



A Novel Virus with Familiar Results: The impact of covid-19 on women in Libya

This summary document is based on a report issued by DRI in May 2021, in Arabic, on the findings of a gender-based study carried out from October through the end of December 2020 on the economic and social effects of the covid-19 pandemic in Libya.

In mid-March 2020, both the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan Interim Government declared a state of emergency, based on concerns that the coronavirus was spreading in the country. They also introduced procedures that included the closing of land borders and air entry points and the introduction of a curfew¹.

Men and women, girls and boys have been affected differently by the crisis and associated measures to address it. The main objective of the paper, covering the period from March through the end of 2020, is to analyse the gendered socioeconomic impact of covid-19 on women and girls in Libya. The study also assesses how the pandemic has affected women civil society organisations (CSOs) to assist different stakeholders in addressing issues specifically affecting women during the crisis and in post-pandemic planning.

Methodology

The research applied a combined methodology, comprising two basic elements. The first was the collection of qualitative data through interviews with 32 key community leaders and heads of CSOs working on gender equality and access to services for women, covering the three main

regions of Libya, with 18 interviewees in the West, six in the East and eight in the South. The second was the gathering of data from secondary sources through a desk review of research and reports on gender equality in Libya before the pandemic, on the gendered impact of the covid-19 pandemic globally, and on Libya's response to covid-19.

The situation during the covid-19 crisis and, in particular, the associated restrictions on movement imposed limitations on the research process, including that direct access to communities was not possible. As a result, data collection had to be carried out through phone calls and digitally, which limited interaction with respondents, particularly during the key informant interviews. For the same reason, it was not possible to organise focus group discussions or validation workshops.

The lack of recent official census and other data, particularly data on gender-based violence and/or domestic violence before and during the pandemic, as well as on related services provided, made the analysis more difficult.

Introduction

Since early 2020, countries around the globe have been battling the severe health crisis caused by the covid-19 pandemic, which has led to the deaths of more than 2.5 million people worldwide. The pandemic has not only been a health crisis but has also had a serious economic and social impact, particularly on

¹ A Legitimacy Crisis, Civil Conflict and a Pandemic: how Libyan authorities used emergency powers to curb the spread of covid-19, 2020, retrieved on 24 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3g1ejBj>

vulnerable groups, including women and girls.

In April 2020, UN Women stated that in Libya, a country already torn apart by war, women were particularly vulnerable to being the negatively affected by the pandemic, due to existing insecurity and gender-based discrimination.²

Key Findings

Women absent from decision making

Globally, women's representation is still limited when it comes to principal decision-making processes, especially in relation to responses to the pandemic. The situation is even worse for women in conflict zones.

This lack of representation is pronounced in Libya, as women make up just 16.5 percent of the membership of the parliament and 14.3 per cent of the ministerial positions with only five women appointed ministers by mid-March 2021 in the Government of National Unity (GNU). Seventy per cent of interviewees stated that the absence of women in decision-making processes contributed to the exacerbation of the negative effects of the pandemic on women and girls.

At the national level, there is no female representation in the National Advisory Scientific Committee established by the (GNA), and only a few women have been appointed to its subcommittees, which lack decision-making prerogatives.

At the local level, although the law on local administration requires the selection of at least one woman in every municipal council, women are poorly represented in special committees working on crises or in areas like infrastructure, planning, budgeting and service delivery; women have participated

mostly in thematic committees, such as medical and volunteer committees.

More specifically, our research found that at the local level, in the west, most of the women members of municipal councils are heads of social affairs sections, none of these were engaged in crisis-management efforts, and no women were appointed to the committees in charge of responding to the pandemic in most municipalities. The case was much the same in the south, where most interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the extent to which women are represented in decision-making. While a woman was assigned to head the advisory scientific committee in the eastern region, and she ensured that women were included in the local committees, she did not emphasise the need to incorporate gender-based policies or collect gender-disaggregated data. In some cases, where women had been members of standing crisis management committees, they were not included in the smaller committees formed specifically to address the covid-19 crisis.

Disproportional economic impacts

While both men and women have been severely affected by the economic impact of the pandemic, the data suggest that women were disproportionately affected, as they lost their sources of income and economic opportunities. This was caused by the large presence of women in the informal sector and those sectors most affected by the pandemic, such as hospitality, education and health. According to UN Women,³ 52 per cent of the women covered by a recent survey said that their job was affected by the preventive measures to counter the pandemic.

In another survey, conducted by Jusoor Center for Studies and Development, the data show that 89 per cent of working women in the private sector are working informally in low-paid and non-registered jobs that

² UNWomen, Press Release, 14 April 2020, retrieved on 24 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3wzfhvj>

³ UNWomen, Gender-Sensitive Prevention Response and Management of covid-19 Outbreak in Libya, retrieved on 24 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/2SrYAU3>

generally provide no basic legal or social protection. Therefore, the suspension of labour activities because of the pandemic has affected women's income in a disproportionate manner.⁴

This is particularly true for internally displaced and migrant women, who work overwhelmingly in day-labour activities, which have been most affected by official responses to the pandemic. This has added to the economic pressure borne by them, as many of the male breadwinners in their households are either abroad, in prison or unable to find employment. The rise in rental costs has also affected this group disproportionately.

One hundred per cent of interviewees confirmed that women-owned businesses and women working in the private sector have been negatively affected by the pandemic, due to both general or partial closure of many businesses, by a lack of liquidity and by increasing prices. The economic effects of the pandemic were less severe for workers in the public sector, who were not laid off during the crisis, and even those who were suspended from work, pursuant to the decision related to the state of emergency to prevent the spread of covid-19, did not see their employment or financial prerogatives reduced.

Another economic factor that has negatively affected women's economic situation during the pandemic can be found in discriminatory social customs, including a general belief that men are the breadwinners in families and need greater opportunities in the labour market when jobs are scarce. The same stereotypical roles oblige women to prioritize their household responsibilities. Therefore, when workforces were reduced in most private companies, women were the first to be sent home.

All interviewees reported that closure of nurseries and schools exacerbated the situation, forcing *many* women, including owners of businesses, to stop working

either completely or partially, which has reduced women's incomes.

There have been no policies by the government to address the negative economic and social impacts specifically on women during the pandemic, and 93 per cent of interviewees said they had not received any information on government procedures to support women and their families during the pandemic.

Our research shows that women were also adversely affected by delays in payment, sometimes by as much as six months, by the Social Security Fund to vulnerable groups, including widows, divorcees and the elderly, because of lengthy administrative and financial procedures. In August, responding to popular anger, the GNA's Presidential Council passed a decision to pay a pension for wives and children. Some CSOs protested the decision because the pension was to be paid to the head of family and not directly to the wife, leading to women's further dependence on their husbands.

Not only women's physical, but also their mental health has been negatively affected because of the pandemic in a way different from men. An increase in the household responsibilities of and a lack of services providing support for women has exacerbated mental health difficulties. The suspension of school courses and the switch to remote education was an additional burden for women, especially in the absence of any ministerial programme to support and guide parents in supervising their children's educational process.

Health risks for women on the frontline

Women constitute a significant share of the workforce in the Libyan health sector. Most survey participants believe that women on

⁴ Jusoor Center for Studies and Development, Covid-19 Impact on Women Entrepreneurs in Libya, and How to Mitigate it?, 2020, accessed on 24 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3vFPp0F>

the frontlines of fighting the pandemic, whether in hospitals or in quarantine centres, were the most adversely affected. Yet no policies were introduced to support them or improve their situations, nor were measures taken to protect them from the virus.

This may be partly the result of the fact that the low level of women's representation in leadership positions also applies to the health sector. Although women represent a large portion of the workforce in this sector, they are much less represented in management and in senior positions.

A UN Women survey⁵ showed that 69 per cent of women covered by the survey contribute to the learning process of their children. Where women have become the primary breadwinners in households, this has generally not come with any reduction in domestic responsibilities.

Women's traditional role as caregivers in the home has also increased due to covid-related illnesses.

Funding cuts for women-led CSOs

The pandemic has negatively affected women's CSOs, particularly in the area of funding. Thirty-six per cent of representatives of women's CSOs surveyed said that their organisations depend mainly on international funding. They also said that economic difficulties in the countries of origin either have or are likely to result in some losses in funding. Seventy-three per cent of surveyed CSOs working on women's rights have reduced activities due to a lack of funding. The danger here is greatest for smaller organisations, which tend to rely more heavily on foreign funding.

Seventy-seven per cent of these CSOs have taken measures to ensure the

continued implementation of their plans through online training and work on small-scale initiatives to serve local communities. Most of these have conducted advocacy campaigns to engage women in the decision-making process in relation to the pandemic and in awareness-raising campaigns targeting municipal councils.

The study found that the switch to online work associated with the pandemic has also raised difficulties for many of these organizations; 55 per cent of women's CSOs have faced challenges in implementing their programmes online, due to poor infrastructure, including the high cost and poor quality of Internet services and a lack of computers.

Levels of gender-based violence increase

The UN Women study⁶ states that factors associated with the responses to the pandemic have had significant negative social effects, including in the incidence of gender-based violence. Ninety-two per cent of the interviewees noted an increase of instances of violence against women since the onset of the pandemic. In a survey conducted by UN Women⁷ on Women and the covid-19 pandemic, 46 per cent of women surveyed expressed their fear from the increasing fits of anger at home, as their partners are constantly home, and the economic pressure continues to rise.

All women interviewed for this study said the absence of a database of cases of gender-based violence makes it very difficult to identify the depth of the problem.

⁵ UN Women, Gender-Sensitive Prevention Response and Management of Covid-19 Outbreak in Libya, 2020, accessed on 24 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/2SrYAU3>.

⁶ UN Women, Gender-Sensitive Prevention Response and Management of Covid-19 Outbreak in Libya, 2020, accessed on 24 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/2SrYAU3>.

⁷ *ibid*

Pursuant to a decision issued by the Supreme Judicial Council in March 2020, work was completely suspended in courts, prosecutors' offices and the other judicial organs, to prevent the risk of coronavirus contagion. The decision included the pending cases in first instance courts, among which are cases related to family affairs, alimonies

and child custody. Some interviewees told DRI that some ex-husbands refrained from paying alimony to women and for child support, using the pretext of the deteriorating economic situation during the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to political Decision-Makers

- The Government should ensure the meaningful engagement of women in decision-making processes during the pandemic by ensuring the fair and effective representation of women in all committees working on responses to the pandemic.
- The GNA should begin (without delay) to design socio-economic policies to alleviate the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic, to enhance women's and girls' access to social support services at the local and national levels, and to improve procedures for reporting cases of gender-based violence and provide survivors with proper services.
- To strengthen women's access to economic and financial security, the Central Bank of Libya, the Ministries of Economy and of Planning, the Economic and Social Development Board and the Women's Empowerment Unit should start designing national strategies to promote women's financial security, including long-term savings plans, and to enhance legal protection schemes.
- The Ministry of Local Governance should ensure that all crisis committees formed within municipalities include at least one member who is a woman, and that matters specifically related to women during crises and emergencies are taken into consideration.
- The GNA should instruct the Women Empowerment Units in the ministries and public entities to mainstream gender sensitivity and responsiveness into governmental response plans and policies, to ensure that response and support measures take women and girls' needs into account.
- Governments should support the activities of women CSOs and mobilise them to organise awareness-raising and outreach campaigns at the national and local levels to provide psychosocial support to women and girls during the pandemic.
- The National Centre for Disease Control should prioritise disaggregating data related to the pandemic to facilitate the understanding of the different effects from a gender perspective, and to design response measures as needed.

Recommendations to Non-Governmental Organisations

- The government should organise advocacy campaigns and mobilise support to engage women to a larger extent in committees working on crises and emergencies locally and nationally, including the committee working on covid-19 responses.
- More focus could be placed on designing plans to build working women's capacities to use technologies to move to a remote working business model and ensure the sustainability of their projects.

Recommendations to International Donors and Organisations

- Aid agencies should, in coordination with CSOs, consult with their beneficiaries by running impact assessments or public opinion polls to better understand their experiences during the pandemic to design more effective response plans. Special focus should be given to women from vulnerable groups who do not have sufficient knowledge of and/or access to the digital technologies.
- INGOs should continue supporting work on mechanisms that help monitor domestic violence, such as hotlines and psychosocial support programs.
- Donors and INGOs could ensure that services to address gender-based violence and provide psychological responses are prioritized in the country's response plans to covid-19, to ensure continuity of services as much as possible.