



Tackling Violence Against Women in the Middle East and North Africa

GOVERNANCE AND VICTIM/SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACHES



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Foreword

Violence against women (VAW) exists in all countries and across all socio-economic groups, with around one in three women experiencing sexual and physical violence in their lifetime worldwide. This situation has worsened since the outbreak of COVID-19, intensifying the need for major efforts to eradicate VAW and to build societies that prioritise the safety and well-being of all individuals.

This report offers an overview of MENA countries' efforts to establish comprehensive, whole-of-government responses to VAW, particularly amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It assesses gaps that impede the realisation of a society free from violence for all women and girls. Drawing on the OECD reports (2022) *Eliminating Gender-based Violence: Governance and Survivor/Victim-centred Approaches*, (2023) *Breaking the Cycle of Gender-based Violence: Translating Evidence into Action for Victim/Survivor-centred Governance*, and on international good practices, it provides recommendations to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of policy and institutional frameworks addressing VAW in MENA countries.

The report presents findings from responses to the OECD 2022 Survey on Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centric Approaches to end Violence Against Women (VAW) in MENA Countries of the public administrations of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, and Tunisia, complemented by data from the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2023 and desk-based research.

This report is part of a long-standing strategic partnership between MENA and OECD countries under the MENA-OECD Governance Programme and its MENA-OECD Platform on Gender Mainstreaming, Governance and Leadership. Since 2009, the Platform has focused, among other objectives, on supporting MENA governments in strengthening institutions, regulatory frameworks and co-ordination capacities to prevent and tackle VAW and advance gender equality.

The report is delivered in the context of the project "COVID-19 Response and Recovery in the MENA Region". Implemented by the OECD Development Centre, the MENA-OECD Governance Programme in the OECD Public Governance Directorate, and the OECD Centre for Tax Policy and Administration, the project supports MENA governments in their efforts to respond and recover from the COVID-19 crisis and to enhance their resilience to future shocks, with a focus on young people and women. The project is financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in Italy.

Preliminary findings of this report were shared during the meeting of the MENA-OECD Platform on Gender Mainstreaming, Governance and Leadership in September 2022, during which MENA stakeholders provided additional valuable inputs.

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Executive Summary

Violence against women (VAW) remains an urgent and complex challenge in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: it is estimated that one in three married women experiences physical and sexual abuse by her intimate partner at least once in her lifetime. A United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) report shows that the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in VAW in MENA countries, while putting pressure on health and social services for victims/survivors. The crisis highlighted women's economic dependence as a key obstacle to escaping violence in the MENA region, along with restrictive social norms that discourage victims/survivors from reporting and sharing their experiences. This report offers an overview of MENA countries' efforts to establish comprehensive, whole-of-government responses to VAW, covering legal and policy developments until July 2023.

MENA countries have committed to adopting and updating legal frameworks to prevent and prosecute various forms of VAW, both at the national and international level, as well as supporting the implementation of domestic legislation or regulations combating VAW through dedicated national strategies and horizontal and vertical co-ordination mechanisms. Still, legal gaps and loopholes significantly reduce the efficiency of VAW responses in the MENA region. For example, as shown by the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2023, less than half of MENA countries have legislation protecting women from forms of violence other than physical abuse, such as psychological abuse (9 countries) and economic abuse (7 countries), and none explicitly criminalises marital rape. Strategic and co-ordination efforts are limited by a lack of adequate structures, capacities, and funding. Moreover, there is no systematic evidence of accountability and monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of VAW responses in MENA countries, although some examples exist. In addition, in MENA countries, programmes to tackle VAW are largely dependent on donor funding, and the pandemic has further diverted funds to address health and economic crises, threatening the sustainability of those programmes. In order to guarantee lives free from violence, MENA countries should continue to strengthen legal frameworks to protect women and girls from all forms of VAW and develop comprehensive national strategies that are adaptable to emergency settings and are linked to broader efforts to empower women economically. To support the implementation of legislative and strategic frameworks, MENA countries could consider enhancing the capacities dedicated to VAW responses, strengthening co-ordination mechanisms, ensuring monitoring and accountability through independent entities and regular evaluation exercises, and promoting coherent and systematic approaches to resourcing for the initiatives addressing VAW.

While the COVID-19 pandemic put pressure on services, surveyed MENA countries have begun introducing integrated solutions to reduce social and financial burdens on victims/survivors, as well as adopting innovative, technology-based approaches to increase access to information and make reporting easier for victims/survivors. Surveyed MENA countries have improved data collection on VAW and recognised the potential of risk assessment and management as powerful tools to prevent violence, establishing cross-sectoral data-sharing initiatives. To combat the "culture of silence" around VAW, all seven surveyed MENA countries reported introducing programmes that engage men and boys and promote positive notions of masculinity. However, as in OECD countries, under-reporting of incidences of VAW continues to be a fundamental challenge in the MENA region, leading to a lack of data on prevalence.

Moreover, the provision of shelters remains limited, victims/survivors' are often unaware of their existence, and women who leave abusers or families are stigmatised. A victim/survivor-centred culture should be further strengthened in MENA countries through awareness-raising initiatives and safe and confidential reporting options that reduce fear and stigma. Data collection for policymaking, risk assessment and management should be expanded, harmonised, and complemented by the use of new technologies for a more comprehensive view of the extent of VAW. Governments should ensure that services, including shelters, receive sufficient funding and that service providers have the necessary skills and capacities. MENA countries should continue to facilitate access to services, by improving the integration of and collaboration among service providers, digitalising services, promoting information-sharing across agencies, and adopting “no wrong door approaches”.

MENA countries have also made efforts to decrease the burden borne by victims/survivors when facing complex, expensive justice processes. They have addressed social and financial barriers to justice by providing information about victims/survivors' rights through hotlines and legal assistance. However, integrated justice solutions, such as specialised courts relying on the “one family, one judge” model, are rare in the region. Furthermore, while the COVID-19 pandemic prompted MENA countries to digitalise law enforcement and justice systems, several of these initiatives were discontinued after the crisis, reintroducing some of the barriers experienced by victims/survivors. To respond to this, MENA countries should continue to ensure access to justice for victims/survivors through integrated, specialised justice solutions, as well as access to legal information and assistance. Finally, MENA countries should reinforce the capacities of law enforcement, one of the first responders in guaranteeing victims'/survivors' physical, mental and psychological safety. Specialised training of police units would help raise awareness and make risk assessment and management more efficient, ultimately saving lives.

1. Addressing violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa: Overview

This chapter provides a brief overview of the pervasive issue of violence against women (VAW) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, highlighting the exacerbating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It outlines the report's structure, which is organised around the OECD three-pillar approach to a whole-of-state framework for addressing VAW, as well as its methodology.

1.1. Context

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that one out of three married women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) had experienced physical and sexual forms of abuse by an intimate partner in the course of their life (WHO, 2013^[1]). This estimate is likely a conservative one since many cases of violence go unreported for a variety of reasons (OECD, 2023^[2]). In the last decade, MENA countries have demonstrated a growing commitment to recognising the magnitude of this issue and taking efforts to address it, mainly through the adoption of domestic legal frameworks and national strategies to prevent and prosecute various forms of violence against women (VAW).

Globally, and particularly in the MENA region¹ (OECD, 2020^[3]), the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated VAW (OECD, 2022^[4]) (OECD, 2023^[5]) (OECD, 2021^[6]). A United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA) report has found that increased instances of domestic violence were reported throughout the MENA region, accompanied with lower levels of safety. For example, in Lebanon, 57% of women and girls reported feeling less safe in their communities since the start of the pandemic (UNESCWA, 2020^[7]). The Arab Barometer, a nonpartisan research network active in the MENA region, estimated that citizens perceive that VAW in their community has increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, 63% of respondents to a population-based survey perceived increase in abuse and/or VAW in Tunisia, followed by 41% of respondents in Algeria and Morocco, respectively, while the perceived surge of VAW in Jordan was 27%, and 20% in Lebanon (Arab Barometer, 2020^[8]). In Jordan, the Family Protection Department announced a 33% increase in reported domestic violence cases during the first month of the lockdown (OECD, 2020^[3]). The strict and prolonged confinement measures put in place to contain the outbreak, especially in its early stages, have had pernicious effects on women due to economic insecurity, forced coexistence with abusers, disrupted support services, and reduced access to law enforcement services. While global, these risk factors are exacerbated in the MENA region by the restrictive social norms and legislations that see men as heads of household and responsible for the family income. Under such a configuration, economic obstacles and pressure preventing men from fulfilling their social roles as providers may heighten frustrations and risks of violence toward women and girls. In conflict-affected MENA countries, where institutional capacity and services were already limited, the negative impact was multiplied (Maloney, 2020^[9]). Overall, governments were insufficiently prepared to swiftly implement contingency strategies to protect women from violence in the emergency context installed by the pandemic. In its short-term consequences, the pandemic has thus jeopardised the progress achieved by MENA countries toward the implementation of the goals outlined in the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030.

However, amidst these setbacks, the urgency triggered by the global pandemic has also compelled governments in the MENA region to take more decisive and innovative action to protect women from violence. This momentum has helped instigate the creation of policies and services to mitigate abuse, such as the establishment of additional shelters for survivors. Good practices have emerged out of the crisis and outlived it, owing to the adaptability and resilience of service providers. The COVID-19 crisis can thus offer a small window for tackling underlying discriminatory legal frameworks, social norms and other barriers holding back progress toward gender equality across the region.

1.2. Overview

This report provides an overview of some MENA countries' efforts to develop more holistic VAW responses, while assessing the gaps that hinder progress towards achieving lives free from violence.

VAW is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that manifests in multiple and interlinked forms (OECD, 2023^[5]), including intimate partner violence, domestic violence², sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment, stalking, technology-facilitated violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, "honour"-

based killings (OECD, 2023^[5]), human trafficking, workplace violence, among others. This report, however, focuses specifically on domestic violence, primarily in physical forms.

The report provides multifaceted guidance to MENA countries on how to improve VAW-responses, including in emergency contexts such as pandemics. The analysis and structure of this report emanate from the OECD's three-pillar approach to addressing VAW (OECD, 2021^[10]) (Figure 1.1). The framework recognises VAW as the result of a combination of unequal power structures and deeply rooted cultural norms that legitimise and fuel VAW. As such, this report is based and organised around a three-pillar approach, which seeks to engage countries to act holistically in enacting VAW frameworks:

The first section focuses on the systems required to establish a whole-of-state approach to addressing VAW. The Systems pillar (Pillar I) is based on effective structures and systems to appropriately respond to VAW and proposes solutions to systemic failures to prevent VAW. Crucial governance components within this pillar may involve: developing comprehensive laws and policies that address various forms of violence and discrimination against women; clearly delineating the roles and responsibilities of government actors and relevant stakeholders in implementing VAW strategies, policies, and programmes; and establishing internal and external accountability mechanisms to monitor the progress of VAW policies (OECD, 2021^[10]).

The second section focuses on promoting a victim/survivor-centred governance and service culture through capacity-building and co-ordination efforts, along with enhancing detection and prevention (Pillar II). This pillar aims to combat cultural biases, norms, and practices that fuel VAW and hinder efficient service provision to victims/survivors' needs. Essential governance components may involve: training public service providers who interact directly with victims and survivors; facilitating co-ordinated responses from the community and different government ministries; providing funding for essential resources like shelters and programmes addressing VAW; and involving men and boys in confronting harmful attitudes and behaviours that contribute to VAW (OECD, 2021^[10]).

The last section tackles victims/survivors' access to justice services and mechanisms (Pillar III) and respond to failures in the justice system hindering positive measures to facilitate victims/survivors' access to justice and to fully recognise and address their complex needs. This ensures that victims/survivors receive support and protection from the judicial and law enforcement systems. In doing so, it facilitates their access to justice and holds perpetrators accountable. Essential aspects of governance within this pillar involve: developing justice-related services and procedures that are sensitive to the needs and perspectives of victims and survivors; criminalising VAW and imposing penalties on offenders; and examining cases of femicide/feminicide to rectify avoidable shortcomings and insufficient responses by the justice system (OECD, 2021^[10]).

Figure 1.1. Three-pillar approach to a whole-of-state framework for addressing VAW



Note: An adaptation of "Figure 2.1 Three-pillar approach to a whole-of-state framework". Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/687928d6-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/687928d6-en#figure-d1e1027>.

Source: Author's own adaptation (2022).

1.3. Methodology

This report provides policy recommendations addressed to countries in MENA region¹. It mainly builds on the results of the *OECD 2022 Survey on Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centric Approaches to end Violence Against Women (VAW) in MENA Countries* conducted between July and September 2022³.

The qualitative survey aimed at identifying existent governmental approaches to tackle VAW, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It sought to locate and identify gaps in MENA countries' efforts to adopt victim/survivor-centric approaches, with the goal of improving justice and accountability for victims/survivors of violence. The survey was circulated among eight countries of the MENA region and received responses from seven countries: Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, and Tunisia.

The survey answers are supported and complemented by data from the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2023, which covers 19 MENA countries, as well as by a review of publicly available sources of information pertaining to MENA countries' VAW responses, including national policies and legislations, reports by non-governmental organisations, policy briefs by the United Nations, national and regional surveys. Preliminary findings of this report were shared during the meeting of the MENA-OECD Platform on Gender Mainstreaming, Governance and Leadership in September 2022, during which MENA stakeholders provided additional valuable inputs.

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Notes

¹ For the purposes of this report, the MENA region will refer to the governments of the MENA-OECD Initiative on Governance and Competitiveness for Development. The MENA-OECD Initiative covers Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

² Domestic violence refers to “all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm that occurs within the family or domestic unit, or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the person experiencing violence”. Domestic violence is a broader definition than intimate partner violence, as it may involve non-partner offenders and victims (e.g., fathers, uncles, brothers). Intimate partner violence refers to “any act of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occurs between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim”. This term focuses exclusively on violence between former or current spouses, but acknowledges the possibility that the offender and victim/survivor are not or had not been cohabitating (OECD, 2023^[2]).

³ Tunisia provided responses to the questionnaire in October 2023.

2. Fostering a victim/survivor-centred governance and service culture to eradicate violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa region

This chapter explores how countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have made efforts to build a victim/survivor governance and service culture which focuses on understanding and implementing victims'/survivors' needs and interests, ensuring the accessibility of public services, building capacities of service providers, and engaging men and boys in prevention initiatives. The chapter pays particular attention to how these efforts were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Findings

- Stigma, restrictive cultural and masculine norms, and economic dependence continue to be the major barriers for victims/survivors of VAW to share and report their experiences in the MENA region. Under-reporting weakens data collection efforts, obstructing efficient VAW responses and policy design.
- All surveyed MENA countries have recognised the potential of risk assessment and management as powerful tools to prevent incidences of violence through the establishment of cross-sectoral data-sharing practices. The primary sources of information in the surveyed MENA countries are shelters, NGOs and the police, but the justice sector was found to be among the least engaged in data-collection efforts.
- The COVID-19 pandemic depleted resources allocated to “non-essential” VAW services, including shelters, housing or counselling, but MENA countries found innovative ways to increase access to information and make reporting easier through use of information technologies.
- Integrated services show promising potential to empower victims/survivors and remove social, financial barriers to receiving adequate and comprehensive range of services. Surveyed MENA countries have started introducing initiatives for integrated approaches, but there is scope to intensify the integration and collaboration between services.
- Capacities of service providers are essential for a victim/survivor-centred approach and quick and efficient responses. Surveyed MENA countries have made significant progress in training VAW service providers, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, training for law enforcement authorities needs to be reinforced, as they are often the “first responders” to VAW cases, but dissuasive attitudes remain among them which can lead to a failure in adequate protection of victims/survivors.
- MENA countries have shown commitment to inciting behavioural change among men and boys as a strategy of VAW prevention through the introduction of several initiatives, including community and education-based programmes.

2.1. Victim/survivor-centred culture and approaches: key elements

In order to create a culture where VAW can be properly addressed, changes in policy frameworks should be accompanied by a profound shift in the conception and delivery of VAW services. Namely, service providers and authorities should put victims/survivors’ experiences at the centre of their approach, tailoring to their needs and seeking to empower them within every stage and form of VAW assistance. This notion reflects the second “culture” pillar of the OECD whole-of-state approach to tackling VAW (OECD, 2021^[1]). It encompasses elements relevant to detection and prevention; information sharing; capacity building; co-ordination efforts; and engaging men and boys. Such a victim/survivor-centred culture requires that embedded funds be dedicated to the provision of services and programming and thrives to incorporate the principle of intersectionality across all VAW-related policies and programming (OECD, 2021^[1]).

2.1.1. Data collection and information sharing

Under-reporting

Domestic violence is under-reported around the world and especially in the MENA region (ESCWA, 2020^[2]), as a consequence of various and merging individual and societal-level barriers and systemic failures. In MENA and beyond, a “culture of silence” often normalises VAW and can encourage women to tolerate abuse to ensure family stability (UN Women, 2020^[3]). Victims/survivors’ may be reluctant to admit abuse for a variety of reasons: stigma, cultural norms, fear of harm (towards themselves and their loved ones), inadequate ability to self-support, and low levels of trust in law enforcement actors. This means that many cases of violence go unreported (OECD, 2020^[4]) (OECD, 2021^[1]) (OECD, 2023^[5]) (OECD, 2023^[6]). For example, abusers may manipulate victims/survivors to dissuade them from reporting while victims/survivors may not recognise their experience as domestic violence or be unaware of available support services. Victims/survivors may fear retaliation by their abusers; or may fear stigmatisation by service-providers or by their own community if they report abuse. They may also lack trust in the criminal justice system (OECD, 2020^[4]) and fear negative consequences such as losing custody of their children or being re-victimised in the legal processes. Furthermore, victims/survivors may be too financially dependent on their abusers to consider leaving them or to have control over sufficient resources (access to communications tools or to transportation means) to report violence.

Including in OECD countries, under-reporting represents a fundamental challenge in collecting accurate data on VAW (OECD, 2023^[6]). As such, it is critical that governments address this issue and adapt their responses to adequately detect VAW. The collection of reliable data would strengthen the knowledge base on the incidence and prevalence of different forms of VAW, which is a condition for fulfilling this obligation through informed policy and strategy development. An improved knowledge base would also help better measure the access of women victims of violence to public services and adapt the provision and quality of services as necessary. If collected regularly and over time, reliable data would allow for better monitoring of progress towards meeting international standards and obligations regarding VAW (OECD/CAWTAR, 2014^[7]).

Efforts to better capture the prevalence and forms of VAW should start by considering how to estimate prevalence more accurately (OECD, 2020^[4]). Survey questions, for example, should be designed to make sure that victims/survivors feel safe to answer honestly. A comprehensive data collection strategy should also employ a variety of sources – including administrative and survey data, as well as data collected by other service providers (OECD, 2021^[1]). More in general, overcoming under-reporting of VAW calls for increasing awareness and education to reduce the stigma and encourage people to report; providing safe and confidential reporting mechanisms (such as hotlines, online reporting forms and secure reporting channels) to reduce fears of retaliation or further violence; and training service providers (such as health care workers and police officers) to recognise signs of VAW and how to respond appropriately (OECD, 2023^[6]). Involving community leaders and organisations in encouraging reporting and addressing legal and policy barriers, such as restrictive laws or biased attitudes among law enforcement officials, may also be effective in improving victims/survivors’ confidence in the reporting process. Training may also help get better and more rapid identification and reporting of cases of violence, supporting governments in defining a clearer picture of the incidence and extent of VAW (OECD, 2023^[6]). Box 2.1 describes some promising practices of OECD countries in strengthened data collection efforts through administrative records and population-based surveys for assessing the prevalence and various characteristics of victims/survivors, perpetrators and circumstances of the violence.

Box 2.1. OECD countries' initiatives for robust, disaggregated data collection efforts on VAW

Finland's disaggregation of administrative data records

In Finland, comprehensive data is collected on VAW, which can be broken down by various factors such as gender, religion, occupation, age group, housing arrangements, and more. This data encompasses various forms of VAW, including domestic violence, sexual violence (including rape), physical violence, psychological violence, economic violence, stalking, and other forms. Furthermore, Finland maintains robust data on homicides, containing a range of variables. This data includes information about the relationship between the victim/survivor and the perpetrator (e.g., partner, ex-partner, family member, acquaintance, stranger), demographic details (such as gender, age, and marital status), and key characteristics of the homicides. Additionally, the data includes information about the perpetrator's prior criminal history and any warning signs, such as restraining orders, shelter stays, threats, or fears. The Finnish Homicide Monitor, administered by the Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy at the University of Helsinki, is responsible for compiling detailed information on homicide cases. The effectiveness of this system can be attributed to the use of a standardised electronic data collection form and the mandatory requirement for all investigating police officers to submit data.

Mexico's population-based survey

In Mexico, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) released the National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relations (ENDIREH) in August 2022. This extensive survey provides detailed data breakdowns, including the type and location of violence, intersectional vulnerabilities, and reasons for not reporting incidents. It marks the fifth edition in a series of statistical reports on the status of VAW in Mexico. The survey also delves into the environments where violence occurs, such as within women's communities, couples, schools, or workplaces. Data is further analysed based on the women's regional origins. Regarding domestic violence, the survey captures various forms beyond physical and sexual violence, including psychological and economic abuse. It tracks whether violence occurred throughout the relationship or within the last 12 months and specifies the age group of the affected women. Conducted among women and girls aged 15 and above, the survey reached 140,784 households in total.

Source: (OECD, 2023^[6]), Breaking the cycle of gender-based violence: Translating evidence into action for victim/survivor-centred governance.

VAW assessment and detection

The systematic collection, monitoring, and dissemination of reliable and relevant data and statistics on VAW are crucial for effective VAW-sensitive policymaking (OECD, 2023^[6]). A victim/survivor-centred culture requires robust data collection efforts, including risk assessments and multi-sided information sharing to better understand patterns of VAW and respond to them (OECD, 2021^[11]). Such efforts can help reach VAW estimates that are as reflexive as possible of the phenomenon's real scale. In turn, collected data can help inform the design and targets of VAW policies and provide a measure of their short and long-term impact.

More immediately, risk assessments can help prevent the reoccurrence of violence and potential femicides/feminicides. Indeed, case-by-case assessments can allow for the early identification of high-risk individuals through an analysis of the history of violence, access to weapons, substance abuse, mental health issues and controlling behaviour. The early detection is supported by screening tools and referral to VAW services, which can enable life-saving interventions, including the issuance of protection measures

to keep abusers at a distance from victims/survivors, or therapy and substance abuse treatment to prevent future violent behaviours. By maintaining consistent oversight, the risk of reoccurrence can be minimised, making risk assessments a necessary component in VAW responses (OECD, 2021^[11]). The actors that most commonly use risk assessment tools, which include justice agencies (such as police and courts) and social workers, need to be adequately trained to use screening and assessment tools and to be able to interact with victims/survivors applying a gender-sensitive approach. Effective risk assessment relies on co-ordination amongst the actors using these tools, and importantly through an exchange of data across services involved (OECD, 2023^[5]) (OECD, 2023^[6]).

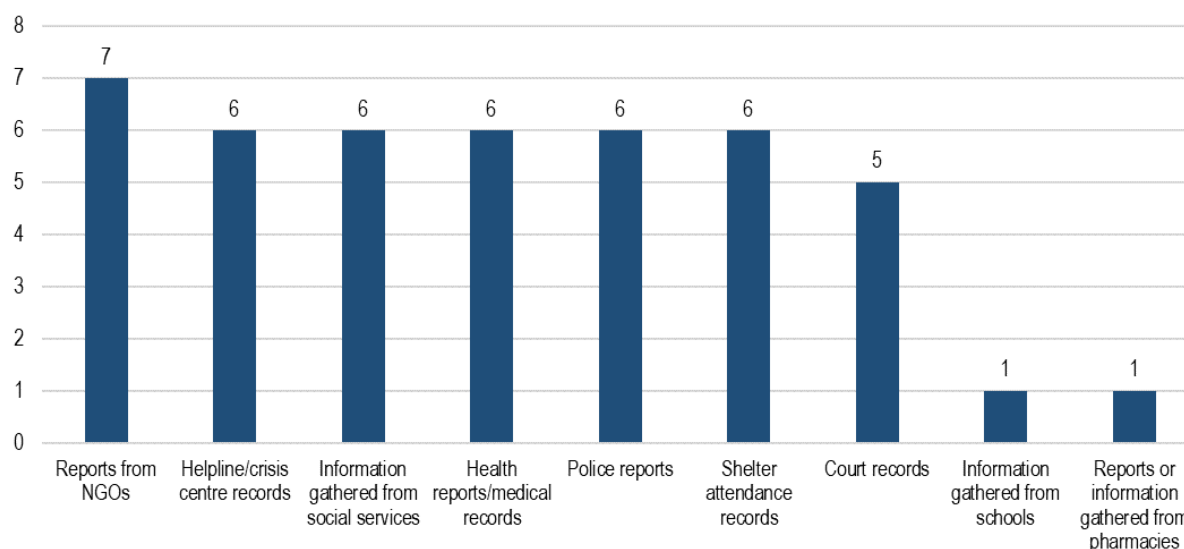
Adequate data collection requires gathering data from diverse parties (such as public, private, and non-governmental entities) and sources, including qualitative and quantitative studies, surveys, police records, court records, or health facilities (OECD, 2021^[11]). As victims/survivors may not always report instances of violence to formal authorities or service providers, data-collection mechanisms should seek to train and integrate a wide range of actors with whom they regularly interact (e.g., education, social workers, healthcare providers) to contribute to VAW-detection efforts (OECD, 2021^[11]).

Importantly, while VAW-sensitive policymaking and VAW risk assessment are based on data-sharing across agencies and across sectors, it is key that victims/survivors' privacy and security are prioritised (OECD, 2023^[8]). Digital data sharing could be a way to better ensure privacy and security, where several steps can be taken to secure access to information, particularly about individual victims/survivors.

All surveyed MENA countries reported having established cross-sectoral data-sharing practices to measure VAW, using a variety of data sources (Figure 2.1). However, according to SIGI 2023, only half of MENA countries have nationally representative data on IPV prevalence (12 months), which highlights that governments should strengthen their commitments to understanding the full scale of the phenomena (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023^[9]).

Figure 2.1. Sources of data collected by the government at the national level to estimate incidences of VAW in MENA countries

Number of respondent countries



Source: Information collected by the OECD through the 2022 survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA* (with responses from all seven surveyed countries).

Shelters and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are primary sources of information in MENA countries' data collection efforts. Among public actors, the police are major partners in data sharing. In Lebanon, Internal Security Forces (ISF) report monthly information on domestic violence cases to the National Commission for Lebanese Women (the country's gender equality institution in charge of intersectoral co-ordination efforts). The ISF provides a wealth of information on the number of phone-based queries it registers through its hotlines, including: nationality and region of the victim/survivor; the type of violence involved (physical, sexual, economic, moral); the number of reported victims/survivors within the household; the relationship to the perpetrator; type of services offered in response (protection, legal, counselling, shelters, or other); time of call; and sex of the police officer receiving the call (based on the ISF reporting form provided by Lebanon as part of its response to follow-up questions to the 2022 OECD Survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA*). MENA countries may also use National Statistics Offices (NSOs) to develop population-based surveys for more accurate depictions of prevalence of VAW. For example, the Palestinian Authority reported conducting a domestic violence survey every six years, through the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Despite the importance of source-diversification in the measurement of VAW – notably, to raise cross-sectoral awareness, fill data gaps linked to underreporting and triangulate information – only a handful of public sectors are solicited in data collection efforts in the MENA region (Figure 2.1). The justice sector's contributions to data-collection efforts appear to be among the most limited ones. Yet, complaint files and court records including information on charges, legal proceedings, outcomes, and protective orders would be invaluable in efforts to collect greater data in relation to VAW.

In collecting data, the harmonisation of indicators is essential for effective verification, compilation and circulation. In its survey response, Jordan highlighted that the lack of homogenised data-collection registries across its co-ordination body hampered its ability to measure VAW.

Moreover, the integration of an intersectional analysis in data collection is fundamental to identify patterns of oppression that expose women to greater risks of violence and to adapt policies accordingly (OECD, 2023^[6]). Such an approach considers the various and interconnected individual factors impacting victims/survivors' experience of VAW, including ethnicity, class, religion, disability, migrant or refugee status, etc. However, across the MENA region's VAW-responses, the integration of intersectionality remains limited due to multifaceted challenges, at the core of which lies a limited understanding or acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of different forms of discrimination. To date, most legislations and policies in the MENA region tend to address VAW-related issues in isolation, without considering other intersecting identities such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation. This resistance may be linked to deep-rooted cultural and traditional norms that reinforce gender roles, hierarchies, and discriminatory practices and render invisible the oppression of different marginalised groups. Challenging deeply ingrained beliefs and practices requires sustained efforts to raise awareness, foster dialogue, and promote inclusive attitudes among individuals, communities, and institutions. This resistance is both a cause and consequence of the limited research on the specific challenges faced by marginalised groups of women. Without accurate data, it is harder to develop targeted policies and interventions that address the intersecting dimensions of VAW.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, where face-to-face access to authorities and service providers was disrupted, some of the surveyed MENA countries introduced alternative mechanisms to detect VAW cases. For instance, as early as April 4-14, 2020, Egypt reportedly launched a rapid assessment through a phone-based survey to overcome the barriers of COVID-19 confinement measures. Reaching 1 518 women, the survey revealed 7% of married women reporting unprecedented verbal abuse by their husbands and identified a 19% increase in violence among family members. The survey results provided evidence that could help anticipate the impact of the pandemic on the rising rates of VAW, informing the preliminary and emergency measures rolled out by the country (Box 2.2). However, these efforts were not mirrored across

the region. In its survey response, Jordan pointed to the scarcity of data collected by the health and social sectors impeding VAW-monitoring efforts, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the future, therefore, MENA countries could consider expanding and harmonising the collection of data disaggregated by gender and other individual characteristics to inform gender-sensitive policy choices and processes, including in emergency contexts. Moreover, as a whole-of-state framework to eliminating VAW requires fostering a truly collaborative culture of information sharing across all sectors, including the judiciary, countries should ensure all ministries provide information and relevant co-ordination actors systematise data collection using standard indicators and information registries (GBVIMS, n.d.^[10]). Similarly, it is important for MENA countries to seek to expand data collection sources, including through the engagement of non-governmental and private actors and the implementation of “no wrong door approaches” via which a multitude of victims/survivors service providers, general public servants, and private sector figures are sufficiently informed to detect potential VAW and refer victims/survivors to appropriate authorities. This is especially important during confinements where survivors have restricted privacy and freedom of movement to report VAW.

Hotlines

Empowering victims/survivors entails, at a minimum, that relevant information is sufficiently available in a range of formats and easily accessible mediums to them.

All surveyed MENA countries have reportedly set up or expanded the operating hours of toll-free 24/7 hotlines to help women report VAW and have scaled up efforts to disseminate information about these hotlines via social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), press releases, video advertisements, radio, and lamp posts. For example, the Jordanian National Commission for Women mapped out all services provided to survivors in the country and published a list of hotlines affiliated with the “Family Protection Unit” and NGOs. This was organised by governorate and geolocations to facilitate more relevant location-specific support to victims/survivors throughout the country. In March 2022, the Tunisian government issued a circular requiring that women victims of violence, whoever the perpetrator, be given protection as soon as possible. The State has also opened ten shelters for victims of violence, with several more to be opened throughout the country in the future. In November 2022, a 24-hour helpline (1899) was set up (OHCHR, 2023^[11]). In Egypt, the Complaint Office within the National Council for Women (NCW) has set a hotline to provide women with free legal advice and psychological support.

Given the constraints imposed by COVID-19 lockdowns, it was acknowledged that victims/survivors may be under increased surveillance from abusers, leading to restrictions in “access to information” sources through which victims/survivors could access vital services (ESCWA, 2020^[12]). In Lebanon, the NGO Abaad launched a national awareness-raising campaign in April 2020, under the hashtag #LockdownNotLockup, prompting populations to share hotline numbers from their balconies for victims/survivors in need (ABAAD, 2020^[13]).

Considering the convoluted barriers victims/survivors may face in reporting VAW, it is important that governments diversify reporting channels beyond helplines, such as with SMS or web-based means and the use of code-word reporting systems at frequently visited places (OECD, 2021^[14]). While in 2020, the international community called on all governments to set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and grocery stores as part of prevention and screening (United Nations, 2020^[14]). However, no surveyed MENA country reported setting up such systems.

In the future, to promote evidence-based victim/survivor-centred VAW advocacy and policy making, MENA countries could consider engaging with rapid assessments and “big data” to collect information on VAW, while upholding strict privacy protection principles. As also explained in the previous subsection, it would be important for MENA countries to continue expanding data collection sources beyond traditional ones, by involving a wide range of actors interacting with victims/survivors.

2.1.2. Service provision

During the COVID-19 outbreak, in the MENA region the health-response needs were prioritised over survivor/victim support services which were considered non-essential (ESCWA, 2020^[2]). This led to a depletion of already limited services for victims/survivors in MENA countries, including shelters, housing, counselling, healthcare and justice services (UN Women, 2020^[15]).

However, the crisis has also revealed the resourcefulness of state and non-state victim/survivor support service providers who strived to co-ordinate their efforts, integrate their services, and digitise outreach activities. For example, as described above, the Jordanian National Commission for Women has mapped all available VAW services and circulated them via social media and TV channels.

Integrated services

A victim/survivor-centred approach should empower survivors by facilitating their access to information services and reporting channels, especially in times of crises where their mobility and freedom is restricted. Under such an approach, service providers seek to integrate their services in different ways: by concentrating a wide array of relevant service-providers (e.g., medical providers, counsellors, lawyers, police, shelters) in a single location or “one stop shop” (OECD, 2021^[1]); by sharing and linking data across providers; by fostering local referral networks of connected (if not physically) providers; or by co-ordinating service provision across different services through a centralised case worker (OECD, 2023^[5]). Box 2.2 shows examples from OECD countries on integrating VAW services across health and housing sectors.

Box 2.2. Integrated service delivery examples in OECD countries

The United Kingdom's experience in integrating VAW services within the health sector

In England, pilot programmes introduced Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs) within National Health Service (NHS) facilities to manage cases of intimate partner violence. After the pilots ended in 2020, some NHS sites retained co-located IDVAs, and they expanded into new hospitals. The Pathfinder Project, an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) initiative, underwent impact analyses and improved users' well-being. The model became a best practice with a toolkit for implementation, although progress since 2020 is uncertain due to its non-mandatory status.

Themis, a 2012-2015 pilot in collaboration with SafeLives, placed IDVAs in hospital emergency and maternity wards. They provided GBV training to healthcare staff, immediate support through safety planning, and referrals to various services.

The Pathfinder Project, from 2017-2020, with non-governmental partners, co-located IDVAs in eight additional hospitals. It saw a 10% quarterly increase in referrals on average. IDVAs participated in multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) and reported improved well-being for users exiting services, with reduced or stopped abuse, especially physical.

The United States' Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) Model

Acknowledging that domestic violence is a leading contributor to homelessness and housing instability, the DVHF Model in the United States strives to aid women who have left abusive homes in securing safe and stable housing. The Model prioritises placing victims/survivors in stable housing and subsequently providing comprehensive support. This approach is rooted in the established “Housing First” model, which has been successful in assisting other vulnerable populations with complex needs, such as individuals with mental health issues. A quasi-experimental, longitudinal evaluation study of DVHF tracked the progress of women for a two-year period after they sought assistance from one of

five participating Domestic Violence agencies in Washington state. The evaluation assessed the effectiveness of two key components of the model: mobile housing-related advocacy and flexible funding. The findings indicate that, after 24 months, the DVHF model proves more effective than conventional services in helping survivors achieve housing stability, safety, and improved mental well-being. These positive outcomes became evident shortly after the initial six months and remained consistent over the full two-year duration.

Source: (OECD, 2023^[5]), Supporting Lives Free from Intimate Partner Violence: Towards better integration of services for victims/survivors.

In Bahrain, “Dar Al-Aman”, established in 2006 and operating under the Ministry of Social Development, provides temporary shelter for abused women and minors under their care, and offers them social, psychological, and legal advice. The centre receives cases around the clock and handles them in co-operation with the concerned authorities during the shelter period and follows up the cases post shelter. In addition, Bahrain has implemented several initiatives to aid victims/survivors of VAW. The Child Protection Centre ensures child well-being through social services and family rehabilitation. Social Centres enhance family communication, addressing obstacles, while Family Guidance Offices offer counselling and specialised programmes. Family and Child Protection Offices in police stations provide protection, offering legal and psychological guidance in cases of domestic violence. In Lebanon, under the framework of the “Strategic Plan for the Protection of Women and Children in Lebanon 2020-2027”, the Ministry of Social Affairs set up 12 safe spaces (including one additional shelter set up during the pandemic) for victims/survivors to provide a range of specialised services. These include primary healthcare, psychosocial support, case management, and capacity building. The Palestinian Authority has set up a National Referral System (NRS) as part of its national strategy, which provides a set of guidelines for the co-ordination and information sharing of health, social, legal and police institutions. Through the NRS, victims/survivors can be referred to shelters and then granted integrated health, social and legal services (UNESCWA, 2023^[16]).

All surveyed MENA countries have engaged in some form of support service integration, notably Egypt (Box 2.3).

Box 2.3. Egypt’s One-Stop-Centre: the protection of women victims of violence

Pursuant to Decree No. 827 issued by the Prime Minister in 2021, Egypt established a Collective Unit for the Protection of Women from Violence. A reception centre integrates various support services (National Council for Women, National Council for Childhood and motherhood, Ministry of justice, Ministry of Health and population, public prosecution, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Social Solidarity) into a single location and state authorities to facilitate victims/survivors’ access to protection and justice. Services offered included:

- Reception and examination of victims/survivors’ reporting of VAW and co-ordination with relevant ministries and authorities to facilitate the filing and processing of their legal complaints against abusers;
- Co-ordination with relevant ministries and concerned authorities to provide suitable accommodation for victims/survivors during investigations;
- Referral of survivors to a network of support services providing legal aid, health, psychosocial and social services.

Source: Information provided by the government of Egypt in response to the 2022 OECD survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA*; (Beljah F., 2021^[17]).

Building on their past and current efforts, MENA countries should continue mainstream the integration of the various services provided to victims/survivors through a “no wrong door approach”, with the aim to improve service delivery and make sure that help-seekers are not turned away or left with outstanding needs. To this effect, countries could promote, for example: co-location of specialised services; information-sharing and training co-ordination across agencies; deep co-operation across agencies working on individual cases towards pre-determined consistent goals, etc. (OECD, 2023^[5]).

Information and communication technology

As COVID-19 lockdowns prevented or curtailed service-providers’ ability to engage in face-to-face delivery of activities and outreach, service providers across MENA have displayed significant efforts to utilise Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to facilitate victims/survivors’ access to information and essential services amidst lockdowns.

Recognising hotlines alone would not suffice to facilitate victims/survivors’ reporting of domestic violence under lockdown (due to a lack of privacy in their isolation with their abusers), MENA countries have established alternative channels to engage with victims/survivors, including websites, mobile apps and Facebook providing case management, psychosocial support, and information relating to rights and services (ESCWA, 2020^[2]). For example, in Morocco’s emergency response to VAW during the COVID-19 pandemic, multifaceted ICT tools were used to facilitate victims/survivors’ access to services throughout the country (Box 2.4). Among the measures put in place in 2020, 69 centres for listening and legal guidance were reportedly established with the support of the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Insertion and Family to help women victims of violence. OECD countries have also taken similar measures, such as Türkiye (Box 2.4).

Box 2.4. Information and communication technologies to tackle VAW in MENA and OECD countries

Morocco’s digital outreach efforts NajatBot & Kolona Maak

In January 2020, the National Union of Moroccan Women launched “Kolona Maak” (“All of us with you”), a pioneering listening platform providing 24/7 support to victims/survivors, via a toll-free helpline (8350), accessible via telephone or Facebook’s messaging application, or via a free downloadable mobile application. The platform creates links between the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Insertion and Family, the Office of the Public Prosecutor, police authorities, the Ministry of Health, and Social Protection, and other relevant stakeholder such as the Ministry of Justice, Barid Bank, the Office of Vocational Training and Employment Promotion, the National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Skills, including 105 multifunctional facilities for women and shelters for victims/survivors. In March 2020, a digital awareness campaign was set up to raise awareness and combat violence against women and girls. In December 2020, the National Union of Moroccan Women partnered with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to launch “NajatBot”, the first conversational software robot (ChatBot) used to guide victims/survivors of violence. NajatBot provides automated information to its users in Moroccan dialect and automatically directs urgent cases to the “Kolona Maak” referral platform for immediate interventions.

Türkiye's KADES application

In 2018, the Ministry of Interior of Türkiye launched KADES, a mobile application which aims to ensure effective and rapid intervention for victims of violence. KADES grants users 24/7 access to law enforcement units through a dedicated Request Help button. Upon identification of a need, victims are directed to receive service from Centres affiliated with the Ministry. The application offers services in eleven languages, including Turkish, Arabic, English, French, German, Persian, Kyrgyz, Kurdish, Spanish, Uzbek, and Russian.

Source: Information provided by the government of Morocco in response to the 2022 OECD survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA*; (UNFPA, 2020^[18]) (Mobilizing for Rights Association, 2020^[19]); Information provided by the government of Türkiye in 2024..

The host of measures implemented to digitalise VAW support services under the COVID-19 pandemic can prove highly valuable in addressing future crises. In 2020, an impact assessment conducted by the Inter-Agency Sexual and Gender Based Violence Taskforce in Lebanon found that 86% of victims/survivors who used remote services considered them equally or more helpful than in-person services (Inter-Agency SGBV Task Force Lebanon, 2020^[20]).

To optimise its outreach to victims/survivors beyond the crisis, it would be important for MENA countries to keep expanding the digitalisation of their service provision, while continuing the provision of face-to-face services to ensure the most marginalised groups of women with limited digital literacy or constrained access to technological devices receive the support they need. Monitoring and evaluation efforts should also be deployed to assess the impact of digitalised services, with particular attention to safety and privacy concerns entailed in the digitalisation of support services.

Shelters

Shelters are life-saving services for victims/survivors (OECD, 2023^[6]; OECD, 2023^[8]) and are thus essential to a victim/survivor-centred approach (OECD, 2021^[11]). Worldwide, and in the MENA region, the increase in need for safe accommodation due to surge in VAW and social distancing measures imposed by the global pandemic have strained shelters' hosting capacity as they faced overcrowding or closures owing to fear of infection or decreases in funding (ESCWA, 2020^[2]). Confronted with these structural challenges, MENA countries have sought to secure and expand victims/survivors' access to shelters as described in Box 2.5.

Box 2.5. Efforts made by MENA countries to ensure victims/survivors' access to shelters during the COVID-19 pandemic

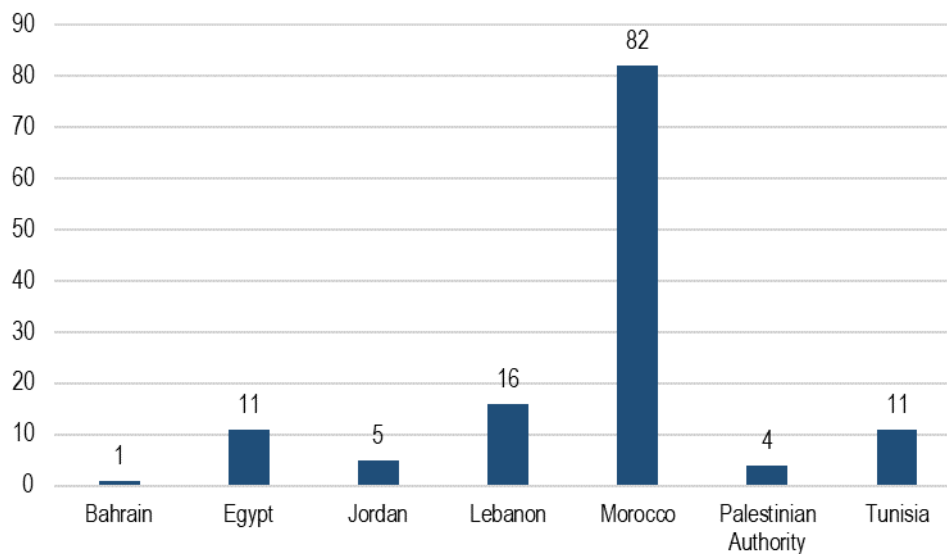
To face challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2022 **Bahrain** reported efforts were underway to expand the hosting capacity of "Dar AlAman", from 60 to 150 women. In **Egypt**, shelter services ceased at the onset of the pandemic and no additional shelter was set up during the crisis despite NGOs' advocacy for increased shelter spaces. However, some shelters were redesigned to accommodate a dedicated room for quarantining, and the government distributed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to facilitate survivors/victim's safe access to shelters during COVID-19. In **Jordan**, the Family Protection department of Public Security Directorate reported having organised the transportation of survivors to shelters under lockdowns. In **Morocco**, the government implemented provisions of its Action Plan (2021-2024) for the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to increase support toward shelters dedicated to victims/survivors. Since the pandemic, the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and the Family established partnership agreements

with 44 associations leading to the creation of 82 safe spaces for victims/survivors. The latter integrated the provision of various support services to 7,624 women, including accommodation for 821 women in 2020.

Source: Information provided by the government of Bahrain, Jordan and Morocco in response to the 2022 OECD survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA*; (ESCWA, 2020^[21]); (Nazra for Feminist Studies, 2016^[22]); (UN Women, 2020^[15]); (UNFPA, 2020^[23]).

All surveyed countries reported having shelters in place to welcome victims/survivors, with large variability among them (Figure 2.2) – although the number of shelters alone is not indicative of the quality of the services provided, considering that shelters in each country may have very different hosting capacities and be operational for only limited periods of time or continuously. Despite efforts, in most MENA countries, the provision of shelters remains limited and hampered by victims/survivors’ lack of awareness of their existence, as well as the stigmatisation of women who leave abusers or families (ESCWA, 2020^[21]).

Figure 2.2. Reported number of shelters dedicated to victims/survivors per country (August 2022)



Note: data on shelters in Tunisia is from October 2023, and data on shelters in Egypt is from December 2023.

Source: Information collected by the OECD through the 2022 survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA* (with responses from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, and Tunisia).

The pandemic has prompted countries to integrate additional guidance on the management of shelter spaces into their national frameworks to respond to VAW (ESCWA, 2020^[21]). In Morocco, a guide was developed to support women in multifunctional facilities and shelters, as well as to empower them to rebuild their lives and develop life projects. This guide for supporting women victims of violence includes a unified and comprehensive protocol for social workers and actors to approach and identify the appropriate care for victims of violence in shelters, by specifying all the services made available to them. Morocco has also launched a digital platform called “GISSR AMAN” allowing victims/survivors to benefit from different services and guiding them to local shelters. In Lebanon, the Ministry of Social Affairs co-operated with the National Commission for Lebanese Women, with the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to develop quality standards for shelters and their services on the basis of recommendations resulting from a study assessing existent practices, knowing that the said standards are to be launched shortly.

To meet victims/survivors' protection needs, countries should ensure sufficient shelter spaces are available throughout the country, including in times of crisis, and are supported by co-ordinated transportation services. The United Nations Handbook for Legislation on Violence Against Women recommends one shelter space (i.e., bed) be available per 10,000 inhabitants (United Nations, 2012^[24]). Moreover, MENA countries should invest in online and offline awareness-raising campaigns about the existence of shelters for women, notably targeting the most vulnerable and isolated populations (while protecting information about their location for security concerns). Campaigns should also tackle victim-blaming attitudes with regards to women who leave abusive partners, with or without children, to build trust, empower victims/survivors and remove social barriers to accessing shelters. As part of shelters' integration into a wider range of support services, stakeholders and service providers should co-ordinate to ensure women's economic empowerment, psychological support, and legal assistance.

Of course, time is a critical component of any recovery from violence and, in addition to emergency shelters in time of crisis, governments should increase their focus on offering medium- and longer-term housing solutions (OECD, 2023^[25]). Emergency shelters, though critical to crisis response infrastructure, do not represent viable and sustainable housing solutions for women wanting to leave a violent relationship. Providing longer-term support in the form of transitional shelter and affordable housing contributes instead to reducing the risk of continued harm for women experiencing violence, helping them re-assert their safety and independence, and curbing the repeated use of limited and costly emergency services (OECD, 2023^[25]).

2.1.3. Service culture

To design and deliver a victim/survivor-centred approach to eliminating VAW, it is essential that all service-providers interacting with victims/survivors (including medical personnel, social workers, NGO personnel, security and law enforcement officials) have the adequate knowledge, skills, and practices to carry out their work (OECD, 2021^[11]).

Protocols

Surveyed MENA countries have invested considerable efforts to operationalise their national frameworks for the elimination of VAW through the development and diffusion of sectoral protocols. In Lebanon, for example, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) developed sector-specific standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the realisation of the 2014 Law 293 on the Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence. The latter provide guidance on procedures to prevent, detect and manage VAW risks. The MOSA has also developed SOPs dedicated to the treatment of VAW patients among medical personnel. Egypt has launched an “essential service packages to address VAW” which includes the development and diffusion of practical guides for a wide range of service providers interacting with victims/survivors, encompassing medical professionals, judiciary members, police officers, hotline operators, social workers, and NGO personnel.

Trainings

The diffusion of protocols should involve targeted sector-specific and cross-sectoral trainings. In addition to expanding and harmonising stakeholders' understanding of relevant laws and procedures, training material should address service-providers' understanding of victims/survivors' experiences. This involves educating an exhaustive range of service providers who interact with potential victims/survivors on the varying psychological effects VAW may have on victims/survivors, and secondary victimisation risks (OECD, 2023^[6]). Such service providers include social workers but also public and private health workers – including hospital receptionists and pharmacy personnel, police officers of all ranks, case managers (including public prosecutors and judges), school teachers, etc.

Surveyed MENA countries have invested significant efforts to train VAW service providers, including during the COVID-19 crisis. In Morocco, the Ministry of Solidarity, Social Insertion, and Family developed a National Training Programme targeting all personnel providing care to victims/survivors. The first session, held in 2020, focused on expanding and harmonising understandings of the normative and legal VAW-response framework and reached 100 service providers. Its second session, held in December 2021, reached 150 participants and went beyond legal and procedural domains to incorporate modules on non-violent communication, listening skills and non-violent communication, among other themes. Training has reportedly continued until 2023 in favour of students of the National Institute of Social Action.

Law-enforcement authorities play a critical role in victims/survivors' complaint processes. But there remain documented patterns of dissuasive attitudes among them in MENA countries, which foster victims/survivors' reluctance to report VAW to authorities (Banyan Global, International Center for Research on Women, Center of Arab Women for Training and Research, 2016^[26]). It would thus be critical to train law-enforcement authorities to treat complaints in a manner that does not discourage victims/survivors from seeking protection or justice or minimise perpetrators' responsibility.

2.1.4. Behavioural change among boys and men

VAW is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and boys in all countries. This is mainly due to harmful social norms, and especially harmful notions and norms of masculinity. Jordan and Lebanon identified prevailing negative social norms as the major obstacles to eliminating VAW. For example, the social acceptance of intimate-partner violence is present across the MENA region, with 30% of women that consider it justified for a husband to hit or beat his wife under certain circumstances, a figure that raises up to 63% in Jordan (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023^[9]). Lebanon reported that these barriers had raised further by the economic, political, security, and health crises plaguing the country.

A holistic strategy addressing VAW should focus on changing male attitudes as part of primary prevention and risk management efforts (OECD, 2021^[1]) (OECD, 2023^[6]). Such initiatives could include community, education-based programmes promoting women's equality and rights, as well as non-violent masculinities (OECD, 2021^[1]). As a central environment in children's socialisation, schools are a particularly useful setting to deliver such programming which should target boys and youth but also teachers, parent teacher associations, and surrounding communities (Soliman, 2020^[27]). While research is needed to assess the long-term impact of policies engaging men and boys on VAW, to date, evidence points to the value of such initiatives, especially where they involve community-wide sensitisation campaigns (OECD, 2020^[4]). Data to better understand and track evolving masculinities and how they impact on women's empowerment are also crucial and can help inform policies and programme design. The OECD's Masculinities framework is a good starting point, as it provides a framework identifying a set of norms in the private and public sphere, that are detrimental to both men and women, and can lead to violence (OECD, 2021^[28]). For example, the framework identified that rigid gender norms such as "a real man is the breadwinner" or "financially dominant" can threaten or put pressure on the well-being of men themselves – in case they lack income or in times of economic insecurity (OECD, 2021^[28]). Evidence shows that in situations where such dominant gender norms are challenged or difficult to adhere to, VAW may increase.

In recent years, MENA countries have launched unprecedented initiatives to change boys and men's attitudes and raise awareness regarding VAW both at the national and the regional level, as shown in Box 2.6. These are promising efforts that should be continued in the future as well.

Box 2.6. Initiatives to raise awareness on VAW and change boys and men’s attitudes in MENA countries

In **Lebanon**, the National Commission for Lebanese Women, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and UNICEF, is planning VAW-related awareness-raising initiatives targeting 10,000 adolescent girls, adolescent boys, parents, and school personnel administrations in public schools across the country. The initiative builds on and expands previous awareness-raising campaigns that had targeted 3,000 girls across 13 schools. In 2021, **Morocco** launched a national campaign to combat violence under the theme “Awareness-raising in schools on the fight against violence against women and girls” which aimed to sensitise youth to VAW in universities. The campaign served as a platform for the conduct of 470 interactive activities and reportedly involved 27,518 participants – including 40% of boys and men. The national campaign to combat violence in 2022 was launched under the theme of “Danger of digital violence towards women and girls”, while focusing on “A sure environment which protects women and girls from violence” in 2023. **Tunisia** reported organising annual and periodic awareness-raising campaigns involving young students and those active in civil society organisations, especially in the regions, to encourage them to be actors of positive change in their communities. In addition, in 2018 the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Elderly launched a campaign to promote positive masculinities, based on the results of a study on men’s and boys’ perceptions of VAW conducted by the Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF).

Innovative awareness-raising campaigns targeting young and adult men’s attitudes at a regional scale have also emerged. **Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority and Tunisia** have collaborated with UN Women for the launch of the “Because I am a Man” regional campaign. This advocacy and behavioural change campaign seeks to empower women by preventing VAW and promoting positive masculinities by focusing on fatherhood as a pillar in the engagement of men in ending discrimination against women and girls. The campaign involves on-ground activities, with outreach to 480,000 men, as well as online actions with over 17 million viewers on social media.

Source: Information provided by the governments of Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia in response to the 2022 OECD survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA*; (UN Women Arab States, 2022^[29]); (UN Women, 2020^[31]).

2.2. Way forward

A series of actions could be considered by MENA countries to ensure victims/survivors’ realities and needs are at the centre of their VAW programmes in the future. As victim/survivor-centred VAW advocacy and policy making should be evidenced-based, MENA countries could consider strengthening their data-collection mechanisms by harmonising the collection of gender-disaggregated and intersectional data and engaging with rapid assessments and “big data” to collect information on VAW. To inform gender-sensitive policy choices and processes, it would be important for MENA countries to expand data collection sources, including through the engagement of non-governmental and private actors and the implementation of “no wrong door” approaches. A culture of information sharing across sectors should be further developed by making sure that all ministries provide information and relevant co-ordination actors systematise data collection using standard indicators and information registries. Moreover, to address under-reporting, it would be relevant to develop initiatives that reduce the stigma around VAW, raise awareness and address legal and policy barriers. Building on current efforts, MENA countries should continue integrating support services and ensuring service-providers have the adequate skills and resources to deliver VAW programmes. To identify gaps in institutional responses to VAW, the impact of trainings should also be

monitored, and complaint and accountability mechanisms should be made available to victims/survivors. Finally, countries in the MENA region could keep engaging men and boys by promoting initiatives to raise awareness on VAW and change their attitudes towards gender equality.

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3. Ensuring access to justice for victims/survivors and holding perpetrators accountable in the Middle East and North Africa region

This chapter focuses on measures and initiatives implemented by countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to strengthen victim/survivor-centred access to justice and accountability. It examines the efforts made, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure access to judicial systems and relevant legal services to all victims/survivors.

Key findings

- Women who are victims/survivors of VAW face several financial, social, and institutional barriers, including discriminatory biases and norms within the legal system or economic vulnerability limiting victims/survivors' access to justice. Victims/survivors of VAW also have complex legal needs, due to complex, often parallel criminal and civil proceedings.
- Integrated, specialised courts can alleviate burdens and barriers felt by victims/survivors through simplified procedures and can also provide more long-term solutions by aiming to solve root causes of incidences of violence. However, this practice is underused by MENA countries.
- All surveyed MENA countries have stepped up efforts to facilitate victims/survivors' access to information about their rights and legal proceedings, including through digital solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is room to expand legal assistance to inform and help victims/survivors in their legal needs.
- Adequately trained police units are a first, essential step in providing well-informed, efficient ways to protect victims/survivors. While VAW specialised police units have been institutionalised across most surveyed MENA countries, there is scope to further strengthen the capacity of actors tasked with preventing, identifying and responding to VAW.
- The COVID-19 pandemic provided impetus to introduce innovative, digital court services in the surveyed MENA countries, which can combat financial or mobility barriers faced by victims/survivors, but proved to be incomplete solutions to the consequences of the postponement of judicial proceedings due to the crisis. The digitalisation of the judicial systems can be a long-term strategy to facilitate victims/survivors' access to justice. However, several of these digital initiatives were discontinued after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. Access to justice for victims/survivors: key elements

Ensuring victims/survivors' access to justice implies an explicit recognition of the latter's legal and social needs and requires that clear strategies be put in place to remove some of the practical and institutional barriers they face (OECD, 2021^[1]). Such strategies may include the provision of free legal aid; the delivery of campaigns that disseminate legal information; or the maintenance of judicial services for victims/survivors even in cases where major events disrupt public institutions' functioning by prioritising VAW cases. To ensure accountability for perpetrators of VAW, legislations should criminalise multiple forms of VAW (including, but not limited to marital rape, harassment and stalking, and technology-facilitated violence) and guarantee substantial sanctions for perpetrators, while providing clear guidelines for the interpretation of the law. Legislation should also provide for protection mechanisms such as ancillary orders, including protective or removal orders (OECD, 2021^[1]).

Authorities' efforts to bring justice to victims/survivors are particularly important in MENA where domestic violence is alarmingly under-reported (see previous subsection on *Data collection and information sharing*), and hence unpunished, due to social norms, economic dependency on abusers, and distrust in law enforcement authorities (ESCWA, 2020^[2]). It is important for governments to prioritise the accessibility of justice for victims/survivors, as the presence of real or perceived impunity dangerously encourages abusers to perpetuate further acts of violence against women, ultimately contributing to the grave risks of femicide/feminicide.

In addition, access to justice should be unconditional and resilient in emergency contexts. A survey conducted by UN Women in 2020, in consultation with 220 NGOs across 15 MENA countries – including

Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Morocco – found that policing and justice services had been restricted at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis which, further limited survivors' already scarce access to protection and justice (ESCWA, 2020^[2]). Morocco nevertheless reported facilitating remote access to justice during the lockdown, notably through the implementation of the remote trial system.

3.1.1. Addressing victims/survivors' complex needs

Women, especially in VAW cases, face convoluted financial, social and institutional barriers that make it harder for them to access justice than for men. These barriers include a lack of adaptability of the justice system to ensure legal representation, discriminatory biases and norms within the legal system, social stigmatisation, and limited resources to support victims/survivors.

Economic vulnerability, resulting from victims/survivors' limited access to employment opportunities or financial resources (notably due to abusers' control over them), is a particularly common challenge for women who experience VAW. Many victims/survivors are economically dependent on their abusers, restricting their ability to pursue legal action against them.

Moreover, seeking justice for victims/survivors is a particularly complex process due to the multi-faceted nature of VAW cases. Domestic violence cases involve not only the criminal justice system but also intersect with civil matters such as divorce, child custody, and restraining orders (OECD, 2021^[1]). Child custody can present a particularly complex matter: the risk of losing it may inhibit victims/survivors of pursuing a divorce from an offender in the case of domestic violence, thus limiting the victim/survivor's access to justice (OECD, 2023^[3]). The parallel processes create additional complexities, requiring survivors to navigate multiple legal procedures simultaneously. This intricacy can be dissuasively overwhelming, time-consuming, and emotionally draining for victims/survivors, making it more difficult for them to access justice.

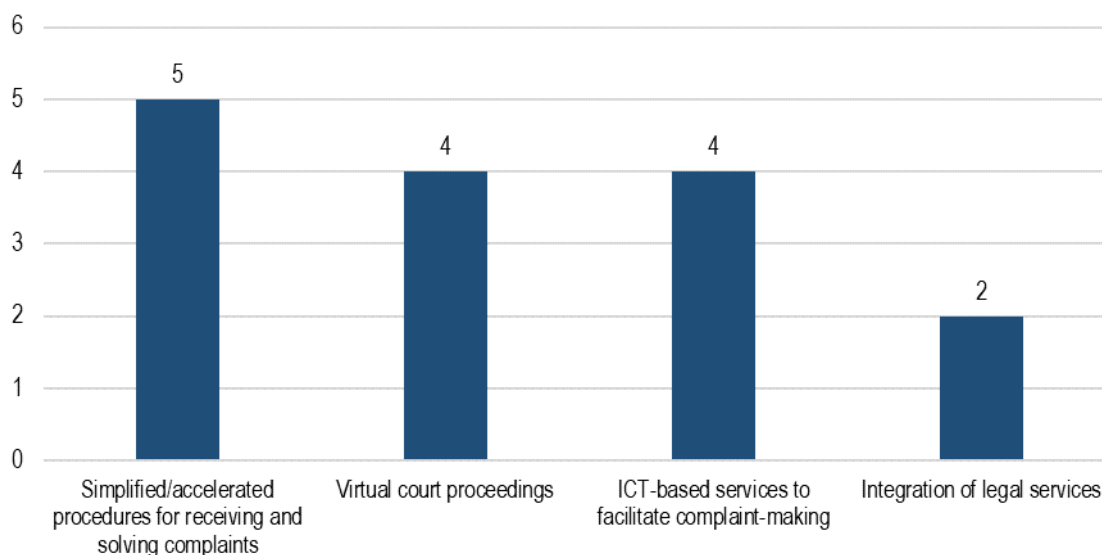
Overall, the combination of barriers to victims/survivors' access to justice makes it all the more urgent to see legal systems adapt to their complex needs to avoid double victimisation and foster trust in justice institutions. As such, a victim/survivor-centred approach to VAW should pursue arrangements to adapt its justice system and help victims/survivors overcome existent barriers to legal assistance and protection services, including in times of crises.

Access to information and legal aid

In all surveyed MENA countries, the pandemic has reportedly compelled governments to scale up dissemination efforts to ensure the delivery of information about victims/survivors' rights through hotlines and the integration of legal assistance within other services provided to survivors (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. Measures taken to facilitate victims/survivors' access to justice during the COVID-19 pandemic

Number of respondents



Source: Information collected by the OECD through the 2022 survey on *Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centred Approaches to end VAW in MENA* (with responses from all seven surveyed countries).

In Morocco, the Ministry of Public Affairs diffused 95 telephone numbers and email addresses which victims/survivors could reach in order to issue complaints via their online website and TV spots (UN Women, 2020^[4]). In Tunisia, complaints were reportedly treated with priority in tribunals. In Lebanon, the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) have joined efforts to raise awareness on the national ISF hotline on domestic violence (1745), and to encourage victims/survivors' and witnesses' reporting of domestic violence. Egypt's One-Stop-Centre (Box 2.3) notably referred victims/survivors to legal aid service-providers.

Moreover, 5 out of 7 surveyed MENA countries aimed to ensure the provision of free legal aid for criminal and/or civil proceedings to victims/survivors. In Jordan, while legal aid is provided to women for criminal and non-criminal legal proceedings, the latter is conditional upon their financial vulnerability. Similarly, in Bahrain, the Judicial Aid Committee (formed at the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs and Waqf¹) assigned lawyers to assist and represent victims/survivors in need through family reconciliation and amicable settlements and further litigations.

In Lebanon, a project launched in 2020 with the support of the European Union and the National Commission for Lebanese Women, effectively trained a team of 53 lawyers to provide legal aid to domestic violence victims/survivors before civil and religious courts. In 2021, the team of lawyers has, in turn, formed and trained a taskforce of lawyers to provide voluntarily legal support to domestic violence victims/survivors. However, funding discontinuance and the wider economic crisis plaguing the country have curtailed lawyers' ability to engage in voluntary work and put a stall on the project. As of September 2022, the National Commission for Lebanese Women was seeking funds to ensure the projects' viability.

Despite the remarkable improvements in institutional practices efforts to widen victims/survivors' access to crucial justice information, some gaps in access to justice information and services remain to be addressed. To promote a victim/survivor-centred approach to addressing VAW, MENA countries should put in place legal assistance mechanisms that are responsive to their needs and make efforts to ensure

that victims/survivors be adequately informed about legal aid available to them for both civil and criminal law needs.

Integration of justice services

The concept of integrated justice pathways holds the promise of establishing justice systems that prioritise the needs and experiences of victims and survivors. This approach seeks to streamline processes and alleviate the challenges faced by those affected. It promotes a holistic perspective in which legal and justice services operate as integral components of a unified system. This system facilitates smooth referrals and transitions of legal matters within a continuum of services, all grounded in collaborative efforts among legal professionals, justice providers, and various other human service agencies. By adopting such an integrated approach, the aim is to create a more supportive and responsive environment for individuals seeking justice (OECD, 2021^[1]). Integration of justice services can start at the police service, which can be integrated with VAW-related services and can help provide better support for victims/survivors and alleviate administrative burdens, while freeing up resources to offer more training for police services (OECD, 2023^[5]). Further down the justice system supply chain, integrated advocacy services can combat barriers to justice for victims/survivors, and specialised courts, such as domestic violence courts, can simplify legal procedures, allow for more tailored follow-ups from judges (OECD, 2023^[5]) (OECD, 2023^[3]). Domestic violence courts place a strong emphasis on safeguarding the victim/survivor and prioritise their well-being over the rehabilitation and recovery of the perpetrator. These protective measures encompass various services like counselling, shelter, and advocacy. In many cases, perpetrators are mandated to participate in intervention programs, and they are expected to provide progress reports to the judges presiding over domestic violence cases (OECD, 2016^[6]).

Some surveyed MENA countries have introduced integrated justice solutions, but this practice remains underused in the region. Bahrain for example issued an order to allocate a building for family courts in 2018. The building includes all the judicial services related to the family system in order to facilitate procedures for lawyers. The Restorative Justice Courts headquarters and facilities designated to receive children and their families have been inaugurated in a manner that suits the interests of children and take into account the confidentiality and privacy of cases related to children and the family. Bahrain also has Family and Child Prosecution Offices concerned with investigating cases involving children under the age of fifteen, as well as crimes stipulated in the Child Law. The prosecutions ensure that children are treated appropriately with procedures and measures aimed at reform and protection. Tunisia reported having set up specific areas for women victims of violence in some courts of first instance, with the aim of applying this to all courts in the future. Box 3.1 provides examples of integrated justice in OECD countries.

Box 3.1. Practices in OECD countries in integrating justice pathways

One notable example of integrated justice solutions in OECD countries is the Family Justice Centre model. These centres offer victims/survivors of family violence a one-stop, comprehensive approach. They provide integrated services, including medical and legal support, counselling, court system access, and assistance with various other needs like public benefits and safety planning. The first Family Justice Centre was established in the United States in 2002, and several OECD countries, including Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Poland, and Sweden, have also adopted this initiative.

In **Belgium**, French-speaking federated entities plan to support pilot projects that encourage co-ordinated care among professionals dealing with violence against women, including harmful practices. In the Brussels-Capital Region, an intersectoral approach is being developed to enhance collaboration between the public prosecutor's office, police, justice houses, support services, and local actors in

complex intimate partner violence cases. In Flanders, the Family Justice Centre network brings together social services, police, and the justice system in a single location to address family violence and child abuse, with three operational centres.

In **Italy**, Family Justice Centres are legally defined and house multidisciplinary services under one roof. Various facilities, including the *Soccorso Violenza Sessuale e Domestica del Policlinico (SVSeD)*, operate under this structure. SVSeD, part of the European Family Justice Alliance, aims to prevent domestic violence, raise awareness through training, and ensure the well-being of victims/survivors and their children through integrated services. SVSeD comprises a multidisciplinary team of medical professionals and social workers who provide health, medico-legal, psychological, and social support. Victims/survivors receive free legal advice from civil and criminal lawyers. SVSeD also conducts research on domestic violence and offers training for professionals in the social, health, judicial, and law enforcement sectors.

Source: (OECD, 2023^[3]), Breaking the cycle of gender-based violence: Translating evidence into action for victim/survivor-centred governance.

Specialisation of police units

As the first point of contact for victims/survivors seeking help, the police play a crucial role in providing immediate and life-saving protection and ensuring perpetrators are held accountable (OECD, 2021^[1]). Their preparedness to effectively detect cases of violence, assess risks, and intervene promptly can significantly impact the safety and survivals of the victims/survivors. Throughout their interactions with victims/survivors, the police's professionalism, sensitivity, empathy, and ability to establish trust are crucial to preclude risks of non-reporting of VAW or complaint withdrawal. As such, it is essential that police officers of all levels be trained to understand power dynamics at work in abusive relationships and to interact in a trauma-sensitive and non-judgemental manner with victims/survivors, ultimately creating an environment where victims/survivors feel safe to report VAW.

As a primordial interlocutor in victims/survivors' complaint-making processes, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recommends that police officers or units be dedicated to the investigation of VAW cases (UNODC, 2010^[7]). Such VAW specialised units or officers have been institutionalised across most of surveyed MENA countries – including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia.

In Morocco, after Law 103-13 relating to Violence Against Women was adopted in 2018, the General Directorate of National Security set up Police Units for Women Victims of Violence in 132 principal police stations across the country (UN Women Arab States, 2022^[8]). VAW focal points were also designated in each of the 440 district police stations to refer survivors to the nearest specialised unit (UN Women Arab States, 2022^[8]). These Police Units maintained their operations throughout the Pandemic and took measures allowing women to declare and file complaints remotely (UN Women Arab States, 2022^[8]). In Jordan, the Public Security Directorate formed an emergency response team that included female officers and trained it to operate while navigating the constraints induced by the pandemic. The team reportedly conducted in-person outreach activities and support survivors by accompanying them to police stations or courts in person to ensure their safety amidst movement restrictions. In Tunisia, Law 58/2017 on the elimination of VAW promoted the establishment of 130 units specialising in the investigation of crimes against women and children.

In the future, MENA countries could consider further strengthening the capacity of actors involved in the prevention, identification and suppression of VAW, including the police, through specialised trainings so they can apply a victim/survivor-centred focus.

Digitalisation of services

At various extents across the MENA region, the impetus to digitalise a wide range of VAW support services under COVID-19 has expanded to include the judiciary system. Despite these notable efforts, to ensure victims/survivors fair access to justice (during but also beyond times of crises), there is still scope for MENA countries to make progress in expanding the digitalisation of their service provision. Moreover, monitoring and evaluation efforts should also be deployed to assess the impact of digitalised services, with particular attention to safety and privacy concerns entailed in the digitalisation of support services. Simultaneously, they should continue to provide face-to-face services to ensure that women from the most marginalised groups, who may have limited digital literacy or restricted access to technological devices, receive the support they are entitled to.

In Bahrain, the pandemic has impelled the Supreme Council for Women to digitalise the provision of its victims/survivors services through its Women's Support Centre. It has developed its online platform and launched a mobile application to provide family, legal, social and psychological consultations and case work follow-ups (Supreme Council for Women, 2020^[9]). The platform's "Your Remote Advisor" programme dedicated a specialised team of volunteer consultants to provide virtual consultations to survivors, involving the provision of free legal aid on matters pertaining to alimony, divorce, custody, civil cases, and family mediation (ESCWA, 2020^[2]).

Morocco's "Kolona Maak" system (Box 2.4) helped connect complainants to courts in their respective jurisdictions and allowed survivors to submit urgent complaints remotely, without needing to present themselves to any court or police station (ESCWA, 2020^[2]). However, non-governmental organisations have highlighted technical difficulties in the use of the electronic complaint mechanism, as well as its de facto exclusion of populations lacking literacy skills (UN Women, 2020^[4]).

In April 2020 in Lebanon, pursuant to a ministerial note issued by the Prosecutor General, the police were instructed to immediately investigate all reported cases of domestic violence, including in cases of unwitnessed crimes, as well as permit victims' hearings and testimonies through video technology or other means.

Going forward, MENA countries could build on the innovative measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic to improve justice pathways for victims/survivors and continue expanding the digitalisation of their VAW support services, while considering privacy/safety and exclusion risks, as already discussed in the subsection on information and communication technology.

3.1.2. Adapting law enforcement systems

Around the world, temporary court closures induced by COVID-19 and the ensuing postponement of hearings have created a backlog of cases in the judiciary's response to VAW, and hence, in the immediate and longer-term protection of survivors and prosecution of abusers. As such, in April 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General urged all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19, ensuring that judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers (United Nations, 2020^[10]).

In Egypt, the 21 emergency response measures rolled out by the government in response to VAW included the exceptional openings of family courts.

In April 2020, the Cassation and the Supreme Judicial Council responded favourably to the National Commission for Lebanese Women's request to allow complaints and hearings of domestic violence to be filed and delivered virtually (online, by phone, per e-mail). However, the Ministry of Justice did not publish any data on the number of hearings received virtually.

The same month, the Supreme Judicial Council allowed for urgent complaints to be submitted remotely, online, by phone or e-mail (ESCWA, 2020^[2]). According to Lebanon's survey response, this effectively enabled Lebanese judges to rule remotely, notably for the issuance of life-saving protection orders to victims/survivors. On April 23, 2020, the first online protection order was issued (Inter-Agency SGBV Task Force Lebanon, 2020^[11]). Moreover, in reaction to the pandemic, in Lebanon judges have reportedly ordered forensic doctors to document physical abuse of survivors at police stations (KAFA, 2020^[12]).

Although virtual hearings were discontinued after the cease of COVID-19 lockdowns in Lebanon, the provision of virtual court services in other MENA countries is embedded in longer-term ambitions for the judiciary system. In Bahrain, the pandemic gave the impetus to finalise the digital transformation of the judicial system, a project which was first rolled out by the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs and Waqf in 2015. Virtual court systems in Bahrain now permit the electronic filing of civil complaints in family courts and family reconciliation offices. In an apparent effort to institutionalise the use of virtual proceedings into its justice system, Jordan reported that its Ministry of Justice issued guidelines for the electronic filing of lawsuits. Following the establishment of eight digitised offices for the prosecution of family courts, Egypt plans to establish cyber courts and digital prosecution offices for family prosecution services in the fall of 2022.

While the digitalisation of court proceedings are promising practices to facilitate victims/survivors' access to justice, limited availability of data on virtual hearings' scale and results prevents a thorough assessment of their impact. It is unlikely that digitalisation efforts have sufficed to meet all victims/survivors' needs. In Lebanon, court closures or reduced capacities reportedly led women to facing challenges in seeking legal redress against their perpetrators (UN Women, 2020^[13]). In countries like Morocco, the postponement of judicial proceedings pertaining to divorce judgements or alimony requests has reportedly aggravated the economic violence exerted on victims/survivors (UN Women, 2020^[4]). Morocco reported that a family solidarity fund gives financial aid to divorced women with children, until the father starts paying the child support.

Going forward, taking heed of the COVID-19 pandemic experience, it would be key for MENA countries to recognise adaptability and prioritisation as important elements to facilitating access to justice and keep working to make sure that survivors/victims have access to judicial systems and relevant legal services even during times of crisis, where major events disrupt the normal functioning of public institutions.

3.2. Way forward

To improve access to justice for victims/survivors, MENA countries could consider reinforcing systems to ensure that legal information is available and profusely and unconditionally available to women, regardless of their financial situation, location or literacy. This could be done by building on the remarkable improvements in institutional practices efforts to widen victims/survivors' access to crucial justice information during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, in order to facilitate victims/survivors' access to justice for interrelated criminal and non-criminal proceedings (VAW complaints, requests for divorce, child custody, alimony, and else), countries in the MENA region could further specialise and centralise prosecution and justice systems, for instance by considering the deployment of "one judge, one family" or other specialised courts.

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Notes

¹ The fully translated name of the ministry in English is: Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs and Endowments.

4. Conclusion and policy recommendations to address violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa region

This chapter offers targeted recommendations to countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, aiming to enhance the efficiency and the effectiveness of their policy and institutional frameworks in addressing violence against women (VAW).

4.1. Conclusion

In the last decade, most MENA countries have displayed a growing commitment to protect women from violence through the adoption and development of legislations, policies, and strategies to respond to VAW. Most governments have also put in place national strategies and dedicated institutional co-ordination bodies for the implementation of VAW frameworks.

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested MENA governments' commitments to address VAW by drastically increasing VAW rates and limiting the resources and ability to deliver pre-established procedures and services.

Amidst the overlapping constrains of the COVID-19 and domestic violence crises, the pandemic has also been the scene of genuine and innovative efforts to tackle VAW. Intersectoral co-ordination efforts were sustained and women's needs were mainstreamed in governments' COVID-19 emergency plans. Information and Communication Technologies have also been leveraged to reach out to survivors and deliver essential services.

Many of the emergency measures and strategic shifts prompted by the COVID-19 crisis have outlived lockdowns and lessons learned will help governments anticipate future crises. While gaps in data collection, resourcing of initiatives tackling VAW, institutional engagement, and victims/survivors' access to justice are to be bridged, MENA countries are moving toward the establishment of a whole-of-state and survivor-centred approach to VAW. The following recommendations aim to further sustain them in that effort.

4.2. Implement a whole-of-government approach to addressing VAW

- **Strengthen existing legal frameworks** to include all forms of VAW (e.g., domestic violence, female genital mutilation, trafficking of women, psychological violence, etc.) and ensure that protection measures and criminalisation provisions align with international best practices and commitments made by MENA countries with respect to gender equality and the fight against VAW. Furthermore, existing laws should be harmonised in countries with parallel, plural or informal legal systems to ensure the same protection of all women. These laws should be supported by comprehensive policy strategies and adequately enforced, so they can effectively contribute to preventing and combating VAW.
- **Ensure national strategies to eliminate VAW consider women's broader socio-economic rights** and aim to transform harmful social norms e.g., through greater access to formal employment, housing, education, affordable childcare and a minimum living wage. VAW is in fact inextricably connected to socio-economic gender inequality, and social norms with victims/survivors' dependency on their abusers often acting as a barrier in their ability to leave them.
- In developing future VAW frameworks, **ensure that they are adaptable to emergency settings and identify specific policies and actions that can be taken in times of crisis** to allow for effective rapid responses to VAW. Since most MENA countries do not have thorough prevention policies and plans that can be rolled out in response to crises, they could consider incorporating contingency and crisis management plans into their VAW frameworks, as well as designing national emergency management strategies which integrate a gender lens, taking into account that victims/survivors' vulnerability is often higher in such contexts.
- **Ensure that horizontal and vertical co-ordination mechanisms to respond to VAW are in place** and that stakeholders' respective roles and responsibilities are clear. For maximum impact,

MENA countries should also make sure that these bodies meet periodically and systematically and have sufficient capacities to carry out their mandate in an effective way.

- **Strengthen monitoring mechanisms** to assess and report on the implementation and efficacy of national VAW frameworks by engaging external entities, such non-governmental organisations and independent oversight bodies, in the evaluating and measuring the efficiency of measures aimed at addressing VAW. MENA countries could consider conducting and publishing periodic (internal and external) monitoring and evaluation exercises based on clearly defined indicators to foster accountability and transparency.
- **Ensure that national VAW frameworks are supported by a coherent, co-ordinated, and systematic approach to resourcing for the different initiatives tackling VAW.** To counter the negative impacts on VAW, during crisis and emergency situations, MENA countries could also consider investing additional resources into relevant policies, programmes, and services in support of victims/survivors.

4.3. Promote a victim/survivor-centred culture

- **Develop initiatives to raise awareness and reduce stigma with the aim of encouraging people to report cases of VAW.** This could include ensuring safe and confidential reporting mechanisms, reducing fear of retaliation or further violence, involving local stakeholders such as community leaders and organisations, communicating on reporting options available, etc. To capture unreported instances of VAW, MENA countries could also consider developing surveys that make victims/survivors feel comfortable in answering honestly, as well as offering trainings to promote a better and more rapid identification and reporting of cases of violence.
- **Strengthen the existing data collection mechanisms** by:
 - Sustaining the commitment to collecting and compiling data on VAW to estimate the prevalence of VAW, and support evidence-based policy making and service delivery. This data collection should be based on several tools to capture the most accurate information, including from administrative data and population-based surveys.
 - Expanding and harmonise the collection of data disaggregated by gender and other individual characteristics to inform gender-sensitive policy choices and processes, including in emergency contexts;
 - Systematically applying an intersectional approach (considering individual factors such as ethnicity, class, religion, disability, migrant or refugee status, etc., and their intersections) to data collection to ensure the particular barriers and risks certain groups of women face are identified and addressed.
 - Engaging with rapid assessments and “big data” to collect timely information on VAW cases;
 - Involving non-governmental and private actors and implementing “no wrong door approaches” via which a multitude of all victim/survivors service providers, general public servants, and private sector figures are sufficiently informed to detect potential VAW and refer victims/survivors to appropriate authorities;
 - Promoting a culture of information sharing across sectors by making sure that all ministries provide information and relevant co-ordination actors systematise data collection with standard indicators and information registries.
- **Mainstream the integration of the various services provided to victims/survivors through a “no wrong door approach”,** with the aim to improve service delivery and make sure that help-seekers are not turned away or left with outstanding needs. To this effect, MENA countries could promote, for example: co-location of specialised services; information-sharing and training co-

ordination across agencies; deep co-operation across agencies working on individual cases towards pre-determined consistent goals, etc.

- **Keep expanding the digitalisation of the service provision to victims/survivors**, while continuing the provision of face-to-face services to ensure the most marginalised groups of women with limited digital literacy or constrained access to technological devices receive the support they need. Going forward, MENA countries could also consider assessing the immediate and long-term impact of the digitalisation of victim/survivor services, with particular attention to safety and privacy concerns entailed in the digitalisation of support services.
- **Ensure sufficient shelter spaces are available to victims/survivors at all times**, including during emergencies, and they are integrated into a wider range of support services promoting women’s economic empowerment, psychological support, and legal assistance.
- **Keep investing in developing protocols to operationalise national VAW frameworks as well as trainings** for a wide range of service providers and law-enforcement authorities to increase reporting of cases of VAW.
- **Continue strengthening engagement with boys and men** to be agents of change in fighting VAW through educational curricula and other public efforts, including communication campaigns and advocacy actions, in order to challenge and change harmful norms and attitudes which perpetuate gender inequality, build awareness, and promote girls’ and women’s rights in the MENA region.

4.4. Enhance victims/survivors’ access to justice

- **Sustain efforts to increase women’s awareness of their rights and access to legal aid and other legal assistance mechanisms**, for both civil and criminal law needs and especially for hard-to-reach women, regardless of their financial situation, location or literacy. In emergency contexts, MENA countries should ensure that victims/survivors continue have access to judicial systems and legal services by making law enforcement systems easily adaptable.
- **Ensure police and justice systems cater to victims/survivors’ needs, including in emergency contexts**, for instance through the prioritisation of VAW complaints and the offer of specialised and virtual services. In particular, MENA countries could consider further strengthening the capacity of actors involved in the prevention, identification and suppression of VAW, such as the police, to promote a victim/survivor-centred focus. In addition, to facilitate victims/survivors’ access to justice for interrelated criminal and non-criminal proceedings (VAW complaints, requests for divorce, child custody, alimony, and else), countries in the MENA region could further specialise and centralise prosecution and justice systems, for instance by considering the deployment of “one judge, one family” or other specialised courts.

Tackling Violence Against Women in the Middle East and North Africa

GOVERNANCE AND VICTIM/SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACHES

Violence against women (VAW) and girls exists in all countries and across all socio-economic groups, with around one in three women experiencing sexual and physical violence in their lifetime worldwide. This issue was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, intensifying the need for urgent action to eradicate it. Many governments, including in the MENA region, have enacted policies and programmes to tackle VAW. However, limited strategic planning, long-term investment in services, and co-ordinated responses among public institutions and actors involved in the implementation of VAW strategies have made it difficult to break the VAW cycle. Drawing on data collected through the 2022 OECD Survey on Strengthening Governance and Victim/survivor-centric Approaches to end Violence Against Women in MENA Countries, this report provides an overview of MENA countries' efforts to develop whole-of-government VAW responses, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and with a view to help anticipate future crises. It assesses the gaps that hinder progress towards achieving lives free from violence for all women and girls and provides recommendations to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the policy and institutional frameworks across MENA countries in addressing VAW.



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