

“National Referral System for Women Victims of Violence”: *Prospects and opportunities for development and complementarity*

Executive summary of the conference held on 19 July 2016 in Ramallah, organized by the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling and Juzoor for Health and Social Development, with the support of the Spanish Cooperation and the Italian Development Cooperation Agency.

Historical background

Takamol started in 2009 as a joint project between two non-governmental organisations – the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling and Juzoor for Health and Social Development. The National Referral System (Takamol, "complimenting" in Arabic) was designed as a comprehensive working framework for service providers detailing protocols for the referral of women victims of violence, within the civil and governmental social/legal/health services in the West Bank. The Takamol procedures are meant to ensure efficient cooperation between partners for women to receive the service(s) they most urgently require, be it counselling, legal aid, emergency protection, medical treatment – or a combination of all four. Such national framework secures women's access to justice, adequate protection and socio-legal support in the oPt. The System received formal agreement from the Cabinet in early 2013 and the implementation process could start subsequently across the West Bank, including appropriate capacity building of the service providers.

After three years of implementation of the National Referral System and its use by different institutions and women's organisations, WCLAC and Juzoor decided to carry out a holistic evaluation of the system. WCLAC created an internal committee of specialized staff to conduct such evaluation, and currently a process of procedures and regulations revision is ongoing. As part of such evaluation process, the national conference held on 19 July in Ramallah gathered key stakeholders – from field workers to governmental representatives – involved in the implementation of Takamol to discuss the main challenges to be tackled for the enhancement of the system. The share of experience was meant to assess the needs for the revision of the operational protocols and the national strategies.

Invited speakers included governmental and non-governmental representatives. Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and Women's Affairs could reaffirm their commitment towards the enhancement of the National Referral System. The Palestinian Civil Police and the Public Prosecution Office under the Attorney General could acknowledge the challenges their specialized units face in combatting gender-based violence. Furthermore, representatives, researchers and field workers from WCLAC, Juzoor, UNRWA, the Women's Studies Centre (Jerusalem, Nablus, Hebron) and the Centre for Women's Legal Research and Consulting in Gaza could present individually their assessment on the Takamol implementation process.

CHALLENGES

- **Coordination among partners.** Interventions shed light on the need to deepen the coordination among service providers working under the National Referral System. The lack of synergy among partners leads to insufficient service provision to women victims of gender-based violence and/or in need of protection, including a lack of use of Takamol standardized forms, a lack of clear referral procedures to address the cases in a timely and efficient manner and a lack of multi-partner supervision meetings. On that account, several presentations provided by speakers reminded the necessity to go beyond interinstitutional conflicts that prevent the advancement of the system's implementation.
- **Access to services:** Although documented rates of gender-based violence are on the rise, participants highlighted that women in need rarely seek assistance among specialized service providers – women's organisations, the police, and health sector. Besides, when they do so, they sometimes do not benefit from counselling that is sensitive enough to let them broach intimate subjects such as domestic violence. Palestinian women from remote communities and East Jerusalem particularly suffer from a lack of access to protection services while women from Gaza have to deal with continuous blockade from the Israeli occupying forces and political unwillingness from the de-facto government. Some highly discriminated categories are not covered in the System

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such as sex workers or women addicted to drugs also face double social and legal exclusion, being criminalized and therefore excluded from the Takamol system.

- **Sustainable referral and follow-up procedures.** The current framework of the National Referral System lacks specific procedures such as precise emergency referral procedures, and comprehensive reintegration procedures for women who have been victims of gender-based violence. There is also a need to set up special guidelines on case management for women from East Jerusalem that often cannot access the services available in the West Bank, including filing a complaint to the Palestinian civil police. Social Workers attending the case conference voiced the emergency to strengthen an efficient follow-up of the cases in order to ensure the women benefit from long-term protection, assistance and empowerment, and successfully reintegrate their communities in the corresponding cases. Integrated follow-up of the cases requires further implementation of a unified and computerized information management system.
- **Inadequacy of the law.** Lack of reforms in the applicable law and even lack of political willingness on the issue was a major concern raised by the participants. Social Workers constantly deal with insufficient legal provisions for an adequate protection of women's rights. Obstacles go from insufficient recognition of domestic violence in the Palestinian law to the lack of legal capacity for social workers, notably in what concerns the legal period of time women can be received in the protection institutions. Police officers are often caught between legal matters and victims' urgent needs, since they are not entitled to keep the women at the police station but face meanwhile the lack of available space in the shelters. To the same extent, applicable law only allows emergency shelters to host victims for a maximum of one month, a period very often exceeded in reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Improving Palestinian women's access to gender-sensitive integrated services.*

- **Awareness-raising about the National Referral System.** Participants voiced the necessity to enhance public awareness about the National Referral System and the services available accordingly in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to women victims of gender-based violence. Awareness-raising activities shall be carried out through unified campaigns focusing on the community level so that women receive comprehensive, non-repetitive and non-contradictory information about their rights and the assistance they are entitled to receive. In such process, Tawasol centres; that are associated with the governorates can stand as key resource centres within each governorate.
- **Confidentiality and high quality counselling.** Enhancing women's access to gender-sensitive services will also be achieved through guaranteeing them that ethical principles are respected throughout the procedures. On that account, ensuring full confidentiality of the cases comes as a major requirement. Adequate and continuous training of the service providers, especially within the police, the health and the legal sector, is also meant to ensure women benefit from sensitive, non-judgmental and supportive counselling from the service providers.
- **Inclusion of excluded beneficiaries.** The next steps of implementation shall respond to unintentional discriminatory provisions that were underlined by the participants. Based on Takamol current procedures, there are seven categories of women who are excluded from being referred to the three existing shelters among which are sex workers, women with drug addiction, and women suffering from psychological disorder. Unintentional discrimination also comes from economic inequalities that prevent women to access the health services they need and/or initiate a case in the court. Women from East Jerusalem particularly suffer from economic vulnerability since they have to cope with very high costs to access those services, and the working group suggested accordingly the establishment of

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a specific fund to tackle the issue. Inclusion of beneficiaries will eventually be addressed through a progressive extension of services throughout the West Bank – for instance several speakers insisted on the lack of safe houses (shelters) and specialized clinics.

2. ***Institutionalizing Takamol's procedures.***

- **Clarifying referral procedures with the role of each partner.** All participants voiced the need to clarify Takamol procedures, defining the role and duties of each partner, and how and when it shall be involved. Unified guidelines are to be available to each partner and shall include concrete cases management based on field workers' experience. Special procedures shall respond to some specific situations experienced in the field on a regular basis, among them procedures for efficient emergency transfers and procedures dedicated to women from East Jerusalem.
- **Long-term follow-up of the cases.** One major weakness of the National Referral System is currently the lack of integrated follow-up of the cases. Some cases are referred without using specific referral forms available in the Takamol protocols. This prevents unified documentation and filing of information related to each case. The lack of follow-up gets particularly visible in the light of the reintegration of women within their communities, where these women should be followed-up by directorates of social affairs in each governorate. Successful reintegration requires long-term social and legal support to the women.
- **Information management system.** Efficient coordination among partners shall be supported by a shared computerized information management system. Legal cases especially are to be recorded and fully acknowledged within the system. Besides, Takamol information management system must allocate a space for the follow-up of the training activities – including the topics and the participants – in order them not to be repetitive. It would also address the need for unified data and statistics at the national level.
- **Capacity-building of the service providers.** All partners shall receive comprehensive training about the national system and its procedures, and shall be able to provide the women with a comprehensive vision about their rights, the available services and the manner they would respond to their needs.

3. ***Implementation and evaluation of the National Referral System.***

- **Establishing a national organigram of Takamol's stakeholders.** The Ministry of Women's Affairs presented during the conference the establishment of a national committee which will head the supervision of the implementation process. Priority shall be given to define each partner's role and responsibility within the Takamol system, before going further in the revision process. Key partners such as UNRWA and the Governorates are to be closely integrated within the national framework.
- **Setting up pragmatic working plans.** Further implementation of the National Referral system shall be conducted with concrete and progressive outcomes allowing synergy among partners. Participants accordingly voiced the need to intensify the working process through more frequent meetings with daily precise objectives.
- **Continuous lobbying for legal reform.** The National Referral System will not achieve its purposes without specific legal reform to enhance women's human rights. Victim's protective legislation as well as preventive legislation to combat gender-based violence need to be on the political agenda, since they are the ground for a sustainable development of the protection system. In addition, specific bylaws are locally required. To that end, crucial decision-makers are to be continuously involved in the implementation process.
- **Economic and practical empowerment of the service providers.** As a concern expressed by many participants, the enhancement of the services available to women in the West Bank will require to tackle the lack of logistic means and human resources.

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- **Accountability to ensure a sustainable program development.** Participants eventually claimed the need to ensure accountability for each party working under the Takamol system. While precisely defining the responsibility of each partner, accountability will secure the completion of strategic outcomes and will ensure that reporting and evaluation are conducted regularly. The Ministry of Women's Affairs shall centralise the reports and recommendations.