

report

RETHINKING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: PERSPECTIVES FROM EGYPT, LEBANON AND SYRIA

A conversation with Ghida Anani, Mozn Hassan and Zeina Kanawati

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Overview

On the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in 2020, the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) in collaboration with the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation (EMWF) organised an online seminar on gender-based violence (GBV). The seminar sought to start a debate with gender experts and activists from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to discuss the subtleties of the increase in gender-based violence accompanying the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the modalities of its unfolding and the local and regional Euro-Mediterranean responses to it. The conversation attested to the fact that the feminist movements that criss-cross the Mediterranean space go beyond borders of any kind and are interwoven into a big network of feminist solidarity; the participants made room for the voices of women and girls from the region to be heard, and looked for opportunities to share relevant data,¹ experiences and practices that can be extrapolated to different contexts.

This publication gathers the participants' thoughts, suggestions and orientations, with the objective of disseminating the knowledge produced during the event,² while dissecting the debate's policy-orientations that emanated from the meeting.

This document was prepared by

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1. In 2020, the three organisations released documents that focus on the hardships they have had to face but also on measures, recommendations and initiatives undertaken by Abaad, Nazra for Feminist Studies and Women Now for Development which allow the solidarity networks that are being created across the Euro-Mediterranean space to be taken into consideration.

2. Please note this article is an edited and reworked version of the contents presented during the aforementioned seminar and does not reproduce the exact speeches of the event.

Ghida Anani

Founder of Abaad – Resource Centre for Gender Equality (Lebanon)

A medical social worker by training and clinical counsellor, in 2012 she founded Abaad - Resource Centre for Gender Equality, of which she is also Executive Director. Abaad focuses on policy development, legal reform, gender mainstreaming, eliminating discrimination, and advancing and empowering women to participate effectively and fully in their communities. In 2016, the Centre launched a campaign against the Lebanese Rape-Marriage Law Article 52 (finally abolished in 2017) that received the UN Sustainable Development Goals Action Award for the most impactful campaign globally in 2019.

Ghida Anani combines her work at Abaad with her role as assistant professor in the Faculty of Public Health at the Lebanese University. Her teaching and work at Abaad have earned her numerous recognitions. She is an expert in gender-based violence and child protection –topics tackled by her organisation, through the creation and dissemination of toolkits and pedagogical material focusing on Lebanon and the MENA region.

The Uniqueness of Gender-Based Violence in Lebanon and Operational/Local Responses from Abaad

Changes and continuities of GBV in Lebanon

The composition of GBV in Lebanon can be considered unique because of the intersectionality that traverses it and the interrelations between multiple layers that are affecting the lives of women and girls in Lebanese society – in addition to the common denominator across the MENA region and around the globe, which is related to the patriarchal structure of the system.

In Lebanon, in addition to the notion of patriarchy, we have always struggled with the question of confessionalism, which is directly affecting the lives of women and their relationship with their partners by dictating the legal structure that regulates

relationships at home and within marriage. Confessionalism also regulates the role of Lebanese women in society in general.³ Added to confessionalism, Lebanese people unfortunately struggle a lot with corruption. Since the public system lacks a state jurisdiction that might hinder mechanisms of corruption, such corruption permeates the entirety of the layers of the state responses and affects service delivery.⁴ Such is the case when it comes to caring for the people affected by GBV, namely women and girls: aid and support are delivered by civil society actors, with no direct support from the state.

In Lebanon, it is a constant that women live, suffer and survive GBV every single day. However, lately, the situation is becoming life-threatening because, in addition to direct GBV, there is the question of the financial crisis and the lack of access to resources: not only financial resources but also access to the labour market, which is usually at the heart of women's protection in the sense of reinforcing their agency, independence and autonomy, as well as their ability to take decisions over their lives. Furthermore, the question of insecurity is putting women in a situation whereby they find themselves obliged to reflect on and rethink their lives' priorities.

In 2020, during the first lockdown, we saw an increase of women reporting GBV due to the pandemic. After the Beirut blast, we perceived a decrease in such reporting because women were too caught up in essential existential questions: "Where am I? Where am I to go? If I am to report GBV, what does that mean for my kids, for my future?" Security was in question and uncertainty took over.⁵ Nowadays, Lebanese women are struggling with violence but also with the absence of any kind of prospect or opportunity to prioritise their concerns in terms of access to information, services and long-term sustainable solutions

3. Di Peri, R. (2018) "Speaking Secular, Acting Sectarian. Lebanese Women's Rights beyond the Constitution", *Oriente Moderno*, "Gender Equality and Women's Rights in the Constitutions of the Middle Eastern and North African Countries", 98: 2; pp. 247-264.

URL: https://brill.com/view/journals/oromo/98/2/article-p247_7.xml

4. Helou, AM. (2019) *Whose Government and What Law? A Political Sociological Investigation of Corruption in Lebanon and its Effect on Government, Legality, and the People*, Department of Sociology Graduate Theses, Queen's University. URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1974/26323>

5. UN Women, CARE, UN ESCWA, ABAAD, UNFPA (2020) *Rapid Gender Analysis of the August 2020 Beirut Port Explosion: An Intersectional Examination*.

URL: <https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1603898974.pdf>

when it comes to protection and safeguarding their well-being and their choices. I would like to highlight that, in times of uncertainty, lifesaving has always been a key priority in the country, starting with the so-called revolution back in October 2019 and later during the harsh economic crisis, topped by Covid-19. Life-saving was the top priority following the Beirut blast, and continued to be during the new lockdown when dealing with the long-lasting insecurity and lack of stability tied to the conflicts taking place in neighbouring countries –either in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or in Syria.

Initiatives implemented by Abaad to counter GBV throughout the different stages experienced by Lebanon in 2020

At Abaad, as activists, the heart of the question that drives our work is always: What can be done so that life-saving is the key priority? How can we ensure that women access information despite all the odds? How can they continue to access quality, holistic care services and other services whilst preserving their dignity, despite the lockdown in the country at multiple levels? Moreover, the most important aspect for Abaad is to have women and girls at the core of the actions implemented. One of the key priorities for addressing GBV is ensuring the active participation and informed engagement of women and girls themselves. This process cannot be fostered through a survivors-centred approach only because there are many priorities: people picking and choosing what they really want on that front is key.

Lastly, accountability plays a pivotal role. It is crucial for Abaad to ensure feedback tools not only about complaints mechanisms but also about monitoring mechanisms in which women's voices reach policy-makers and decision-makers, so that they can have a say on what needs to be done, highlight the lack of space, resources and time on the political agenda, and thus keep GBV as a top priority on the table of decision-makers, as well as at the centre of analysis and responses concerning the events influencing society.

At Abaad, we try to keep thinking outside the box and, as mentioned, we really keep in contact with the grassroots levels, women themselves, to let them drive what the organisation is to do, as far as possible under the specific circumstances.

This was the bottom line for Abaad. One example of this work is the campaign “It’s a Lockdown NOT a Lockup!”⁶ At the beginning of the Covid-19 spread and once the lockdown measures started to be put in place in Lebanon, citizens were hopeless and helpless, staying at home, having to cope with the economic crisis and with the consequences of the pandemic. We had one top priority: letting the women behind the locked doors know that, despite the lockdown, Abaad’s services were not interrupted. We were there, breaking the isolation, welcoming and countering vulnerability by giving them a modality of calling and bridging with the external world – letting them know that they were not alone – and mobilising community solidarity.

It was a way to reach out to GBV survivors and to keep the ball rolling to maintain GBV among the concerns of decision-makers in the country. Regarding teenage girls, Abaad reached out to them using cereal boxes: through the activity of food distribution for kids, we placed camouflaged messages inside cereal boxes telling girls: “Ok, you are going to grow older – you have to take care of your body. No one has the right to harm you. If you want to talk to someone, we are here.” As for the juvenile, the Covid-19 crisis was indeed an additional challenge to engaging on that front because we were not able to go door to door, and girls were neither going to school nor attending community activities. Traditional media in Lebanon is far from even tapping on social issues. Very often the perpetrators of violence are the parents themselves,⁷ so we needed to find a way to enter these girls’ houses and let them know that they were not alone.

Policy measures that could be implemented to tackle multi-layered GBV after Covid-19

Among the many policy priorities that need to be tackled in Lebanon for countering GBV, ensuring a kind of mainstream of Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PASEA)⁸ is key for Abaad, since it is progressively becoming a major concern

6. Abaad’s campaign “It’s a Lockdown NOT a Lockup!” - Lebanon, April 2020.

URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XbFzlvz89A&ab_channel=ABAADMENA

7. UNICEF (2017) *A Familiar Face - Violence in the lives of children and adolescents.*

URL: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-familiar-face/>

8. Inter Agency Standing Committee (2020) *COVID-19 and Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Guidance Note No 1*, Lebanon In-Country PSEA Network.

URL: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/psea-during-covid-19-response-field-examples-adaptation-iasc-guidance>

in the country. Moreover, operationalising the multiple national action plans with clear-cut state responsibility and political will and budgeting the regional and national action plans for 2025 should both be envisaged. In this regard, another top priority should be officially aligning Lebanese local legislations with international standards and treaties that many governments are ratifying or signing. Lebanon still operates on a series of legislations that are discriminatory against women and girls: from nationality – the right to pass nationality onto children –, multiple discriminations in the penal code, sexual violence and the personal status quo that is still depriving mothers and women of many rights concerning marriage and divorce.⁹

Activists, movements, civil society organisations (CSOs) and multilateral organisations should all foster keeping GBV at the heart of the priorities of governments when it comes to policy-making, and strive to counter the perception that GBV is a separate issue, as if it is separate from the public health agenda, the security and peace agenda, and the economic agenda. It needs to be perceived as a pillar that can make any country healthy and have real prospects for the future. On this matter, our major difficulty has to do with dividing rights under the Human Rights Convention. As societies, we start to lose when we make divisions among various social groups, as if it was a women's world versus everything else, a disabled world versus everything else... It is a key difficulty that reduces the opportunities of effective solidarity.

Furthermore, bridging the gap between academia and activism is pivotal and should be considered a top priority. The research and the action-research that we produce at Abaad (baselines, data collection, policy recommendations) very often stays on paper, implying a broad gap between the understanding of what is happening and the activism that takes place on the ground, and vice versa. Activism does not always base its actions on scientific evidence and theories, understandably, and this also needs to be problematised.

9. Human Rights Watch (2020) *Lebanon: Broken Promises On Women's Rights - UN Review Should Focus on Increased Protection Against Violence, Bias*.

URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/04/lebanon-broken-promises-womens-rights>

Mozn Hassan

Founder of Nazra for Feminist Studies (Egypt)

Trained in the domains of civil society and human rights, in 2007 she founded the association Nazra for Feminist Studies, together with a group of women activists from Egypt. Nazra, which Hassan also directs, aims to foster a feminist transformation of the political, socioeconomic, legislative and cultural tissue of Egypt and the MENA region as a whole, particularly when it comes to defending women's rights.

Mozn Hassan and Nazra were very active during the Egyptian 2011 revolution, documenting human rights violations taking place in Tahrir Square and working with local organisations to support women facing sexual harassment and various forms of gender-based violence, providing them with medical, psychological and legal support. Mozn Hassan has faced a travel ban since 2016, escalated by the freezing of Nazra's assets; this has not prevented her from working toward the defence of women's rights. Her work has earned her numerous awards and recognitions.

The Resilience of the Feminist Movement and Human Rights Activism in Egypt

GBV as another epidemic in Egypt

I want to stress that having such a discussion from our region the day before the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is very meaningful, since this date revolves around one of the messages that feminist activists from the MENA region, and Nazra in particular, have been loudly stating every day for years: this region, and feminists from this region, understand their context very well and can fight against one of the main social problems of the world with their own agency.

On the topic of change and continuity related to GBV in Egypt – whether the pandemic has changed the unfolding of gender-based violence or not –, a question that needs to be asked is: do we still have to explain GBV, or do we believe that it has already been explained and, therefore, we should rather focus on how the

feminist movements are working hard to change the situation and make it better? For a person who is proud to be part of this movement in Egypt and the region, it is important to see how the feminist movements have been working for years in order to change and contribute to building a better environment for GBV survivors, and for the whole of society, with the aim of healing GBV-related problems, including sexual violence.

This issue has been raised in different contexts and spheres. Almost everyone in Egypt has been fighting feminists by saying “gender-based violence is all in your head” but, every day “our narrative” is being verified through facts. For many months now Egypt has been on fire because different “incidents” related to sexual violence have taken place and have been made public, incidents involving women and girls coming from areas about which many people have stereotypes – upper class women in Cairo, for instance. These survivors are coming forward and speaking about what is going on, building on the work done by the feminist movement, which has been denouncing sexual violence for years. This new wave is a strong wave, since it is coming out of hard times. Older generations have been fighting for this issue at a time when – retracing the long history of the movement – the work focused, as it does now, on advocating for a national strategy to combat GBV and on having a public discussion about amending articles in the Egyptian penal code, as well as on trying to advocate for a law to combat violence against women in the private and the public spheres.¹⁰

Different feminist groups and organisations have been working hard to focus on the prevention of GBV and protection from violence, to allow women to have access to comprehensive services and become “real” survivors. The state has been “adopting the narrative”, even if it is not implementing complementary measures. At the same time, violence against women, sexual violence in general and violence against other sexual identity groups have become public issues in Egypt in the last months and years. Egypt was at the centre of internationally covered occurrences like the suicide of our dear friend Sarah Hegazi, who committed suicide after detention, and other

10. EuroMed Rights (2018) *Egypt, situation report on Violence Against Women*.
URL: <https://www.euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/EMHRN-Factsheet-VAW-Egypt-EN-2016.pdf>

different sexual violence-related episodes that have happened lately.¹¹ In this sense, the pandemic is clarifying at what scale GBV is an epidemic in our society, too, and it has increased quite substantially with the implementation of lockdown measures (tied to the Covid-19 pandemic but also linked to the contraction of the public sphere that Egypt has been suffering for years). Egyptian feminist movements are currently openly showing that, despite a restricted public sphere, they will find new generations speaking up, at a time when one would never have thought that this could happen.

Nazra's response to GBV in 2020, the impact on Nazra's mission and its connection with other actors in the region

It is important to see Nazra for Feminist Studies' responses within the framework of the movement in Egypt. The feminist movement is powerful, diverse, and has focused on different issues at different times. It is a tool and shows the way to understand the new waves and responses from Egypt and the region. Within this context, it is worth noting that Nazra's assets are frozen: we witness a constant campaign against us. Despite the crackdown on civil society, human rights and feminist movements have not stopped their work in Egypt. On the contrary, this work has been on-going: this is why our colleagues from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights have been kidnapped and are now imprisoned.¹²

Nazra has been working on specific matters regarding GBV, building on the very problematic situation in Egypt. We highlight and keep saying that GBV is not a new thing. As mentioned, it is crucial, as feminists, to keep repeating this. As part of the patriarchal mindset, people are always surprised by any sexual "accident", as if it is a new thing. This is a narrative that takes us back to the beginning every time. That is why the movement and its history in the country are extremely important. We

11. "Egypt failed her': LGBT activist kills herself in Canada after suffering post-prison trauma", *Middle East Eye*, 15/06/2020.

URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-lgbtq-activist-sarah-hegazi-suicide-trauma>

12. "After the Arrest of EIPR's Executive Director: We are proud of our defence of rights of Egyptians and call on all those keen on human rights in Egypt and the world to show Solidarity; Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights", press release, 20/11/2020.

URL: <https://eipr.org/en/press/2020/11/after-arrest-eipr%E2%80%99s-executive-director-we-are-proud-our-defence-rights-egyptians-and>

need to remind everyone that GBV is taking place, that it can increase at a certain time, but also that we can fight it and eliminate it as we did already in the past. It can show up in new and different forms but the problem itself is the same, is real and is not “in our heads” at all. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Nazra’s work has been focusing on this narrative process.

Understanding the multi-layered nature of GBV is critical in the current times. For example, since Nazra has been working for women’s human rights defenders for a long time, after the outbreak of the Covid pandemic we published a checklist on how to deal with female prisoners in times of pandemic and to simultaneously remind the world, and our society, about these human rights defenders who are now in jail because they wanted their country to be different, to highlight the intersectional dimension of the struggle and the tools to counter violence.¹³

Nazra also continued its campaigns to highlight the work done by women human rights defenders in Egypt and different areas of the region. The campaign “Let her call her mum”, launched five months after the outbreak of the pandemic, is a pretty good example. For five months prisons had been in lockdown to the public, with no access to information about the detainees; thus, we asked the governments (not only the Egyptian one – this campaign was international and took place in different areas of the region, with our colleagues and feminists in Saudi Arabia) to allow the detainees’ families to at least hear the voices of their relatives during times of pandemic.

Furthermore, Nazra for Feminist Studies is focusing on the gender perspective of the pandemic crisis analysis, and on how women and girls can understand it, underlining the importance of well-being and psychological aspects. We launched an initiative centred on a series of drawings – it is a serial called “Lubna and her family”, in Arabic, about the pandemic and GBV – which recounts how women can cope with the pandemic and violence in general. It was amusing to see how women

13. Nazra for Feminist Studies (2020) “Proposal for Urgent Measures Concerning Egyptian Women Prisoners in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic”, research paper.
URL: <https://nazra.org/en/2020/03/proposal-urgent-measures-concerning-egyptian-women-prisoners-light-covid-19-pandemic>

reacted to holistic approaches to the pandemic that include a focus on gender and alternative masculinities. Thanks to this initiative, women were able to see and experiment with some of the coping mechanisms: some well-being tips can actually help in such times, if you are not able to afford or get psychological aid. This is about combating a problem that you are not experiencing yourself alone. This is how the feminist movement is very present in hard times, at different levels.

After the outbreak, feminist organisations have dedicated resources to open hotlines for GBV survivors so that they can seek medical, legal and psychological support. The new generation has been coming up with new ideas: for the first time, an online forum focusing on sexual harassment was opened and older generations have been mentoring newer generations, on the scene or behind the scenes. In time and space, this pandemic has brought to the fore one of the core issues of the feminist movement: the journey of solidarity. We have seen this solidarity taking place, appreciating how other areas of the region and beyond have been in solidarity with our friends and feminist fellows in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Algeria, for example. We have been building and kept working on this solidarity. All of these people have shown solidarity to us here in Egypt and we have been in reciprocal solidarity with them, implementing joint work during difficult times. Seeing the world talking of solidarity enables us to be more aware of the strength of the feminist movement: it could be considered one of the results of the actions that we have been carrying out for years.

Following the pandemic, Nazra has rethought the way it works. This flexibility has been part of how Nazra has been constructed from the beginning. The goal remains the same but the techniques have been changing all the time. Maybe with all the harsh incidents and the targeting that we have been facing, sometimes we were forced to stop working, but in other situations we were able to keep functioning. It is critical to see Nazra's work and the feminist movement's work in Egypt and in the region from this perspective. When we have had spaces, we have used them to provide large amounts of medical, legal and psychological support but we cannot do that now, mainly because of security issues. At the same time, we lack resources based on the pressure we face (connected with the fact that our assets are frozen).

With this in mind, it is important to see how the movement can keep adjusting at different levels.

Finally, I am seconding Ghida Anani on the centrality of political will. Why are we asking the state to support women's rights at the national level and to counter GBV? Because it is the state's responsibility to provide care and solutions for its citizens. The movement can work, but the state must work at the same time. I am always advocating for this: the feminist movements could be the policy creators, the narrative creators, but we are not interlocutors. What Ghida Anani pointed out about academia is also true when applied to the state. What the feminist movements ask the state is to hear them. We ask the state to listen to those grassroots people who are connected with women and societal issues and can create or inform policies accordingly.

Zeina Kanawati

Advocacy Officer of Women Now for Development (Syria)

A journalist and a documentary maker whose work focuses on documenting the experiences of the Syrian diaspora, Zeina Kanawati is Advocacy Officer of Women Now for Development. This association was founded in 2012 to, in its founder's words, "reinvent politics, from the heart of violence and war."¹⁴ Due to the complex scenario in Syria, Women Now for Development has centres in Syria, Lebanon, France, Germany and Turkey. This diversity of locations gets partially explained by the logics of mobility imposed by the Syrian war, which have led many Syrian women to live displaced.

Intending to bring together Syrian women from different backgrounds, Women Now develops initiatives that tackle different domains: micro-economic projects, education and training programmes directed at children and for the empowerment of women, health awareness projects, literacy courses and political and decision-making programmes to fight against the discrimination faced by Syrian women within the law. They follow a bottom-up and grassroots approach, shared also by Abaad and Nazra for Feminist Studies.

Past, Present and Future of Violence against Women and Girls in Syria

Cartographies of GBV in Syria in 2020

When dealing with the Syrian context, one must remember that we cannot disconnect the violence that women are experiencing in 2020 from the long history of GBV in this society, nor from the violence tied to the Syrian conflict. For years, national laws have been discriminating against women and hindering their rights and, as a consequence, even in their familial contexts girls are often raised to follow or maintain these inequalities.¹⁵ Before the conflict, the majority of Syrian women did not have the

14. Introduction to Women Now for Development, on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nh_zUk2FeY&t=246s

15. Maktabi R. (2010) "Gender, family law and citizenship in Syria", *Citizenship Studies*, 14:5; pp. 557-572. URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621025.2010.506714>

chance to choose if they wanted to be housewives, look for a job or continue with their education. In this respect, when the conflict started, women were already exposed to violence against them. After many households lost their male income-providers (because mostly men were killed during the war), women had to become the main income-providers for their families, having to face new situations.

Research conducted by Women Now for Development shows that Syrian society is not accepting this transformation. In this framework, the conflict has shaped the way GBV unfolds in Syria: women are being sexually harassed when they seek jobs or humanitarian aid; they are not considered as qualified workers by either formal or informal employers, they are offered lower salaries – thus, they suffer severe economic hardships on top of not receiving any kind of support. Furthermore, many Syrian women are facing stigma after they come out of detention, which creates additional types of violence, tied to perception and social norms, forcing them to face difficulties that do not apply to men.

Covid-19 broke out shortly after the local Women Now for Development team experienced internal displacement in Syria, from Idlib to other areas, due to Russian attacks. The displacement exhausted the team – we moved inside and outside Syria, and this was not the first time we had to face displacement and the loss of our loved ones it entails. In general, women had to change locations and find new safe places, which are rarely found. In Syria, the living and working conditions are always framed by emergencies, something that forces us to respond to the conflict, the displacement, the people killed and the safety of women. At Women Now, we strive to find economic solutions, healthcare, psychological care and support services, which are not provided for women facing such difficulties. The Covid-19 pandemic arrived in this context as an extra burden, since many Syrian women got stuck at home, or in tents in camps. Gender hierarchies exist in the camps as well – masculine powers predominate; many young Syrian girls, inside or outside the camps, were denied their rights to education, since they could not leave their “homes” and learn at school or engage in other learning activities, which corresponded to a rise in child marriages and suicide rates. Women Now is trying to conduct in-depth research on the many layers of gender violence, to identify the

exact challenges that Syrian women are facing to find out what can be done and changed, and how it can let women take part in those decision-making processes that are directly affecting their lives.

Supporting women as frontline agents in the response to the multi-layered GBV scenario

At Women Now we relate to the struggles faced by Abaad in Lebanon and Nazra in Egypt when it comes to tackling GBV. Despite the particularities of the three countries, we also experience similarities in our contexts. Also, I do agree that the feminist movement around the Middle East and Africa is truly moving forward, and such networking has gained much awareness as more activists and feminists are taking part in it.

In 2020, both the pandemic and the displacement recently faced by the Women Now team made it very difficult to reach out to Syrian women in the country. However, we were able to retrieve many stories of resilience, of women continuously finding ways to adapt and look for solutions to maintain their ability to carry on, to support those around them, to be active agents. At Women Now, we have identified that women lost their economic support due to the pandemic, aside from the conflict; that is why the organisation is working on a project aimed at spotting and tackling the real economic needs to find viable ways to provide opportunities to support women economically. The ideas that inform our actions mainly come from women in the country, since they know better what is needed, what is missing and what is possible and feasible, because not everything we think is reasonable – from the outside – is actually accessible in their reality; they are the ones who can identify and evaluate different opportunities and this is how and why they are always at the core of our activities.

As mentioned before, Women Now has lost much of the usual communication with the girls and teenagers in 2020, due to the additional burden brought by the pandemic and related to how its impacts are being tackled. Women of this age group are key societal actors. When we interact with them, we can assess and acknowledge that they have the energy to keep on actively working. Women Now

is thus looking for new ways to provide educational opportunities for these girls, to reach them, to provide them with a good Internet connection, and to communicate with their families to convince them of the importance of having access to computers and IT devices in these times, with our direct support. Psychological aid is also part of the services that Women Now is trying to provide for young girls, which is one of the central activities of the team's work inside Syria ever since our foundation.

We have already stated that the context in Syria keeps changing precipitously; new problems and challenges come up daily. The shelling and bombing of areas inside Syria are still going on and are still unpredictable. Such violence implies no safety and means that Women Now always has to respond to the basic needs of people, to help them stay alive. The protection of Syrian women's and girls' lives remains a priority for us. Furthermore, a major challenge has to do with the division of the country, which obliges us to deal with many different political authorities to implement actions. We do not have access to all the regions in Syria, and we have to deal with many and mainly male authorities to get such access. Women Now has to face militarisation to work – we have to communicate with military sectors and groups that we would not want to engage with, but mediation with them is the only way to try to have access to certain areas and support women under their authority. This context demands a hard and constant effort of coordination, which is pivotal to try to promote the participation of women at the political level, in the decision-making: the first step is to reach out to these women, as only women can reach some specific groups of the society. They are able to reach the children, the girls, the single mothers, the divorcees, those abandoned by their families, the care-providers, the marginalised groups within different groups. Neither inclusive nor sustainable change could take place without the participation of women.

The fight for gender equality in times of pandemic

As everyone was affected by the pandemic, it affected the feminist movement everywhere and Syrian women as well: Women Now has personal stories of women that are not often heard but speak of their struggles. Our team comprises women living in different parts of Europe, Turkey and other countries, who are single

mothers and worry that if they get Covid they will be taken to a hospital and no one will be there to take care of their children. This is one of the gender dimensions of the pandemic that concerns us as women workers. An illustrative example of how the pandemic has worsened Syrian women's condition is the case of a woman of the diaspora living in Europe who had been waiting for three years for the documents for her children (in Turkey) so that they could join her: she was about to get the last paper needed, but the pandemic outbreak forced them to wait another year, until the end of 2020. Several personal stories refer to the daily struggles of women all over the world and there are many that still need to be told because of the systemic absence of support. No real support is delivered by the respective systems to make women's situation easier. New measures related to teleworking in Europe, or the creation of co-working spaces, for example, show that women still have to choose between their role as care-givers and their jobs, professions or academic lives, because many of the new measures still lack a gender approach.

When it comes to the feminist movement in general, despite the struggles that may make us less active, strong solidarity alliances have been created amongst the feminist movements from the Middle East and around the world during these times. As an example, Women Now got to communicate with Palestinian feminist organisations that were able to support a Syrian woman in need of help, after she reached out to them. Women Now provided the woman with the support she needed thanks to this kind of networking and solidarity that is being fostered by feminist activists.

On a different level, Women Now for Development is also working towards producing the feminist knowledge that is missing. During 2019 and 2020 the organisation produced many reports enlarging the feminist knowledge about Syrian women in these critical situations. This kind of literature comes from the grassroots of this very challenging context. We have, for instance, produced papers on GBV in Syria focusing on the conditions of women detainees during and after coming out of the detention centres. Women Now tries to work on the ground as well as at the academic level in order to make these knowledge-production lines go together.

Policy Recommendations and key GBV Advocacy Issues for CSOs and Stakeholders in the Euro-Mediterranean Region

- Strive to bridge the gap between academia and activism through specific activities and partnerships aimed at performing informed, organised and effective activism as well as producing consistent research in order to avoid undermining the efforts made by both players in the fight for equality;
- Design strategic tools to reopen or keep open the dialogue with youth on youth's involvement in GBV analysis/action to bridge the gap between different actors and generations – according to the specific needs of each country's education system and employment system –, while focusing the gendered analysis on the timeline of progress achieved in terms of gender equality and the previous context challenges to assess change;
- Monitor the role of other non-state actors and favour networking for effective and coordinated advocacy actions. Focus on joint communication and visibility plans able to shed light on the transnational solidarity networks across feminist movements, including by studying and seizing country-specific or international opportunities of intersectional action to broaden the scope of GBV advocacy;
- Prioritise the rights to education and the education about their rights for women and girls, and focus on designing safe spaces in humanitarian contexts;
- Strive to achieve operational communication to ensure effective inclusion of the most vulnerable communities to design, implement and evaluate activities;
- Foster awareness-raising mechanisms elicited by the GBV victims/survivors themselves on specific issues (e.g. child marriage);
- Advocate to demand clear-cut state political will on GBV national agendas in order to ensure mechanisms of accountability for regular and timely feedback on state's responsibilities over GBV progresses;

- Advocate for the state to ensure concertation mechanisms with feminist organisations, with corresponding planning and commitments to be monitored;
- Advocate for aligning governments over the mainstream of the Protection Against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PASEA), and officially aligning local legislations with international standards and treaties;
- Exert pressure for the budgeting and operationalising of public regional and national action plans for the next five years in order to allow CSOs and social actors adequate planning where such programming is not present.

