



## Call for submissions: COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women

### Introduction to Kayan

Kayan is a grassroots Palestinian feminist organization which empowers women and promotes the rights of Palestinian women citizens of Israel. Established in 1998 by Palestinian feminists in Haifa, Kayan takes a bottom-up approach to social change. We invest in the field by empowering women to become transformative leaders on the local and national levels, protecting and promoting the human and civil rights of Palestinian women in Israel and breaking down the social and institutional barriers to gender equality.

- 1. To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered during the COVID-19 crisis.**

Vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by crisis. For Palestinian women, this is especially true because they face the overlapping oppressions of being women in a patriarchal society and being members of a national minority in a discriminatory state. Specifically, during the Covid-19 crisis, there has been a critical increase in violence against women, particularly domestic violence. According to Arab feminist NGOs which operate victim support helplines (including Kayan)<sup>1</sup>, violence has increased about 40% during the pandemic. Since the start of pandemic in March, 5 Arab women have been killed in gender-based violence.<sup>2</sup> Even with the high number of reported cases, there is a concern that the vast majority of abuse is going unreported. As will be detailed throughout this submission, women face several obstacles to reporting abuse and police often fail to address abuse. This is particularly true regarding instances of psychological abuse. Women who were already victims of psychological abuse prior to the lockdown run a greater risk of that abuse turning physical while in confinement with the abuser.

- 2. Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

There are several helplines, including ones operated by state institutions, local institutions, and civil society organizations. The vast majority of civil-society-based helplines are run by feminist organizations. The number of calls, the majority of which were about gender-based violence, increased dramatically during the pandemic. According to police reports, the period between 1 March and 18 April 2020 saw an increase in cases of domestic violence of 16%,

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<sup>1</sup> The current assessment is an unofficial estimate that is based in NGO experiences. There are no certain statistics by the official bodies about the violence against women and, according to Kayan's sources, finalized statistics about the Covid-19 period cannot be immediately assessed; however, the conclusion of violence-prevention professionals in NGOs is that there is a major increase in complaints about domestic violence to the helplines and request for social services.

<sup>2</sup> According to Kayan's documentation

comparing to the same period in 2019.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these cases were about violence against women. Furthermore, there was an increase of 31% in calls to the emergency police helpline. The Ministry of Welfare reported a sharp and dramatic increase in complaints to the emergency line since the start of the pandemic. Civil society helplines are seeing an even greater increase in cases about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Kayan's legal and general consultations and helpline which handle cases of SGBV has noticed an increased in SGBV calls of 40%. In addition, we received many more requests for emotional support as a result of home confinement during the Covid-19 pandemic. Women consultees were often suffering from violence because they were confined at home with their violent husbands or other family members. Other similar NGOs indicated similar findings and statistics.

It is important to note, however, that the availability of helplines does not necessarily reflect or indicate a proportional availability of services to help victims who reach out. This is particularly true in relation to state-run services. State authorities have systematically failed to address violence against women. The Israeli government fails to prioritise the safety of Palestinian woman. One example of police neglect of Arab women's safety is, during the lockdown, one woman reported her experience with violence to the police and the police immediately told her family about the report. This broke confidentiality and further endangered her safety. As a result of the lack of appropriate services and protection, Palestinian women are the most exposed victims to violence and femicide, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **3. Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?**

Even during the strictest lockdown, women who were exposed to violence were allowed to leave to go to family courts and the police in order to demand protection orders or other interventions. The procedure for accessing help and leaving violent homes is complicated and does not always fit Arab women's needs. Even women who were suffering from severe violence often couldn't leave their kids to go to a shelter in such a critical period. They needed to stay to protect their children from their violent family member and to care for them. Others were afraid to ask for help due to mistrust of the police and official institutions which arises from a long history of police and state negligence of women's needs. This leads to a situation where violence against Arab women is continuing to grow rapidly. This disturbing increase is laid out in Kayan's October 2019 submission to the 64th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the conclusion is regularly reinforced by the experience of Kayan and similar NGOs which have been receiving increasing calls for support before and during the crisis.

### **4. Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?**

The 14 shelters in Israel are more than 90% full.<sup>4</sup> The two safe houses in Israel which are designated for Palestinian woman are also full. Most organizations face serious problems absorbing women in need and placing them in shelters. In fact, in spite of previously mistaken reports, only one new shelter was recently opened in Israel, in April 2020. This situation is complicated by pandemic-related restrictions. For example, the pandemic restrictions limit

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5722502,00.html>

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women's ability to escape violence by staying with other friends or family. This option was open to them before the pandemic restrictions.

Organizations running helplines have also seen an increase in women reporting domestic violence for the first time. Women who had never reported domestic violence before are now facing abuse partly due to increased pressures during confinement and increased economic instability on top of an already high unemployment rate among the Arab minority. This problem is worsened by the fact that these victims are seeking support from already overburdened institutions, which lack sufficient budget and capacity. This results in women being unable to get help and sustains an uncontrolled cycle of violence.

5. **Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?** The answer to question 6 relates to questions 5 and 6. See below.
6. **What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?**

During the pandemic, women who were exposed to violence were allowed to access both the police and family courts in order to demand protection and orders of intervention. The state facilitated legal aid procedures for legal aid for women who couldn't afford a lawyer. There are, however, several obstacles for women trying to access justice. Firstly, many Palestinian women are unable or afraid to ask for help because of a systemic lack of trust of the police and the state. The institutions responsible for protecting women and implementing the relevant laws neglect the needs of the Arab Palestinian community, especially women. Secondly, although, orders are available by courts, women need to go to court and submit an application in order to have a decision. Very few courts are located in Arab towns, making them hard for Arab women to access given current restrictions on movement. To be able to circumvent movement restrictions, women must explain the reason they need to leave, which can cause further emotional harm. Thirdly, even when women are able to go to court, they fear life alone. This is due to the fact that Arab women constitute the demographic with the highest unemployment rate in Israel and many rely on their husband's income. Many women resist leaving violent marriages when they fear being unable to provide for themselves and their children. Lastly, most court-ordered warrants are temporary, meaning the abuser will most likely be able to eventually return home. Many women cannot devote the emotional energy to the process of seeking justice when the result is temporary.

7. **What are the impacts of the current restrictive measures and lockdowns on women's access to health services? Please specify whether services are closed or suspended, particularly those focusing on reproductive health.**

Restrictive measures and lockdowns to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have disproportionately limited women's access to health care, safe shelters, education, employment and economic life. This worsens the fact that Arab towns in Israel already suffer from deep health disparities. There are no government hospitals in Arab towns, and the three hospitals located in Nazareth lack resources, including necessary medical equipment. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic saw increased marginalizing of the Arab population. No tests or checks were carried out in Arab towns in the first two weeks of the crisis. Test stations only arrived after the Arab Knesset Members pressured the government into doing so. There was also a serious shortage of media material available in Arabic about the novel coronavirus and the crisis. For instance, general instructions for prevention and options for people with confirmed cases of Covid-19 were translated only two weeks after the crisis reached its climax in the

country. Unfortunately, information in Arabic is still lacking at the moment. The Ministry of Health also failed to published disaggregated data about Arab patients of Covid-19 until late March.

**8. Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.**

While addressing the increase of domestic violence during the Covid-19 crisis, Kayan has encountered many challenges, including multiple oppressions. The patriarchal society limits women's ability to stand up against violence by enforcing problematic and traditional gender norms. Society is quick to blame women for their victimization and attack women who speak up. This makes it harder to stand up against violence. Women may also face personal barriers to reporting violence because of fear of reprisal. This is especially the case in this time, as many of these victims are stuck in home isolation with their abusers. They may also lack the space to safely call for help because of this.

There are also multiple institutional challenges to women combatting domestic violence during Covid-19. Arab women are systematically excluded from decision-making roles. Official institutions exclude women and civil society from participating in and influencing the development of official plans for coping with the crisis and other challenges. Another challenge is the lack of sufficient disaggregated data for Palestinians and especially women. Additionally, a major obstacle is the lack of resources for Arab women facing violence. Although, in late 2018, the government promised to allocate 250 million shekels to deal with violence against women, including Arab women,<sup>5</sup> this budget was not utilized in order to create and develop relevant institutions and resources to address such violence. The state failed to develop any concrete plans to provide services for women such as the desperately needed new shelters. Police continue to neglect female victims of domestic violence and fail to treat them in a professional and responsible manner. Social services are at capacity and unable to help any further women. Despite this, there has been no increase of the budget allocated for social services. This increases the danger for women and exposes them to more violence.

**9. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.**

As explained in this submission, the Israeli state systematically neglects the Arab community and, in particular, Palestinian women. As such, most of the work to combat violence against women during the pandemic was carried out by NGOs and other civil society organizations.

**10. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies.**

Kayan has found it to be productive to work collaboratively to respond to the SGBV crisis. Kayan has coordinated a coalition of 21 other Palestinian feminist NGOs with extensive combined experience in addressing domestic violence. By promoting the services of all coalition members (such as helplines and shelters) and coordinating better between them, we are better able to address the crisis. We have found that it is also critical to expand hotlines to respond to domestic violence crisis. Kayan is also able to reach more women by expanding its hotlines

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-approves-extra-20-million-shekels-for-battling-violence-against-women-in-2019-1.6766986>

and making adjustments to current hotlines. For example, due to the increase incidences of domestic violence and the possible inability of women to call privately in a crowded home, Kayan made adjustments to its hotlines by accepting round-the-clock Whatsapp messages and texts.

We also see that accurate and timely information is critical. Kayan and other organizations are also working to distribute crucial information in Arabic, because we have seen this is a need that the state has failed to meet. Kayan is using Whatsapp and other social media platforms to ensure the information reaches the community. Kayan's grassroots feminist network is fully mobilizing to distribute information within their communities, including providing information along with packages of basic necessities (i.e. food, medicine, and hygienic supplies). Despite difficulties, NGOs have consistently worked together to create solutions to enable women to report incidents and receive assistance.

**11. Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.**

The impacts of the Covid-19 crisis are clear in the increase of domestic violence against women which is not being handled properly during the crisis. The impact is severe and the negative effects of violence could continue due to several factors such as:

1. Lack of appropriate/professional services for the Arab community to handle domestic violence.
2. Lack of shelters and support for existing shelters, including failure to have a shelter designated for Arab women.
3. Lack of public awareness of domestic violence and other covid-19 related issues in Arabic media.
4. Failure to allocate appropriate budgets immediately to take the above steps.

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**12. To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered during the COVID-19 crisis.**

Vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by crisis. For Palestinian women, this is especially true because they face the overlapping oppressions of being women in a patriarchal society and being members of a national minority in a discriminatory state. Specifically, during the Covid-19 crisis, there has been a critical increase in violence against women, particularly domestic violence.

According to Arab feminist NGOs which operate victim support helplines (including Kayan)<sup>6</sup>, violence has increased about 40% during the pandemic. Since the start of pandemic in March, 5 Arab women have been killed in gender-based violence.<sup>7</sup> Even with the high number of reported cases, there is a concern that the vast majority of abuse is going unreported. As will be detailed throughout this submission, women face several obstacles to reporting abuse and police often fail to address abuse. This is particularly true regarding instances of psychological abuse. Women who were already victims of psychological abuse prior to the lockdown run a greater risk of that abuse turning physical while in confinement with the abuser.

### **13. Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

There are several helplines, including ones operated by state institutions, local institutions, and civil society organizations. The vast majority of civil-society-based helplines are run by feminist organizations. The number of calls, the majority of which were about gender-based violence, increased dramatically during the pandemic. According to police reports, the period between 1 March and 18 April 2020 saw an increase in cases of domestic violence of 16%, comparing to the same period in 2019.<sup>8</sup> The majority of these cases were about violence against women. Furthermore, there was an increase of 31% in calls to the emergency police helpline. The Ministry of Welfare reported a sharp and dramatic increase in complaints to the emergency line since the start of the pandemic. Civil society helplines are seeing an even greater increase in cases about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Kayan's legal and general consultations and helpline which handle cases of SGBV has noticed an increased in SGBV calls of 40%. In addition, we received many more requests for emotional support as a result of home confinement during the Covid-19 pandemic. Women consultees were often suffering from violence because they were confined at home with their violent husbands or other family members. Other similar NGOs indicated similar findings and statistics.

It is important to note, however, that the availability of helplines does not necessarily reflect or indicate a proportional availability of services to help victims who reach out. This is particularly true in relation to state-run services. State authorities have systematically failed to address violence against women. The Israeli government fails to prioritise the safety of Palestinian woman. One example of police neglect of Arab women's safety is, during the lockdown, one woman reported her experience with violence to the police and the police immediately told her family about the report. This broke confidentiality and further endangered her safety. As a result of the lack of appropriate services and protection, Palestinian women are the most exposed victims to violence and femicide, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **14. Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?**

Even during the strictest lockdown, women who were exposed to violence were allowed to leave to go to family courts and the police in order to demand protection orders or other interventions. The procedure for accessing help and leaving violent homes is complicated and does not always fit Arab women's needs. Even women who were suffering from severe violence often couldn't leave their kids to go to a shelter in such a critical period. They needed to stay to protect their children from their violent family member and to care for them. Others were afraid to ask for help due to mistrust of the

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police and official institutions which arises from a long history of police and state negligence of women's needs. This leads to a situation where violence against Arab women is continuing to grow rapidly. This disturbing increase is laid out in Kayan's October 2019 submission to the 64th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the conclusion is regularly reinforced by the experience of Kayan and similar NGOs which have been receiving increasing calls for support before and during the crisis.

**15. Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?**

The 14 shelters in Israel are more than 90% full.<sup>9</sup> The two safe houses in Israel which are designated for Palestinian woman are also full. Most organizations face serious problems absorbing women in need and placing them in shelters. In fact, in spite of previously mistaken reports, only one new shelter was recently opened in Israel, in April 2020. This situation is complicated by pandemic-related restrictions. For example, the pandemic restrictions limit women's ability to escape violence by staying with other friends or family. This option was open to them before the pandemic restrictions.

Organizations running helplines have also seen an increase in women reporting domestic violence for the first time. Women who had never reported domestic violence before are now facing abuse partly due to increased pressures during confinement and increased economic instability on top of an already high unemployment rate among the Arab minority. This problem is worsened by the fact that these victims are seeking support from already overburdened institutions, which lack sufficient budget and capacity. This results in women being unable to get help and sustains an uncontrolled cycle of violence.

**16. Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

The answer to question 6 relates to questions 5 and 6. See below.

**17. What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?**

During the pandemic, women who were exposed to violence were allowed to access both the police and family courts in order to demand protection and orders of intervention. The state facilitated legal aid procedures for legal aid for women who couldn't afford a lawyer. There are, however, several obstacles for women trying to access justice. Firstly, many Palestinian women are unable or afraid to ask for help because of a systemic lack of trust of the police and the state. The institutions responsible for protecting women and implementing the relevant laws neglect the needs of the Arab Palestinian community, especially women. Secondly, although, orders are available by courts, women need to go to court and submit an application in order to have a decision. Very few courts are located in Arab towns, making them hard for Arab women to access given current restrictions on movement. To be able to circumvent movement restrictions, women must explain the reason they need to leave, which can cause further emotional harm. Thirdly, even when women are able to go to court, they fear life alone. This is due to the fact that Arab women constitute the demographic with the highest unemployment rate in Israel and many rely on their husband's income. Many women resist leaving violent marriages when they fear being unable to provide for themselves and their children. Lastly, most court-ordered warrants are temporary, meaning the abuser will most likely be able to eventually return home. Many women cannot devote the emotional energy to the process of seeking justice when the result is temporary.

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**19. Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.**

While addressing the increase of domestic violence during the Covid-19 crisis, Kayan has encountered many challenges, including multiple oppressions. The patriarchal society limits women's ability to stand up against violence by enforcing problematic and traditional gender norms. Society is quick to blame women for their victimization and attack women who speak up. This makes it harder to stand up against violence. Women may also face personal barriers to reporting violence because of fear of reprisal. This is especially the case in this time, as many of these victims are stuck in home isolation with their abusers. They may also lack the space to safely call for help because of this.

There are also multiple institutional challenges to women combatting domestic violence during Covid-19. Arab women are systematically excluded from decision-making roles. Official institutions exclude women and civil society from participating in and influencing the development of official plans for coping with the crisis and other challenges. Another challenge is the lack of sufficient disaggregated data for Palestinians and especially women. Additionally, a major obstacle is the lack of resources for Arab women facing violence. Although, in late 2018, the government promised to allocate 250 million shekels to deal with violence against women, including Arab women,<sup>10</sup> this budget was not utilized in order to create and develop relevant institutions and resources to address such violence. The state failed to develop any concrete plans to provide services for women such as the desperately needed new shelters. Police continue to neglect female victims of domestic violence and fail to treat them in a professional and responsible manner. Social services are at capacity and unable to help any further women. Despite this, there has been no increase of the budget allocated for social services. This increases the danger for women and exposes them to more violence.

**20. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.**

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