

Impact of COVID-19 on gender roles and violence against women - results from Jordan

Executive summary:

This study analysed, from a gender perspective, the effects of COVID-19 on health, social and economic aspects in Jordan during the period from March until the middle of the year of 2020. In May 2020, the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, with support from UN Women, and at the request of the Economic & Social Council, conducted a national survey to identify the impacts of the pandemic through a gender lens in light of the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the disease. The survey was conducted through extended telephone calls with 1,300 respondents, 663 of whom were female (51%) and 637 male (49%) respondents, representing different societal segments and the various regions and governorates.

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Jordan has taken a series of exceptional and precautionary measures, prioritising public health over economic considerations. Jordan was able to successfully absorb the initial shock of the pandemic through social distancing, lockdown, and self-isolation policies, including personal protection measures, closing air, land and seaports and borders, and shutting down non-essential industrial and commercial activities. However, such measures have had a negative impact on the social-economic situation, with health, domestic violence and psychological aspects, and with disproportional impact on women.

Self-isolation measures and lockdown policies restricted women's access to health care. Despite the provision of emergency services in cooperation with the Civil Defence, many pregnant women may not feel the need for regular visits to obtain prenatal care. Globally, reproductive health services provided to women, girls and new-borns have been affected by the pandemic. In Jordan, the study showed that 29% of pregnant women cancelled one or more prenatal visits during the crisis. More than half of married women from the study sample reported that they do not use any type of family planning methods, while 29% had to cancel or reschedule pregnancy follow-up appointments. Additionally, women reported being concerned about an unplanned pregnancy, contracting COVID-19 and how it could affect the foetus, or even of not being able to access health services to conduct routine checks to ensure their and their foetus' safety.

Moreover, one-fifth of the sample has at least one chronic disease. In addition, 29% of respondents reported that one of their family members was suffering from at least one chronic disease, and two-thirds of the sample responded that they were able to access health care during the self-isolation period. The results demonstrated that it was easier for women to access health centres when compared to men, with 70% and 66% respectively. On the other hand, 24% of female respondents indicated that they were not able to access hospitals when needed, mainly because of the delay in the lifting of lockdown and the provision of medical services. Additionally, of 4% of respondents who have at least one person with mental or physical disabilities in their family, 41% of respondents answered that they were able to easily access health services, albeit, in this case, access was easier for men than women, as 53% of men had access when compared to 34% of women. Concerning medical appointments, while women attended more scheduled visits than men, 29% of female respondents answered that they were not able to go to health care centres and hospitals, compared to 23% of men.

Concerning psychological health, more than 10% of respondents said they felt neglected or lonely, noting that those who were married and with higher income reported feeling less lonely than others. In this case, there was not a significant statistical difference between male and female respondents. It is worth mentioning that 59% of respondents indicated that they would not visit a doctor if they had COVID symptoms due to fear of social stigma. The study showed that more than half the respondents, split equally between men and women, thought that those infected with COVID-19 were irresponsible and dangerous to society.

From an economic perspective, the study showed that women working in low-wage, informal, or temporary and short-term sectors, such as seasonal jobs or small-scale businesses, were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, with material and psychological impact. In addition, the termination of services of workers in affected institutions and businesses has had a significant impact on the economic circumstances of many families, especially women-led households, causing health and psychological harm due to the inability to provide general well-being, as well as access to effective health care. Additionally, 35.4% of Jordanian women work in the educational sector, and during the pandemic had to switch to remote teaching which was added to the domestic work required from them. In parallel, 13.4% of women in Jordan work in the health and social services sectors and continued to provide their services along with the burdens of social responsibilities imposed on them. The study devoted a full chapter to discussing the economic impacts of COVID-19.

It is important to strengthen programmes on women's health and prenatal care, while raising the awareness on women's continuous work during the lockdown to provide them with the necessary support. It is equally important to keep primary and specialised health care activated during the pandemic. Programmes focused on the protection of family, children, and persons with disabilities should also be strengthened, which requires a joint effort by the government sector, the Royal Medical Services, universities, private sector institutions, civil society, and institutions working on the protection of families and minors. Urgent and necessary measures must be put in place to help marginalised areas, through the establishment of centres for women, maternity and childhood, and family protection centres, while also building the capacity of those available and ensuring their sustainability.

There is a pressing need in addressing cases of violence against women and children by taking necessary measures to protect those who suffer from societal violence during the pandemic, including prosecuting and holding perpetrators accountable, and through the provision of shelters and treatments for victims of violence.

The study also recommended increasing health support, including through the provision of health insurance, for families and individuals affected by the pandemic especially for women who live alone, elderly, widows, and those separated from their husbands or who are divorced, and for families of martyrs, centres for orphans, and homes for the infirm and elderly. Those who are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, with greater health and psychological effect, require further assistance, ensuring their continuous access to care and health services, for them and their families.

It is pivotal to raise community awareness on how to reduce the psychological impact caused by self-isolation, intermittent lockdowns and travel bans, and how to encourage the use of self-isolation as an opportunity to follow a healthy lifestyle. It is important that one promotes public health awareness in general, and that of women in particular, as well as preventative measures, to strengthen public policies on social distancing and the wearing of masks, and to provide pre-and post-natal educational



materials to women, in addition to answering the relevant enquiries through the official webpages and online platforms.