

HUMAN SECURITY AT STAKE: THE GENDERED IMPACT OF COVID19 IN WAR-TORN LIBYA

It has been one year since the conflict in Libya – and specifically around Tripoli – significantly intensified. Global calls have been made for a humanitarian ceasefire to allow authorities address the ongoing COVID19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the contrary is happening. So far, conflicting parties have used the shift of international attention away from Libya as an opportunity to escalate military operations. Fighting has escalated in and around Tripoli.

Libyans continue to face significant challenges as a result of the ongoing violent conflict. These challenges have been magnified by the current pandemic and escalation of attacks.

Since the COVID19 pandemic reached Libya in March 2020¹, clashes in Tripoli and other western cities have been aggravated. Years of violence have left the healthcare system especially vulnerable². Recent attacks³ on health facilities and important hospitals (Tripoli's Al Khadra General Hospital) have made the situation more precarious. "This is a health system that was close to collapse before the coronavirus" said Elizabeth Hof, head of mission for the World Health Organization in Libya. "Equipment for testing is limited, there is very little protective gear, and there is a shortage of medical workers, particularly in rural areas."⁴

"Some Libyans see coronavirus as an invisible enemy, and for a while they didn't even pay attention to the risk of coronavirus. It is not easy to tackle such a crisis during war."

Dr. Rida Altubuly Director of Together We Build it, Tripoli

Libyans have long suffered from electricity cuts and shortages, which have disrupted daily life. Significantly, food and water shortages, as well as an increase in food prices, have been reported. Previously, Libya did not experience substantial food shortages despite many years of war. The financial crisis that many Libyans struggle with due to the conflict and the closing of oilfields has been exacerbated by the consequences of COVID19. A main concern facing all population groups is the disruption to their livelihoods, especially for those in the informal economy. Furthermore, the banking crisis, due to the lack of liquidity, is also affecting Libyan families as they face increasing difficulties obtaining cash from banks. Crowds

gather daily in front of banks in many parts of the country and sometimes people must wait weeks before they can withdraw funds. The sudden lockdowns announced by national authorities have led to panic-buying and large crowds at stores, which significantly hamper previous efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

Despite the U.N. arms embargo on Libya, weapons continue to flow into the country via Libya's porous borders. On 1 April, the European Union launched its IRINI (meaning 'peace' in Greek) mission to enforce the arms embargo in the Mediterranean. Questions remain whether this mission will actually be able to stop the supply of arms without affecting the fragile balance of power and benefiting one or more rival parties over the others.

"We are at home, but it is not safe to be at home, we say corona is below, and the war is above us. That's the reality of people. Last week the main hospital in Tripoli was targeted in the bombing. There are electricity shortages, there is water shortage in certain areas in Tripoli and fear for food shortage as well."

Inas Miloud, Tamazight Women Movement

The migration hubs along the coasts hosting migrants have been targeted by air shelling. The situation of migrants in Libya is devastating: trapped in deplorable circumstances, without protection, very much prone to COVID19 infection, and lacking access to health services⁵. Many will not survive if the international community does not take immediate action.

GENDERED IMPACT OF COVID19:

The impact, response and consequences of the COVID19 crisis are gendered in multiple ways. UN Women conducted a survey to capture the pandemic's specific impact on women. They

¹ The first case was officially confirmed in Tripoli on 24 March 2020.

² <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/libya-people-caught-between-bullets-bombs-and-now-covid-19>

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/libya-COVID19-situation-report-no-2-21-april-2020>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-libya-measures/libya-confirms-first-coronavirus-case-amid-fear-over-readiness-idUSKBN21B2SF>

⁵ <https://www.africanews.com/2020/04/26/coronavirus-libya-escalating-violencein-libya-jeopardises-COVID19-response-warns-irc/>

found that current COVID19 prevention measures have negatively affected women's livelihoods, especially for self-employed women⁶. Furthermore, the pressure and burden on women in the domestic sphere have significantly increased due to the curfews and the deteriorating economic situation. Many women work in the health and social care sector, which exposes them to contagion. In addition, women lack access to opportunities for online work and education. In remote areas, access to health care is already difficult, a situation that could be exacerbated as a result of the COVID19 crisis.

UN chief António Guterres⁷ has called for measures to address a global surge in domestic violence, linked to lockdowns imposed by governments responding to the pandemic. Even before COVID19, "Libyan women already faced great challenges as gender-based violence and insecurity have constrained their employment, livelihood and overall potential", as stated by the UN Women Representative in Libya⁸.

"Most medical staff in Libya are women, we see violence towards them increasing as the situation becomes more intense. It is more acceptable to report yourselves with a bullet wound at the hospital than to seek assistance when you are encountering symptoms of COVID19."

Abdulhadi Soliman, Fezzan Libya Organization

CHALLENGES:

- **Lack of a unified position from the EU and other UN members states:** the internal power struggle and intensified conflict within Libya is strongly influenced by differential interference of foreign states;
- **The widespread presence of weapons and arms in Libya and among the Libyan population;**
- **Poor health infrastructure and insufficient protection** of health service providers;
- **Electricity cuts, lack of water supply, risk of food and gas shortage;**
- **Lack of gender sensitive analysis in the response to COVID19.** Essential services to address gender-based violence are already limited;
- **Spreading of disinformation and misinformation about COVID19.** People have faced stigma if they have contracted or are suspected to have contracted the virus.

It is critical to ensure that achievements in conflict resolution and prevention, peacebuilding, and increased participation of women and youth in these processes do not relapse.

"Many international donors have shifted their priorities to address primarily the COVID19 crisis. This should not happen in Libya. Focusing on women as well as peace and security is incredibly important. Without having organizations working on WPS, we will not be able to increase women's participation, raise attention to gender-based violence.... It is important not to only focus on COVID19 at this time and neglect other needs."

Dr. Rida Altubuly Director of Together We Build it, Tripoli

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS:

We ask the international community for structural and continued support to enhance human security and promote a response to the pandemic with a gendered approach by:

- Ensuring that diplomatic efforts are geared towards an **immediate and unconditional humanitarian ceasefire** being respected by all parties.
- **Ensuring the continuation of the political process** in an inclusive manner with the participation of all relevant actors in society, including civil society organizations (CSOs), and women and youth leaders.
- **Investing in the National Disease Control Committee** and ensuring an appropriate coordination of its work throughout Libya.
- **Investing in the capacity, expertise and protection of Libya's health system and (female) health workers** and staff from the Red Crescent. Create safe routes for medical supplies including testing kits.
- **Promoting and supporting a gender sensitive response** to COVID19, ensuring the inclusion of women in crisis teams mainstreaming an intersectional gender lens.
- **Making the prevention and redress of violence against women** a key part of the national response plans. Offer services to address SGBV and reproductive health.
- **Ensuring a humanitarian, diplomatic and international solution for thousands of migrants in detention** living in unbearable circumstances.
- **Investing in and supporting civil society organizations and local authorities to address the crisis through (innovative) local actions** including awareness rising campaigns to reduce misinformation and stigma around COVID19
- **Ensuring longer-term, structural, flexible funding for CSOs** working on women's rights and human security.

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⁶ <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/04/press-release-new-report-the-economic-and-social-impact-of-conflict-on-libyan-women>

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

⁸ <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/04/press-release-new-report-the-economic-and-social-impact-of-conflict-on-libyan-women>