

Rabat, Friday April 10, 2020

To the honorable attention of:

The Minister of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and the Family
The President of the National Commission for the Protection of Women Victims of Violence
The Minister of Justice
The President of the Public Prosecutor's Office
The Minister of Health

Subject: The need for an urgent response by public authorities to violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic, one that is effective, appropriate, and consistent with human rights standards and principles

Dear Sir, Madam,

Who are we?

The undersigned organizations represent and provide listening and support services to women victims of violence in various urban, peri-urban, and rural regions across Morocco. As non-governmental organizations dedicated to preventing and combating domestic violence, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and harassment, we understand how essential it is to meet women's needs to ensure their safety and well-being in this time of crisis.

What is the purpose of this letter?

We are writing to urge you to respond to the urgent needs of victims of domestic violence and sexual assault and the programs that serve them in response to the 2019 Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) and the resulting disruptions. It is imperative that the emergency measures taken by the authorities meet the needs of women - directly and through the programs that serve them. In particular, steps should be taken to ensure that all parties concerned - public actors, associations, and women victims of violence - have access to the information, support systems and resources necessary during the current crisis.

Current situation: violence against women and COVID-19

Although people have been required to stay at home during this pandemic, the home is already the most dangerous place for women. As indicated in the second national survey on the prevalence of violence against women (Haut Commissariat au Plan, 2019), the domestic sphere is the one most affected by violence, with a prevalence of 52% (6.1 million women).

Already high, *the rate of violence is likely to increase* because of tensions already observed within households - pressures linked to family confinement, and exacerbated by new economic stresses due to unemployment, layoffs, and loss of income.

In addition, the pandemic is facilitating the *emergence of new expressions of violence*. We are seeing situations where husbands exploit confinement to place psychological pressure and exercise coercive control to force their wives to renounce their rights. Additionally, we have cases of husbands who had previously abandoned the marital home and / or were

prosecuted for non-payment of child support, but who have now returned home for the purposes of confinement, and taking revenge on their wives and children. Furthermore, women with divorce and child support cases pending in court face prolonged suffering in the face of adjourned hearings and delayed execution measures.

Being concentrated in precarious labor sectors and low-wage jobs, women suffer from economic insecurity caused by the pandemic. This *economic vulnerability leads to increased dependence on their abusers*, making women unable to leave a dangerous situation.

Restrictions on mobility increase the vulnerability of women victims of violence, making it *difficult to impossible to escape from a dangerous situation*. The abuser's permanent presence at home, fear of being arrested for breaching the confinement order, and suspension of transportation services all prevent women from leaving the home and trying to access services.

At the same time that women need health services, economic support, police and legal protection, and secure and stable housing more than ever, *they feel they have nowhere to go*. Associations have to overcome the challenges of responding to an increased demand to provide services, accommodation, and support, all within the confinement restrictions. There is also the risk that *public resources will be overwhelmed and diverted* by the response to the pandemic.

Abusers are aware of this situation, and now consider that they can act with impunity. As a violent husband recently threatened his wife, "Thanks to Corona, now no one is going to pay attention to you or listen to you."

Urgent policy proposals:

Prevention, protection and reparation measures for victims must remain available or be adapted during this crisis:

Guarantee access to vital judicial, legal and police protections

- Instruct police to go immediately to homes in domestic violence incidents, even in the absence of a prosecutor's order;
- Issue emergency protection orders as a preventive measure, even while pending or in the absence of prosecution or final criminal judgment;
- Clarify that travel to hearings, police stations, and other violence-related services constitute "other urgent reasons" for the purposes of the exceptional travel authorizations;
- Ensure that statutes of limitations, expiration dates for protection orders and all existing filing and hearing deadlines are extended or suspended throughout the crisis period;
- Impose the maximum penalty for all violent offenses - crimes and misdemeanors - committed against women during this period;
- Ensure that aggressors convicted of violence against women are not released before their sentence has been fully served, notify the victims of their impending release, and provide protection to these women;

- Ensure access to police, legal and judicial services through a variety of remote and digital communications systems, including telephone, written and voice messaging applications, e-mail, teleconferences, and online platforms for filing complaints;
- Guarantee the continuity and availability of medical staff in hospital violence against women units, including for granting incapacity certificates;
- Establish hotlines with a free emergency number, local and easy to remember, where women victims of violence can call toll-free or collect for immediate assistance;
- Activate an emergency SMS service with instant geo-tracking to report violence.

Ensure economic security for women

- Guarantee that all women workers, including those in the informal sector and daily workers, can receive unemployment benefits and other social benefits;
- Ensure that courts continue to rule on financial support cases throughout the crisis period, and guarantee enforcement measures;
- Expand the scope of the Family Solidarity Fund to benefit more women.

Provide safe and secure housing for women victims of violence and their children

- Empower law enforcement officials to re-house aggressors outside the marital home immediately so that women and their children can stay there in safety and stability;
- Ensure that residential shelters, including those managed by the Multifunctional Spaces for Women in Difficulty (EMFs) remain open throughout the crisis period.

Guarantee the inclusion of all women

- Ensure that measures take into account the specific needs of all categories of women victims of violence and the impact of the coronavirus on them - for example, sex workers, students, women with disabilities, women without access to online technology and information, elderly women, migrant women, and others.

Provide necessary resources to associations

Organizations working with women victims of violence in the field are working to significantly change their operations at record speed to continue to meet the needs of women victims of violence and their children, to ensure the safety and health of staff, and to play their role in reducing the spread of COVID-19.

For these reasons, organizations need an infusion of flexible resources to ensure the continuity of their vital services. In particular, human and material resources, and this in order to ensure accommodation for staff as well as for women victims of violence, the means of communication and technology to support remote support services, the supplies necessary for hygienic measures, and the presence of staff at all times.

Conclusion

Women victims of domestic violence and sexual assault face extreme danger and risk at a time when programs and systems are struggling to respond. We urge you to respond to the unique needs of women at this time by investing more resources and urgently making the necessary policy changes.

We thank you for your commitment and your efforts for women victims of violence in Morocco.

Please accept, Sir, Madame, the expression of our most distinguished regards.

Association Tafiil Moubadarat – Taza
Association Féminine El Khir – Essaouira
Association de lutte contre le sida (ALCS)
Association Anaouat femme et enfant – Chichaoua
Association Marocaine Manal pour les droits de l'enfant et de la femme – El Jadida
Association Horizon Vert pour le Développement Durable Centre Touda – Guercif
Association Tahadi pour l'Égalité et la Citoyenneté– Casablanca
Association Amal pour la Femme et le Développement – El Hajeb
Association Voix de Femmes Marocaine – Agadir
Association Mhashass pour le développement Humain – Larache
Association Ennour et Irfane – Marrakech
Association Oxygène – Ouarzazate
Migrations et Développement
Fédération national des associations amazigh
Alliance des Femmes du Maroc
Association Forum Marocain des Femmes –Safi
Coalition Plus
Club de femme Fatima el Fihriya – Sefrou
Femme rural et enfant –Mhaya
Khotwa pour la femme et la démocratie – Meknes
Réseau amazigh pour la citoyenneté Azzetta Amazigh section – El Hajeb
Espaces de citoyenneté – El Hajeb
Centre des droits des gens, – Region Marrakech et Safi
Centre d'hébergement des femmes victimes de violence – Kelaa des sraghna et Tamellalt
Fondation de la femme verte – Rabat
Aspirations féminines – Méknès
Mobilising for Rights Associates (MRA)