



للارشاد القانوني والاجتماعي

مركز المرأة

Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling

Weekly response report  
30<sup>th</sup> April – 6<sup>th</sup> May 2020

## COVID-19 and Women's Rights Violations in Palestine

*For Palestinian women who are already facing the dual oppression of the Israeli Military Occupation and Palestinian patriarchal society, COVID-19 and the consequences of lockdown have become a third threat of violence.*

*WCLAC is currently focusing our efforts on mitigating the increase in GBV during the pandemic through an emergency response plan. This includes providing a free, 24-hour GBV helpline service as well as e-counselling, securing protection for GBV survivors in shelters, carrying out media interventions and awareness campaigns on GBV, coordinating with other women's rights organisations locally and globally, and continuing to document human rights and IHL violations against women throughout Palestine.*

### WCLAC's week in numbers



49 new women supported through the GBV helpline



7 cases of physical violence



82 follow up calls with supported women



2 new cases of threat to a woman's life

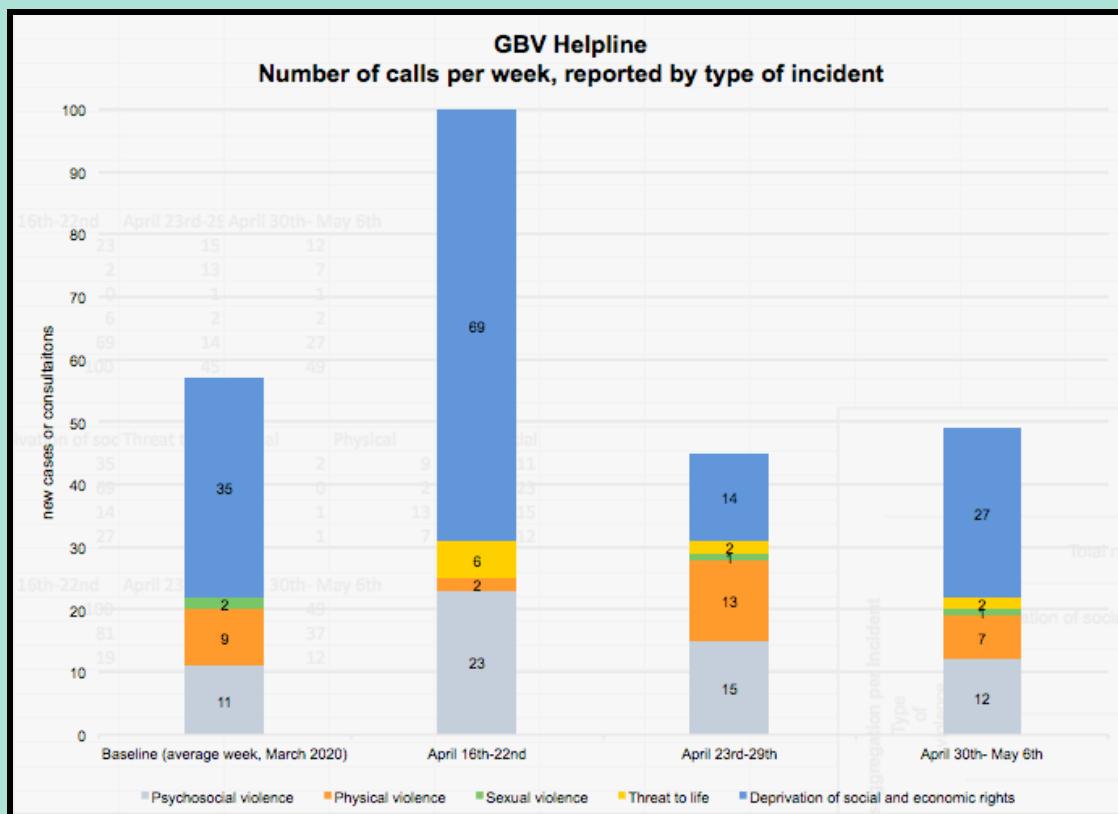
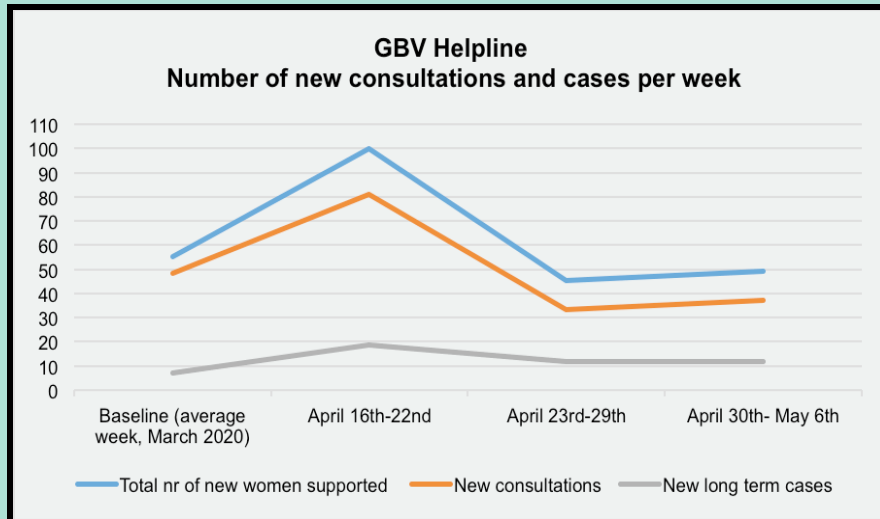
**The past week...** the renewal of the state of emergency for a third month, and continued lockdown throughout Palestine continues to exacerbate economic hardship and risk of violence for Palestinian women. In addition, it is having a clearly negative impact on women's access to justice, as Sharia courts remain closed to cases of custody, maintenance and divorce, and jail time is not being used as punishment for men who do not fulfil responsibilities of paying maintenance or alimony. The number of women that have reached out to the helpline this week remains at a level close to the March baseline, despite that we have entered the second week of Ramadan where a decrease in calls is usually observed. An additional two cases of threat to a woman's life have been reported, which remains higher than an average week pre-pandemic.

### Helpline and counselling

This week WCLAC has provided social and legal consultations as well as long-term case support to 49 new women. In addition to this, 82 follow up calls have been held with women who have reached out in previous weeks, to support them with continued psychosocial support, legal advice, referrals, as well as mediation between supported women, their husbands and/or extended family. The figures this week represent levels close to the baseline from March, despite now having entered the second week of Ramadan, when WCLAC usually notes a decrease in new cases.

WCLAC also remains concerned that restriction of movement, fear of police reporting and of contracting the virus itself, all make women less prone to reach out for support and report acts of violence, meaning that the number of unrecorded cases of GBV may be even higher than usual.

Out of the new women that have reached out to WCLAC this week, 7 cases concerned physical violence, 12 psychosocial violence and one sexual violence. There were two cases of women's life being threatened, which remains higher than the average week. In addition, 27 cases related to social and economic rights, including consultations on custody, maintenance, divorce and alimony, inter alia.



35% of the women supported were from Jerusalem (17 women), 29% from Hebron (14 women), 24% from Ramallah (12 women) and 12% from Bethlehem (6 women). A vast majority (44 women) were in the age span of 19-39, with 3 women over 40 years, and 2 women under 18 years of age.

### **Access to justice**

Sharia Courts have remained closed this week causing distress and increasing hardship for Palestinian women whose access to justice is thus restricted during the pandemic. WCLAC has communicated an official request to the Chief Justice of Sharia Courts for the partial reopening of courts for emergency cases, especially those related to custody, alimony, maintenance and visitation rights with children. These are cases that affect women's and children's well-being, economic hardship and respect for their human rights to such an extent that it is not possible to put them hold despite the ongoing pandemic.

In addition to the courts being closed, there is currently a policy in place to not imprison people for unpaid debts. Although the intention is clearly to protect people from illness, this has also had a highly negative impact on women's access to justice. The effect has been that men who were due to pay maintenance or alimony for their wives and children, are not being punished or pressured to do so. This comes at a time when many women are already facing deepened economic hardship as a consequence of the crisis, particularly the 11% that are the main providers for the household. Reduced jail time has also been noted by women who have reported domestic violence to the police. As was noted last week, women have reported that men who would ordinarily be kept in jail over night were released after only a few hours.

### **Protection**

This week, the Ministry of Social Development issued new guidelines on the referral of women to protection shelters during COVID-19. This is a welcome development building on the meetings and advocacy carried out by WCLAC and other civil society organizations over the past few weeks. The new procedures include COVID-19 testing for victims of domestic violence in need of protection, cooperation between the Police Family Protection Unit and Ministry of Health to facilitate a safe space for protected persons while awaiting their test results, and the guaranteed approval of entering a protection shelter after negative test results have been confirmed. Procedures are also established for those that may test positive to COVID-19,

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

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

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

We have since then been in close contact with friends and family members who are able to support and mediate, as well as partners of WCLAC that can provide additional support. WCLAC has also facilitated urgent financial support for the family, and we are now working with all parties to provide support and protection for the young woman.

guaranteeing a dedicated safe space for them to protect both their health, safety and confidentiality.

WCLAC has participated in two meetings with Women Protection Networks this week, one with organizations in Hebron and one with organizations in Tulkarm. The aim was to discuss shared experiences from working to protect women victim of violence during COVID-19 and identify areas for further cooperation. The meetings were successful and highly appreciated among the participants. They highlighted the need for further coordination between member organizations and also to further advocate for our role in COVID-19 response. WCLAC will now continue to have regular meetings with the members of the Women Protection Network to deepen coordination and communication.

The woman previously protected in WCLAC's shelter, has now safely returned home and is receiving follow-up support. WCLAC has been in touch with the MoSD and the Police Family Protection Unit to reiterate that new cases can now be referred to our shelter, and that no woman should remain in an unsafe environment due to the on-going pandemic.