

Research article

# Policy Brief on the Impact of Covid-19 on Palestinian Women (2020)

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## Abstract:

This paper illustrates and examines the impact of COVID- 19 on Palestinian Women. The pandemic and the declaration of state of emergency since March 2020, led to numerous challenges, where government had to balance between the economic impact and maintaining the health of it's' citizens. The long-lasting lock down had several consequences on Women, all positive gains that were gained and captured before the spread of the virus, were put on risk, as violence against women increased, lot of jobs were lost, households and the IT infrastructure are not adequate to accommodate distance learning, freedom of speech and covering news and documenting violations were put at risk by the occupying power.

A set of practical mechanisms must be put in place, in order to protect the marginalized and to energize the private-public partnership is crucial and essential.

**Keywords:** Impact, COVID-19, Palestine, Violence against women, Education, decision making, economic, journalist, policy recommendations.

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## Overview:

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and has described it a "defining global health crisis of our time". Taking into account the fact that the virus is considered highly contagious, the World Health Organization urged governments to take serious and immediate precautionary

measures in order to limit its spread and its negative effects on health systems, especially those that are not equipped to deal with large numbers of infected people and treat them.

In the beginning of March 2020, first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in Palestine- Bethlehem, the outbreak of (37) cases was registered through direct and indirect contact with infected foreign tourists. As a result, on the fifth of March, President Mahmoud Abbas declared a 30-day state of emergency and mandated the Palestinian government to take appropriate measures in all Palestinian governorates, so that movement became very limited during that period.

In early April, state of emergency was extended for another 30 days, due to the new wave of COVID-19 recorded cases, that coincides with return of many Palestinian students from abroad, and the return of many Palestinian workers from their workplaces within the Green Line; spread of the virus increased. The government response was to contain and control the spread of the novel virus particularly on vulnerable groups.

Given that, and due to the continued lockdown between governorates and villages, rates of domestic gender-based violence is expected to escalate.

Women's rights organizations revealed their stress about the fact that domestic violence may rise against women and children:

- ▶ Mothers working in the public and private sector.
- ▶ Heads of households and the poor who work in day- labour.
- ▶ Women working daily in nurseries and other work.
- ▶ Women working in the health and security sector through compulsory working hours.
- ▶ Older women who suffer from chronic diseases because they are most at risk of infection.

Furthermore, fear of infection as well as limited household sources and capabilities, may exacerbate stressors on all family members. Whereas, the most vulnerable groups such as women and girls with disabilities may be more vulnerable to health risks.

Currently, many Palestinian workers who work inside the green line may find themselves without work, which will affect their income and livelihood, which may be reflected as violence against women and girls.

At the same time, limited mobility has prevented women and girls from accessing service centers, such as health, security, protection, and justice, which may contribute to the severity of abuse against women.

### **General Framework:**

In Palestine, the government developed an emergency plan as a rapid response to the outbreak of coronavirus crisis. The plan was conducted based on data and figures to contain the spread of the pandemic as well as to monitor the impact of the lockdown and limited movement on different aspects of life and to realize the challenges that face the region in general.

These challenges included the negative impact of the pandemic on the economic sector and its consequences:

- 1- Reducing revenues (by at least 40%) that limit the ability of the Palestinian government to maintain the current level of services.
- 2- Increasing need for immediate economic support and long-term economic recovery

Furthermore, the plan documents the need for three main areas as the follow:

- ✓ Support public health response to the emerging of COVID- 19.

- ✓ Budget support to maintain government service delivery.
- ✓ Effective engagement with regional partners.

In addition, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, in consultation with civil society organizations, is leading efforts to enhance the active participation of women's rights institutions in response to the emergency. Furthermore, the Ministry developed an emergency response plan covering several regions, it also highlighted the following interventions:

- ▶ Monitor and supervise the implementation of the Palestinian labor law in the governmental and private sectors in order to protect the economic rights of working women.
- ▶ Provide financial support (to boost income) for marginalized groups of women, especially widows and female-headed households.
- ▶ Ensure Disinfecting facilities of essential service providers that women resort to seek help related to (GBV and psychological help).
- ▶ Follow-up with the Palestinian Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior on cases of corona and ensure that patients receive the necessary gender- responsive and sensitive support.
- ▶ 5. Monitor cases of complaints submitted by women regarding their inability to access services or any other violations that they may experience during the period of the crisis.
- ▶ 6. Distribute “dignity kits” to many families in the Gaza Strip.
- ▶ 7. Highlight all the significant role played by Palestinian women during the crisis.

In addition, the report of the Secretary-General on “*the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19*” addressed several recommendations aimed at strengthening the role of governments and urging them to act in a serious and necessary manner:

- ▶ Suppress the spread of the virus and contain the pandemic;
- ▶ Address the socio-economic dimensions of the crisis with a focus on the most affected people, especially, women, youth, low-income workers, small-scale and medium businesses, the informal sector and other vulnerable groups who are at increased risk;
- ▶ Recovery for a more sustainable and inclusive economy.

The spread of the pandemic, clearly threatens public health and can impose restrictions on some rights, due to the quarantine or the lockdown that limits freedom of movement.

Furthermore, observing the applicability of Human Rights principles (transparency, respect human dignity, non-discrimination etc...) in times of crisis, enhances the urgent need to ensure an effective and efficient response during inevitable emergencies to reduce the harm (undermine of basic rights) that may result from imposing wide and broad measures.

As a result, fears began to increase among women's rights organizations on the gendered health, socioeconomic and political impact of the pandemic.

The right to health is closely related to the realization of other human rights, as it appears in international rights, including the rights to food, housing, work, education, human dignity, life, non-discrimination, equality,

prohibition of torture, privacy and access to information. , Freedom of association, assembly, and movement. These rights and freedoms are integral components of the right to health.

Under international human rights law, states protect and ensure full respect of the right to freedom of expression as well as the right to access information, including the right to seek, receive, and publish all types of information, regardless of any boundaries. Restrictions on freedom of expression related to public health, should not jeopardize the right to access information.

States are also obliged to provide the necessary information on the protection and promotion of rights, including the right to health. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated that “To provide education and access to information concerning the main health problems in the community, including methods of preventing and controlling them”<sup>1</sup> are considered core obligations.

For instance, the response for the outbreak of COVID-19 on a rights-based approach should include up-to date information about the virus, access to services and other aspects related to responding to the virus outbreak.

### Violence Against Women:

Violence against women is spreading in the Palestinian society by 27%, according to statistics in late 2019, however, this rate is expected to rise due to the closures and psychological pressures that women are victims of. Percentage of women who are currently married or who have been married (18-64 years) and have experienced at least once one type of violence by the husband during the past 12 months by region and type of violence for the years 2011 and 2019.

**Table 1:**

Region	Violence Type											
	Spread of violence		Psychologic		Physical		Sexual		Social		Economic	
	2011	2019	2011	2019	2011	2019	2011	2019	2011	2019	2011	2019
<b>Palestine</b>	37	27.2	58.6	52.2	23.5	17.4	11.8	6.9	54.8	27.6	55.1	36.2
<b>West Bank</b>	29.9	22.2	48.8	46.1	17.4	12.1	10.2	5.8	44.8	20.2	41.6	29.3
<b>Gaza Strip</b>	51	35.2	76.4	62.5	34.7	25.8	14.9	8.7	78.9	41	88.3	46.7

**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019. Preliminary results of the Violence Survey in Palestinian Society, 2019 - Ramallah - Palestine

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Many women face various difficulties due to the outbreak of Coronavirus, and the increase of family violence, mainly, in times of the lockdown, social distancing and home quarantine and curfews for long days.

The United Nations indicated that the prevalence of violence among women in the eastern Mediterranean region reached 37%, which includes most of the Arab countries, while World Bank reports indicated that one of the reasons for the increase in violence against women in these countries is mainly due to the absence of deterrent law or modern laws to protect women.

Women's rights organizations have used several tools to monitor and document cases of violence, whether through social media, e-mails, phone calls as well as the allocation of an online hotline, which raises alarms and fears that many vulnerable women living in remote areas will not have access to the internet, and will not move to report violence due to the closure of roads between villages and cities, and in some cases, women indicated that their mobiles remains with their children. Even access to the internet does not guarantee safety for women as their partners (perpetrators of the assaults) are staying home with full control over all electronic devices.

Percentage of women who are currently married or who have been married (18-64 years) and have experienced one type of violence and went to seek help (destinations and methods of help) for 2011 and 2019.

**Table 2:**

Destinations of Women Victims of Violence	Palestine		West Bank		Gaza Strip	
	2011	2019	2011	2019	2011	2019
Never reported the act of violence	65.3	60.6	64.8	55.5	66	66.9
Talked to their partners and demanded the stop of the act of violence	51.3	48	39.5	44.7	65.4	52.2
Left their house to their parents' or relatives' house	30.2	23.5	24	19.6	37.7	28.1
Seek psychosocial or legal aid	0.7	1.4	0.7	1.1	0.8	1.8

**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019. Preliminary results of the Violence Survey in Palestinian Society, 2019 - Ramallah - Palestine

Women used to express their psychological needs and share the maltreatment they face at health clinics; one of the traditional means women in remote areas resort to complain the assaults they face. But due to the outbreak of coronavirus these clinics were shut.

Furthermore, safety houses and shelters shut their doors, as a response to the outbreak of coronavirus, therefore, women will not be able to escape to these shelters, besides, these shelters are available in only four out of sixteen governorates. On the other hand, the conditions of women workers in these shelters who did not visit their families since the outbreak of the virus, to maintain the security and health of the inmates.

An important solution in such circumstances, especially since the priority is social distancing and full closure due to the spread of coronavirus, it is important to create creative tools to reach women victims of GBV, including the use of telephone or mobile lines, especially in areas where Internet services are available.

Concerns increased over the continued closure of Sharia courts, through which women obtain their legal rights in accordance with the Personal Status Law, as all cases filed in Sharia courts are expenses, custody etc...which significantly impacted women and children, therefore, a more practical mechanisms to ensure women obtain their rights at all times.

**Highlights:**

- Violence against women increased during the outbreak of coronavirus.
- The difficulty for women to access protection and care service.
- Women in remote areas are most at risk.

**Women in leadership and decision-making positions:**

A number of media reports indicated that seven countries' female leaders effectively managing the coronavirus crisis (Taiwan, Germany, New Zealand, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Iceland) whose administrations were more effective than great countries such as the United States.

One of the main reasons that made women leaders better than men is transparency in the first place communicating with the people, delivering messages on coronavirus facts and risks, the importance of protection, and avoiding deception and miscalculation, in addition to the quick measures taken since the outbreak of the virus that facilitated its control.

Palestinian women stood strongly in managing wisely from the field all urgent matters related to the novel coronavirus.

The rapid response to the total measures taken by women's leadership has raised many demands that women take significant roles and hold key positions, namely, in health, security, political, protection sectors.

As a result of the proven role women played in managing the spread of coronavirus, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on countries to include women and girls in their efforts to overcome the pandemic, pointing out that this should "begin by granting them leadership positions with equal representation in power and decision-making positions.

"The World Economic Forum, an international non-profit organization, stressed the importance of women access to decision-making positions especially in all laboratories, research, and health facilities with the continued spread of the Corona virus, indicating that women are represented in medical teams to combat Coronavirus were 70%, only 25% of them held leadership positions, "according to a recent WHO report.

### Highlights:

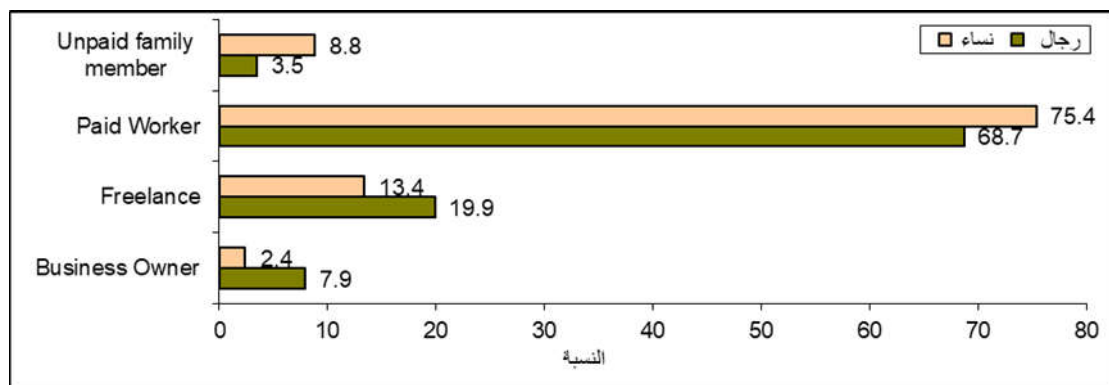
- Women lead field and administrative work with force and wisdom.
- Weak participation of women in decision making and leadership in emergency committees and bodies.
- Women mainly work in lower ranks' positions and expose themselves to danger.

### Economic Situation:

The Secretary-General of the United Nations indicated that a large number of women have lost their jobs and 60% of them receive lower wages than men at the global level, and they work in extremely dangerous occupations with the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, especially in the services sector.

Home burdens and unpaid care also increased to record new levels. Such burdens are doubled on Palestinian women as they are also responsible for the household.

### Workers women and men (above 15 years) during 2018:



**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019. Palestinian Workforce Survey, Annual Report: 2018. Ramallah - Palestine.

The participation of women compared to men in the labor market does not exceed 20%. Unemployment rate women recorded new levels. With the spread of Corona pandemic, the number of women who lose or lost their jobs is constantly increasing. Even Women who have not lost their jobs they are threatened not to get their monthly salary, with the exception of women working in the government sector in which the government has adopted paying the full salary to all employees, especially mothers who sat with their children as a result of the closure of nurseries and educational facilities.

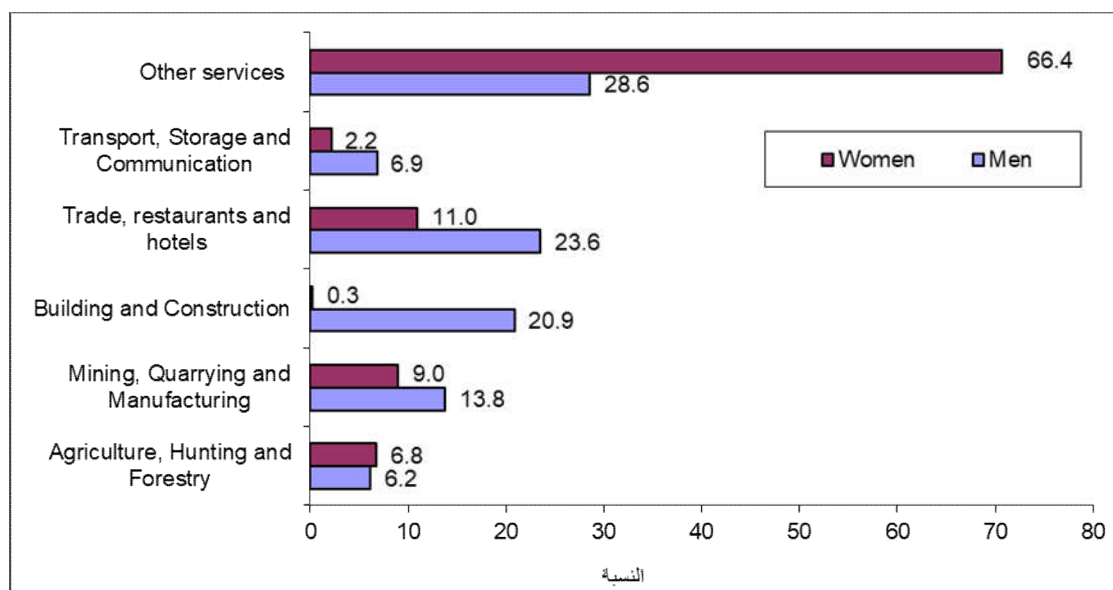
**Table 3:** Working women and men (above 15 years) by region and sector, 2018 (proportional distribution):

Sector	Palestine		West Bank		Gaza Strip	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
<b>Public Sector</b>	32.2	19.1	29.8	12.9	39.3	36.1
<b>Private Sector</b>	67	65.2	69.1	65.7	60.7	63.9
<b>Israeli Settlements</b>	0.8	15.7	1.1	21.4	0	0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019. Palestinian Workforce Survey, Annual Report: 2018. Ramallah – **Palestine**

Women’s participation rate in the tourism and service sectors is 60% in Palestine. These are the most affected sectors by coronavirus.

Workers women and men (above 15 years) during 2018 economic activity in Palestine, 2018 (proportional distribution)



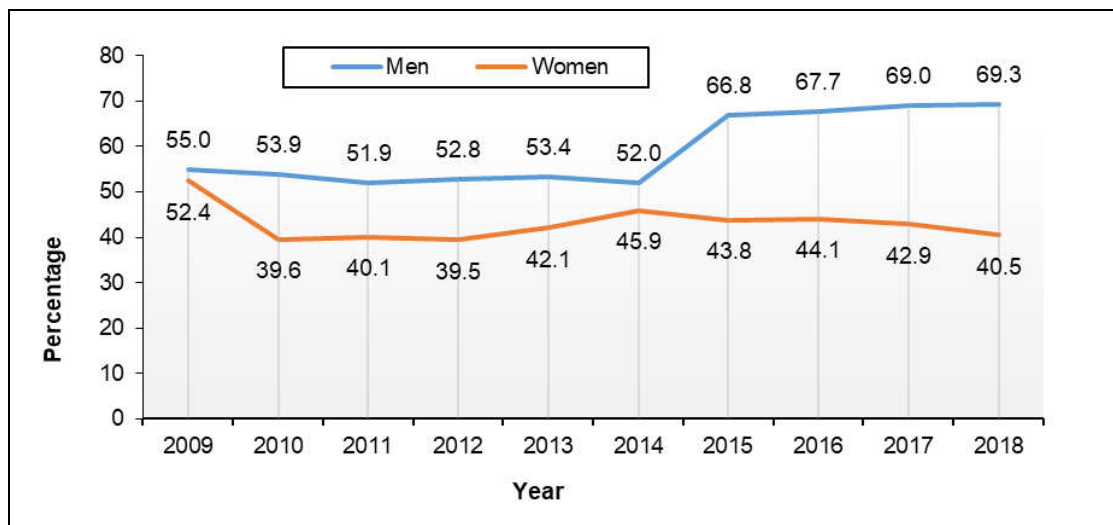


**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019. Palestinian Workforce Survey, Annual Report: 2018. Ramallah - Palestine.

In addition, weakness of protection and safety nets in terms of geographical distribution, especially in remote areas.

Besides to the participation of a large percentage of women in the informal sector; unregistered work. It is not possible to receive benefits, assistance or sometimes they are at constant risk to lose their work.

### **Percentage of informal employment excluding agricultural employment in Palestine, by gender, 2009-2018**



**Source:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019. Palestinian Workforce Survey, Annual Report: 2018. Ramallah - Palestine.

### **Highlights:**

- The percentage of women working in the private sector is very low
- The financial burden incurred by operators per month is equivalent to 6 million shekels.
- The percentage of women in the informal sector is 10%, which will lead to limited utilization of incentive packages to be approved by the government.
- Workers inside the Green Line will be seriously affected by corona through losing their entire income.
- 53% of women reported that they were considering abandoning workers in the facility.

### **Distance learning:**

To help contain the spread of coronavirus, the government of Palestine declared a state of emergency on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020. It demanded the immediate closure of all schools, universities in Palestine, as a precautionary measure to avoid the spread of the virus.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) immediately launched a national response plan for COVID- 19 where distance learning was highlighted as an alternative solution to ensure continued learning for their students.

The Ministry of Education is currently preparing to launch a Facebook page entitled "Reflection" to bridge the distance gap with students to receive notes on their progress and challenges during this period. It also launched an e-learning portal to reach all students in Palestine.

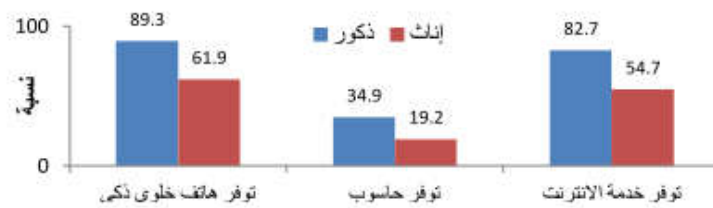
The ministry's online portal requires additional development, especially educational content in order to cover all stages and related lessons. In this regard, the Ministry launched an online initiative to provide support to Tawjihi grade students, who will take the high school exam on May 30, 2020 the online initiative is in cooperation with Palestine TV and the Jerusalem Educational Channel.

Currently, other initiatives are being implemented for other grades at the district level, including producing videos on the YouTube channel and using other social media platforms.

The availability of Internet service at home is a major indicator of the progress and success of the new method, as access to the Internet at home allows citizens to benefit from the availability of information and communications technology services and applications on the Internet, especially in the field of education. Otherwise, they will be deprived from the ability to learn remotely, especially in the times of the quarantine.

The results of the 2019 household ICT survey showed that 54% of female-headed households do not have access to at home.

توفر وسائل تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات في فلسطين حسب جنس رب الأسرة لعام 2019



- 54% have internet access to the websites of the Ministry of Education and Schools
- 19.2% own a computer
- No data is available for "uploading and downloading" speed for files
- No data is available on the presence of a home printer to print, resolve and upload assignments at a later time.

### **Palestinian Women Journalists:**

Journalism is of course, a stressful field mainly for women journalists, especially those who work in exceptional circumstances and under occupation.

Palestinian women working in the field of media suffer from compounded or double discrimination, including gender-based discrimination that sometimes impedes them to develop her career path and occupy key positions and incentives.

On the other hand, women journalists in Palestine they face systematic violations by Israeli Occupation Forces, whether through direct attacks, use of lethal force, extrajudicial killing, night raids, arrest, forced transportation

outside the occupied territories, confiscation and destruction of equipment as well as the prohibition of movement and travel.

Since the spread of Covid-19, Palestinian female journalists work in difficult and dangerous conditions, the Israeli occupation, prevents the Palestinian journalists in general from access to information or data related to numbers of COVID-19 cases recorded in East Jerusalem, besides to the continued systematic policies against these journalists that ranges between detention, summon, incitement and others that put Palestinian journalists in very difficult working conditions, whether natural fear due to the spread of the coronavirus or due to the systematic violations against female journalists, which constitute a threat, especially the summonses that Women journalists are compelled to comply to and go to the investigation- detention centers that lack of any prevention and protection.

Journalist Kristin Reinawi, a Palestine TV reporter in the Jerusalem governorate, was summoned on Thursday at a police station in Jerusalem.

Palestinian journalist, Hind Al-Khudari, was also subjected to a campaign of defamation and incitement from the un watch organization due to a post she shared on her social media page, criticizing normalization with the occupation, after which she was exposed to direct messages of incitement on social media.

Palestinian female journalists are currently working under very exhausting circumstances that is reflected on journalists with severe psychological, physical and social impact, the continue of such violations may lead these journalists to give up their career specially those who work in media coverage in the field.

### **From international interventions - the Security Council**

In light of the efforts of the State of Palestine in international lobbying and advocacy, the Palestinian envoy to the United Nations - New York sent a message to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the President of the Security Council for this month (the Dominican Republic), and the President of the United Nations General Assembly on the continuation of Israel, the occupying Power, to violate Palestinians' rights under COVID-19.

The message focused on the continuation of the public health emergency in Palestine, where there are 369 confirmed cases (291 in the West Bank, 78 in East Jerusalem and 13 in the Gaza Strip), and 2 deaths as of April 15.

The letter stressed that Israel continues to take advantage of the international community's focus on COVID-19 pandemic, to consolidate its illegal occupation, reinforce annexation plans, and escalate its repressive measures against Palestinians, including night raids, arrests and house demolitions. In the period of one month, from March 5 to April 5, Israel demolished or confiscated 47 Palestinian buildings, 267 arrests and 238 raids, killed 3 Palestinians and wounded 52 others. This is in addition to settler violence and the intimidation that escalated and became more aggressive since the presentation of the American administration's "plan of the century" in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Mansour noted that while the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights appeals to governments to study ways to release people who are particularly vulnerable to the epidemic, including those who have been detained without adequate legal basis, as Israel, the occupying Power, continues to carry out arrests in the OPT.

Including East Jerusalem, where during the month of March alone, Israel arrested 250 Palestinians, including 54 children and 6 women and girls.

**Policy interventions:**

- ▶ Introducing financial stimulus packages for female workers in the informal sector to help them shift to the formal sectors
- ▶ Formulating a national mechanism to compensate women workers affected by the loss of their sources of income.
- ▶ Encouraging the private sector to secure the jobs of women during and after the pandemic
- ▶ Directing new graduates to additional education in technology
- ▶ Providing affordable printers, inks and paper for poor families
- ▶ Increasing internet speeds by service providers.
- ▶ Encourage flexible work, especially for women, as a response to the pandemic.
- ▶ Providing new job opportunities for women as employees and entrepreneurs.
- ▶ Supporting the right to access information and prepare disaggregated data on Coronavirus
- ▶ Ensuring easy access to the internet for poor and marginalized families in order to benefit from accessing information.
- ▶ Supporting small-scale women-owned businesses and micro projects.
- ▶ Improving education and training opportunities for women.
- ▶ Bridging the wage gap between men and women, especially in private sector institutions.
- ▶ Building systems to support women's decision-making, especially in health, security and local governance sectors.
- ▶ Developing educational systems and curriculums to meet the needs of distance learning.