

## Women Empowerment Conference Protecting

Girls: Reinforcing the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation to protect girls against gender-based violence

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Session 1: Investing in Prevention and Protection measures

The national and local measures to prevent and end girls' sexual exploitation

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COVID-19 has been observed to have a significant effect on the situation of women and girls in the Middle East and North Africa region, and Palestine is no exception. There was a huge impact on girls' and women's lives and reality during the spread of the Covid 19 virus; in Palestine, we observed a complete paralysis of the entire system of protection from violence, since the announcement of the first health closure. Sawa Organization continued its work as usual, especially the listening center (toll-free number 121) that provides support and primary psychological guidance to victims of in all forms of violence abuse and neglect. The process of transitioning from the office to remote work from home was a readily prepared protocol for Sawa since we had developed a plan of action during different emergencies during the years, since Palestine lives in an unusual state of constant emergency conditions. Sawa continued to provide services and we increased our working hours to be 24/7, thus remaining in contact with the community and following up on the needs that we identify through the calls we serviced through the listening center.

In the first weeks of the lockdown, we noticed a decrease in the number of incoming calls from women (+38% in April 2020), an increase in the number of cases received from young men, an increase in male calls (young men and adolescent boys under age 25 made up 64% of all men's calls in April 2020, most of which contacting us regarding physical abuse from their parents), due to the presence of all family members at home which limited privacy and spaces opportunity

to have the good time to call the 121. Calls also increased during the night shifts, and Sawa observed that at least 22% of calls came at night during COVID-19. At this stage, we also highlighted the chat service provided by the Sawa since 2009 because it was the best way to give attention to women and girls to communicate with us despite the presence of all family members at home. Here, we began to notice increases in the direction of the psychological guidance service via chat.

Girls and women were subjected to different forms of violence at this stage, I will refer to some of what we have noticed through the calls we received, which were interesting.

- An increase in violence, cyberbullying, impersonation, exploitation, extortion and sexual harassment, the luring girls and boys through social networks and electronic games.
- The high number of call reports of domestic violence and the severity of forms of violence practiced against women, girls, and male youth. COVID-19 and Abuse & Violence cases each increased by 20% during the last week of March 2020. MHPSS cases increased by 73%.
- Reporting of sexual violence (there 9 reported cases of rape in the first 2 weeks of August 2020 made by women from the West Bank ranging from ages 18-35 years old); these cases were mostly between couples, but there was also reports of incest, as well as boys who have also been exposed to sexual violence.
- Suicidal ideation or suicide attempt among young people and adolescents. (5 attempts were reported in April of 2020, and it rose to 7 in May of 2020, and sessions related to suicide ideation and self-harm rose to over 50 during June 2020, indicating a gradual increase). Sawa received up to 10 cases of suicide ideation cases among girls and boys in first 2 weeks of August 2020 alone.
- The number of femicides increased: 38 women were killed in 2020 and 27 were killed in 2021.

- There were also more cases of girls forced into marriage. Although there is a law that sets the age of marriage at 18 years, it is known that there are exceptions allowed by the judiciary that go beyond the law. The economic situation is an influential factor in the forced marriage of girls.

Recommendations:

- Activating and updating laws, joining the Istanbul Convention and working on its implementation.
- Finding mechanisms to facilitate interagency coordination and a victim-centered approach.
- Unifying the different and multiple definitions of sexual exploitation of children, so that they are not general and not specific, since this hinders the understanding of its definition as a crime and takes another appearance that limits its severity.
- Emphasizing the importance of having and supporting helpline services to support children and women, hear their voices, provide psychological support, and provide protection for them.
- Continuing towards the achievement of gender equality, as gender-based discrimination contributes to inequality between males and females, as well as gender discrimination as a causative factor that leads to violence sexual exploitation.