapid direct needs but more difficult to achieve long-term impact work and advocacy. There has been an insufficiency of resources, which puts the long-term provision of services at risk. When a WRO tried to contact other organisations to get additional support since they were only able to cover 70% of the needs, other WROs could not assist as their area of responsibility was slightly different. When assistance was provided, the measures were temporary, again raising the issue of sustainable planning and prioritisation.

Organisations are faced with the constant dilemma of being dependent on international aid or not being funded at all.

**“In the end you are doomed in this country ... the government doesn't fund NGOs. You find there is no opportunity in front of you, except the donors who are already here.”**

However, even those that decide to be present, might not want to fund the project in certain areas (a WRO gives the example of East Jerusalem, which is avoided by some donors because of the Israeli influence **“so how can Palestinian women there be assisted during Covid?”**). Another WRO mentions that the donors treat WROs from Palestine and Israel differently, but **“we should have the same conditions in funding as the rest.”**

A testimony by one WRO representative illustrates the level of suffering that was perceived through a call for help:

**“The economic situation worsened and it was the first time we hear that there are people unable to afford the minimum necessities for their families, even food. Poverty and hunger were not present to such extent before here in Palestine.”**

Several other WROs testified to the fact that they have met women in communities who lack basic commodities, food and necessary medicine. WROs have reported that it was hard to help when their projects were not designed to provide material aid to people, and they had no other resources. **“This thing was new to us. The people call, and they need us, and they want a fast response. So this was in a way a burden and a pressure on us.”**

There is a dose of self-criticism or soul searching perceived in some of the interviews. One respondent mentions that some WROs work with a project from a privileged position **“like the elite”**



and believes that **“most of the feminist organisations today work to show off; if all the organisations with their money and efforts and the people who they employ would work, the situation in Palestine could be different.”** Another female respondent expresses the following opinion: **“I see that a call for proposal comes and all these institutions competing to write proposals to get a chance. There should be a clear agreement – these institutions work in these sectors, so they have a certain budget. ... all this competition, and what is happening, and who is the best and...the competition is not clean either... at the end people are forced, so they apply. We are heading in this direction, but this direction is a waste of time, it is meaningless. There is still a long journey in front of us.”**

An additional problem is that some donor organisations are unable to see outside the box, according to one respondent.

**“They are comfortable staying with the same organisation and the organisation becomes like them. This is another thing that must change... don’t let them decide for you and just go along with it. There needs to be a debate with them.”**

The reliability and response by donors is also something that varies.

**“There are donors who say: we will transfer in June and they transfer in June, and there are UN organisations that take a lot of time. You gave them a paper five months ago and still they do not read it. You ask if they read it, they say yes.”**

**“I think it is really important to put this on the international feminist donor agenda - that support to women’s organisations is so vital for women, that it cannot be only small feminist donors<sup>12</sup> that support each other, that they have to enter into conversation with the larger donors like the EU, the UN and foreign ministries etc. Those organisations are restricted**

**by tight contracts that have never taken any flexibility in terms of force majeure. Is Covid force majeure? Yes. So it’s like either or. Either you are functioning according to this tight grid or you are totally closed, because of the force majeure. Covid brought another, new variable into the equation that the contracts have not taken into account.”**

One WRO reported that partners could provide extra funds if the number of women being helped in communities increased. Similarly, there are areas that are traditionally more attractive to donors, for example the old city of Hebron or Area C.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, another WRO mentions that they would not compromise and accept anything that would be against their values, even though the financial situation in the organisation might not be stable. Also:

**“we would not accept funding that would cause a decrease in quality of our work...because we know where we are going.”**

One respondent mentions the fact that emergency funds require the same level of administration as longer projects, but the frequency of reporting is hard to maintain (“there is no balance between what you give and what you get”). For example, the project starts, and in two weeks you already need to submit the report, which is difficult during an emergency.

During Covid-19, donors have largely been understanding and flexible and there has been intensive communication between them and the WROs, especially via online platforms. Some WROs say they have been very lucky when it comes to their relationships with funders.

One WRO describes the donors also as receptive and showing solidarity with them. However, she also noted a clear distinction between large international donors and smaller feminist donors: **“We were not able to meet our benchmark number of people reached through the grant. So we tried to hold discussions on that but**

*in terms of contracts, it is contracts, you know. We found that donors who are let's say feminist donors, even small feminist donors, were much more sympathetic to the issue of the needs related to hygiene. They were much more sympathetic to covering the full salary during the closure although full work was not being done by the women employees and the third issue, they were very sympathetic towards minimising the requirements in terms of beneficiaries reached. Other donors who are not feminist donors, they were not, they were very strict."*

Those donors that were not receptive to the sudden changes have said, according to one WRO:

*"You know you can allocate from another place." But where do we allocate from when all activity budgets are restricted to activities? So it is like, you have to take from one place to put in another place, when we already are running on short and restricted budgets! So this has not been supportive."*

This lack in understanding of grassroots issues from larger donors caused, according to one interviewee, **"bad organisational dynamics, because of the lack of responsibility and solidarity of major donors,"** when the management felt helpless and could not guarantee staff their full salary and equal conditions.

There have also been unexpected challenges in terms of the administrative costs for personnel. As one respondent put it: **"Some donors were sympathetic; others said that during closure they wanted to go with complete time sheets so if they cover salaries they would cover only the percentage of work that is done at home with the closure. Nobody was able to do full time work at home with the closure, especially women. They took care of their children. They had their job and unfortunately, they also had their husbands to take care of. So it meant that these salaries of women employees would**

**be halved, because they could not do full time work and yet, some major donors were so unsympathetic to that. And it was very clear that they will support only the actual time sheets of the work done. There was no use in arguing with them. This was it! This affected and hurt very much the women who tried to invest in themselves as professionals and also hurt their standing in terms of the organisation."**

One WRO expressed a desire to look beyond the current Covid pandemic:

*"The feminist organisations internationally have to support WROs that work on a grassroots level in a more significant manner... Because the major support comes from let's say foreign ministries and international government organisations (IGOs) or aid agencies and these need to be flexible, their regulations, their contracts etc. They have the major role in providing major funding. They need to provide strategic support, so the feminist organisations have to take this into account. They need to become a more viable, dynamic and effective player in order to support us. Because I don't think that Covid is going to start to go away. As there are going to be other issues, other problems, then there must be commitment to the sustainability of women's organisations that are working on the ground ..."*

None of the respondents reported that they have lost funding due to the pandemic. On the contrary, some acquired new funds from donors they have not worked with before. In several cases, the international organisations themselves came forward and proposed to the WRO to work together.

Beyond funding, WRO respondents referenced some of the challenges in their relationships with International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) operating in Palestine.

## Partnerships with authorities

Another WRO mentions the difficulty in connecting to local committees or emergencies, especially where there was no prior networking between the WRO and the local society. In these cases, the WROs could not respond to the needs of the population. When WROs tried to connect with local committees they weren't yet working in to expand and reach more people in the Covid-19 response, they were unable to establish new relationships or be heard within ongoing processes. When referring cases within the national referral pathways, there was also no straightforward process. Some cases bounced back because there were simply no alternatives. The cases in Area C are generally hard for referrals as the Palestinian police has no mandate to operate in that area.

One WRO states that cooperation with national authorities has been difficult since the authorities have very limited resources that might be sufficient to respond to a minor crisis, but cannot tackle the proportions of a pandemic. The authorities tried to stay in control of the situation, but with their offices closed for periods of time it is hard to estimate the success of their crisis management.

In addition, the official authorities in the West Bank and Gaza do not always have the same approach.

According to a Gazan WRO:

*“the current government in Gaza does not actively partner with civil society regarding the emergency... there are political considerations involved in coordination with political bodies...and the cooperation with the authorities is generally limited.”*

It is unclear whether this lack of engagement by the authorities in Gaza is temporary or it will continue until the end of the pandemic.

One WRO mentions that one of the ministries sent them a survey to complete, which they did. She adds: **“But then we went ahead and we did something else – we filed a report on the non-economic costs; the social and the emotional and cultural costs of missed activities.”** This illustrates that this WRO is not only strictly reporting on the organisational activities but sees the larger repercussions of the pandemic and signals that in a proactive way. The respondent concludes by asking: **“women were deprived of that [the activities they organise]. How can we measure the social cost of that?”** The minister has not yet replied to the 25-page letter sent by the WRO.

One WRO states that there has been very good partnership with governmental institutions, particularly the Ministry of Women's Affairs, since emergency committees were restructured to include women.



One WRO representative emphasised how important it is for WROs and public officials to share the same understanding and same language when it comes to GBV – this is why some WROs train the police and other public officials.

*“Our job is completing the work that the government is doing to protect women. We cannot replace them and they cannot do the job the same way we do it.”*

In order to have this kind of collaboration, many WROs have a working relationship with relevant authorities, including the ministries.

## Working in unprecedented circumstances

A significant drawback in accessing services during lockdown was the fact that not all Palestinian women are digitally literate or reside in areas with reliable internet connections. WROs have reported that many families do not have internet or digital devices. As one respondent said: **“Not all of them have the technological ability to use remote learning methods, and all this leads to psychological pressure and social pressure on women.”**

A few WROs reported that even their own employees do not have computers at home to be able to work from home.

WROs that went into 24/7 operation had to increase the number of staff or keep the same number of staff working for longer hours. This put more stress on employees. One WRO explains that in times like these, it is difficult to bring in new volunteers because they are not trained and it is better to have professionals who know how to work with sensitive issues and understand the mechanisms of intervention. One WRO added that employees accessing the office during the lockdown with special permits issued by the Ministry of Social



Development, created higher transportation costs for the organisation as a taxi or car had to be used to transport them to the office.

The challenges for WROs have an important security dimension as well. The virus is dangerous, but the commitment of WROs made them continue despite the risks. It was important to ensure the safety for employees, and to ensure that the activities that are carried out are also conducted in a safe way as not to jeopardise the health of beneficiaries.

# KEY FINDINGS: FEMINIST SOLUTIONS

Each WRO has developed its own coping mechanisms and strategies to address the challenges of the pandemic. One respondent explains the strength of approach taken by WROs:

*“Because we have existed for a long time and worked in these areas, we have a strong relationship with local communities, and trust is already in place, also taking part in networks and committees established good relationships. There is no competition. On the contrary, relations are complementary; there is understanding and acceptance among WROs.”*

## Changing response modalities

During the pandemic, WROs did not sit idle. They responded to the increased need of the population and much more. One respondent recounts how they have **“taken advantage of the opportunity [of the pandemic] to put pressure on duty-bearers and decision-makers to speed up on the passing of a law protecting the family from violence.”** The majority of the interviewees expressed a wish that the Palestinian authorities would be more open to co-operation, more respectful of WROs, and more motivated to action. In the words of one director: **“There needs to be a listening ear in the government of Palestine...the government has a great responsibility and it doesn’t escape responsibility, because they make policy... because of this, there needs to always be an active coordination”**

There was a need to review the activities and interventions, sometimes to reprogramme the activities based on the current situation. Some organisations modified or created new methods of intervention in order

to be responsive. Some WROs decided very early on to focus more on gender-based violence, which was accepted and supported by donors. On the other side, donors like to go into diversification of funding and some WROs have not received news until this day, despite presenting dozens of applications. It was easier to get rapid response funds instead.

This can reflect the need of international donors to have reliable local partners with the institutional capacity to work in emergencies. The fact that they took the first step in making the connection is, according to the same interviewee, rather rare and fills the speaker with pride due to the recognition given.

One WRO describes that due to increased need they decided to increase their capacity to offer more services, and as a result:

*“I think the international donors took this into consideration and many of them who we did not have before as partners approached us and we are working with many international donors now.”*

## Awareness-raising and information sharing

One WRO specialised in providing support in quarantine centres, because these services were not gender sensitive. All the health workers servicing them were men (male doctors and male nurses). When the WRO tried to get some female medical staff to work there, the families of these female workers opposed the idea, because they were afraid that they would get infected at their workplace, highlighting also cultural, traditional and religious barriers to gender equality. The solution

for the WRO was to train the existing staff in the quarantine centres to improve their sensitivity towards women and their needs. Later, the WRO collected the voices of women and their complaints and presented them to the authorities (Ministry of Health and the police). The WRO approached the general director of the police and demanded to have female police officers present in the quarantine centres due to harassment that some women there had reported, which was done.

A positive side effect of continued training was that women were able to hold extended group discussions with other women who did not participate in the initial training. In this way the efforts multiplied. Part of awareness-raising was also to spread rules for Covid-19 prevention. For information management and awareness-raising WROs used a variety of tactics including: social media and audio and visual media (Facebook, Zoom, Twitter) to distribute information, online meetings instead of face-to-face meetings, worked more closely with IT experts to ensure technical coverage, distributed factsheets to donors and stakeholders, guested at radio stations and TV programs, started online groups for women in the community and produced manuals, pamphlets, codes of conduct, and tutorials.

## Advocacy and women's protection

It has been critical to ensure access to services during the pandemic. When WROs were not able to reach the local communities or conduct activities there, they postponed instead of canceling them. WRO respondents note that the courage and positive energy of employees is critical in these circumstances and morale was maintained.

WROs participated in meetings with authorities and stakeholders, wrote letters and petitions to decision-makers and politicians, wrote reports and appeals to the UN, wrote position papers on the situation of women during the pandemic, held round tables and meetings to

discuss the interventions, produced short awareness raising videos, and increased communication with the international community.

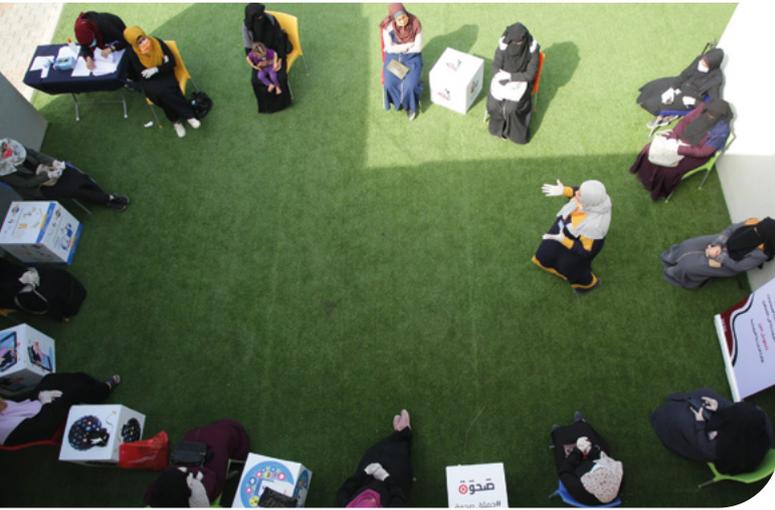
One WRO developed evaluation forms to understand the challenges faced by the women they worked with during Covid-19. Another WRO used core funding to develop a much-needed emergency plan for the organisation. Another WRO adds that even the emergency plans needed to take into consideration the needs of the marginalised groups, for instance, by offering alternatives to helpline services for women with hearing disabilities. There is understanding of the need for accessible services and activities at all levels.

The increase in violence against women required quick and flexible solutions. Those organisations that run helplines increased the number of operating hours to 24/7, maintained highest standards of confidentiality, made it possible for operators to answer calls remotely from their homes, introduced more shifts and employed more operators, enabled employees who are trained counselors to offer peer support, made helplines free of charge, increased social media advertising of helpline services, and introduced counseling sessions through an online chat service.

The WRO that introduced the chat function explains that

*“we discovered that during confinement, during the closure, women were unable to call us because everybody was in the house. Calls from females went down for a certain time, but when we introduced our WhatsApp chat counseling, women began contacting us much more.”*

Some WROs negotiated with the Palestinian telecommunications company to increase the internet speed for operators working from home or to receive a toll-free line.



## Women-led WRO and community collaboration

One WRO explains that they have never experienced problems with active organisations on the ground. They have worked together and taken into consideration all points of view. The success of the interventions during Covid-19 stem from the fact that **“we draw knowledge about the needs from the women themselves. And we are working in partnership with organisations in local communities.”**

## Remote access to services and access to livelihoods

WROs used community workers and coordinators in a creative way to ensure ongoing access to services. Community workers distributed humanitarian aid, distributed tablets, laptops and computers to families in need to allow children to participate in online classes and for families to stay connected via social media. One WRO launched a new app with an e-doctor/telehealth and medical and legal consultations, and with the geolocation of places of harassment. Yet another has distributed coupons because women in the community needed basic necessities and had no money to buy commodities.

To support women and their communities during Covid-19, it was very important to present feasible alternatives. One WRO that usually collects bread by knocking on doors came up with a Covid-safe solution; to collect bread every third day at a collecting point outside. One solution that was suitable to university students, who finished classes at 6 pm, was to organise training after 6 pm for them. In this way, they could attend. **“We adapted the activities and the work based on the wants of people.”**

For organisational purposes, the WROs developed emergency plans and quickly transitioned to their emergency mode. Respondents have said this went smoothly because they had previous experience in working in emergencies, for instance during the wars on Gaza. They followed the Ministry of Health’s guidance on preventing the spread of the virus including using masks, disinfecting areas, social distancing, employee rotas, and ventilation of rooms. They developed helpful solutions for cyber harassment. They were innovative and identified quickly what women needed, for example understanding that **“women are at home and are more exposed to the harassment via internet.”**

Some WROs have maintained that knowing the right focus for a WRO is very important because they become a thought leader:

**“When we are convinced and when we have the “why” we are doing a project...it becomes easier to convince donors or international organisations of the real need of what we are doing.”**

# CONCLUSION

**The findings reflect an alarming situation for Palestinian women during Covid-19. All organisations agree that the situation has become worse and gender equality has deteriorated.**

Using the expression of one respondent, it can be said that

*“there are two major issues in Palestine right now: one is the international response in Palestine – the other is the national divisions and fragmentation within the Palestinian society.”*

True partnerships and networking are fundamental in normal times and essential in emergencies. Stakeholders, especially those working with women and girls, should be integrated in all levels of decision making, from planning to implementation and evaluation and learning phase.

## Challenges, risks and lessons learnt

Women in Palestine who face multiple forms of oppression in ‘normal’ times, have been hit even harder by the pandemic. The layers of oppression – occupation, patriarchy, and harmful traditional practices – have re-emerged with full force and mixed up with the fears and anxieties produced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of women and amplified the insecurity they face. There has been an increase in violence in all forms. The ramifications of Covid-19 are expected to affect Palestinian women’s well-being for some time to come.

WROs have responded incredibly fast and fully committed to the emerging needs, as the many examples in this paper

demonstrate. Each in its own way has tried to alleviate the impacts of the crisis on the women who needed help. The emergency has once again revealed the urgent need for strong and functioning governmental institutions that can deal with gender-sensitive issues during emergencies.

International donors and partners have for the most part been flexible and understanding, though much more can be done in terms of rapid emergency response. Many WROs have pointed out that they would appreciate if the donors shorten and simplify the application process for emergency funds and set minimum requirements for reporting due to the workload and time pressure in emergency contexts. Perhaps the most meaningful element in the continued support to women is prior cooperation initiatives that have cemented a good culture of cooperation and mutual support. These participatory arrangements have empowered the actors and given them renewed energy and vigor to address the increased needs in timely and proactive ways. These joint efforts have also had a positive impact on the unity and cohesion of the Palestinian NGO sector as they allow that West Bank and Gaza WROs join forces, despite being separated from each other. However, it must be said that this vision is not shared by all WROs and there can be sensed an internal division and strife within the Palestinian feminist movement.

The key finding has been that even in unexpected times *“it is what the women need that drives our work.”*

The response interventions were possible because of the harmonisation and adaptation of existing practices with the needs seen during the emergency. Palestinians have faced many tragic events in the past and the pandemic was one in a series of calamities. Consequently, WROs and professionals working in these

organisations have, yet again, responded with force and determination and with an inherent optimism that the current challenge will be overcome. Steadfastness and resilience have played an important role in the response of Palestinian WROs to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 has been called a health pandemic and an economic pandemic. By understanding the hardships of women and the challenges associated with the

organisational responses, it can be stated that this pandemic has also been a gender pandemic, affecting women and marginalised groups disproportionately.

WROs are looking to the future and already coining new plans: ***“We should never talk about the 16-day campaign without talking about the 365-day campaign.”***<sup>14</sup>



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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**The importance of this research piece is enormous as it comes in a time when the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing. The emergency is not over, which means that many of the recommendations can be adopted now, to counter the effects of the pandemic in a pro-active and constructive way.**

## **For local Palestinian authorities:**

- Understand that women know best what women need, engage in communication with WROs, respect what they say about the needs or the interventions, reply to requests sent by WROs, recognise the expertise of WROs in the field and ask them for information and advice.
- Involve civil society organisations and particularly WROs and the women they represent at all levels of decision-making during emergencies, including in emergency committees.
- Ensure that all interventions and emergency plans are gender-sensitive.
- Use just and clear distribution mechanisms for financial support and supplies.

## **For international organisations/international donors:**

- Redesign the emergency funding initially given for 3 to 6 months to long-term projects because the virus has not yet disappeared and WROs will be responding to the impacts for a long time.
- Fund longer projects and multi-year programs and increase budgets in line with the increased needs.

- Establish real partnerships, ensure sustainability of projects, ask and consult with the local expert organisations and listen to the local knowledge before planning activities in Palestine.
- Better planning for emergencies and set aside emergency funds.
- Review the terms and conditions for emergencies, including introducing shorter and more simple application processes in emergencies.
- Support WROs to put pressure on the government to pass generic laws that help protect women from violence and specific laws that help protect women from violence during times of emergency or crisis or conflict.
- Do not try to replace local actors (government and NGOs). Give more space to local NGOs, and recognise and respect their experiences and ways of working.
- Joint supervision of projects and good governance.

## **For other WROs:**

- Build partnerships and alliances with each other and build on past successes.
- Note the points of strength in the internal environment and use them to continue work during emergencies.
- Represent all women, and especially those that are additionally marginalised e.g. because of disabilities, ethnic background, educational background.
- Harmonise your activities and understand where you are heading.
- Be visible on the ground, listen to the needs of women and their communities.
- Have an emergency plan ready with different scenarios and do regular evaluations.

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- The Palestinian Working Women Society for Development (PWWSD)
- Shashat Woman Cinema
- Stars of Hope Society

- The Jerusalem Center for Women (JCW Jerusalem)
- Women's Affairs Center (WAC)
- The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC)

A special thanks goes to the FHN who have supported the idea of this project with passion and resolution. Without your kind contribution and assistance throughout the process, this paper would not have been possible.

***This report is part of wider FHN Research looking at the challenges and feminist solutions taken on by WROs in response to Covid-19 in 8 country contexts.***

# REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity the acronym WRO is used throughout the paper to refer to women's rights organisations.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.feministhumanitariannetwork.org/>

<sup>3</sup> UNWOMEN (2018). Caught Up Between a Rock & a Hard Place: Occupation, Patriarchy and Gender Relations: A UN Women Case Study of Palestinian Women in Area C & H2, [http://healthclusteropt.org/admin/file\\_manager/uploads/files/1/5cd15586228d8.pdf](http://healthclusteropt.org/admin/file_manager/uploads/files/1/5cd15586228d8.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> UNWOMEN (2020), COVID-19: Gendered Impacts of the Pandemic in Palestine and Implications for Policy and Programming, available at <https://palestine.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/02/covid-19-gendered-impacts-of-the-pandemic-in-palestine-and-implications-for-policy-and-programming>

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Baldi, Giorgia (2018) Between patriarchy and occupation: violence against women in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In: Picelli, Giovanni, Borroni, Andrea and Kherkerulidze, Irine (eds.) Reconsidering gender based violence and other forms of violence against women: Comparative analysis in the light of the Istanbul Convention. Libellula University Press, Italy, pp. 247-295

<sup>6</sup> ILO. The situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories. Page 14. (2020, May). Retrieved from: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_745966.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_745966.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> According to OCHA, 2020 had the highest rate of demolitions and people displaced by the Israeli authorities in recent years. The demolitions and displacement were ostensibly due to Palestinian's lacking building permits, which are nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain. For more information see: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/overview-october-december-2020>

<sup>8</sup> The humanitarian community in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) has developed a strategic plan for the oPt every year since 2003. The current Humanitarian Response Plan covers 2021 and focuses on addressing needs identified in the Humanitarian Needs Overview, in Area C, Hebron H2 and East Jerusalem in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The humanitarian context of the oPt is unique amongst today's crises and remains directly tied to the impact of the occupation, which marked its 50th year in June 2017. The humanitarian community has identified 2.45 million Palestinians as being in need for support. For more information see: <https://www.ochaopt.org/hrp-2021>

<sup>9</sup> Hirbawi, N and Helfand, D. Palestinian Institutions in Jerusalem. (2011). Retrieved from: <https://pij.org/articles/1306>

<sup>10</sup> Violence in general increased during the pandemic (the database collects calls from women and men and the calls from men are increasing in number, also surpassing the number of female caller. One reason behind it is the fact that many men do not know where else to turn when they need advice – they cannot ask their family or friends and sometimes they face the violence precisely from this same family or friend circle – case of rape within family, bullying, blackmailing etc.)

<sup>11</sup> UN. Bedouins in the occupied Palestinian territory. (2013, September). Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-195392/>

<sup>12</sup> The responder is referring to smaller organisations (international or local) who have strong feminist values unlike the well-known and established international donors.

<sup>13</sup> These are areas that are traditionally favoured by donors, where the highest number of human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law are documented.

<sup>14</sup> This comment refers to the global campaign against VAWG.