



Action Alert? Endemic Gender-Based Violence in the Middle East and North Africa

June 2023

This policy brief presents an update on the state of domestic violence or other violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region during the COVID-19 pandemic using findings from a large-scale phone survey in 10 MENA countries, conducted by the World Values Survey (WVS) Association. The survey interviewed 12,366 respondents, distributed almost equally across Algeria, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Egypt.

Key Findings

- 1) In all countries, more than 63 percent of individuals reported an increase in violence or other abuse towards women in their community from their husbands or other family members
- 2) Women have a higher perception of domestic violence than men
- 3) There is a concern about the presence of underreporting issues and a lack of awareness regarding the definition and recognition of domestic violence or abuse
- 4) More equitable gender attitudes and higher education are associated with a lower prevalence of domestic violence in the community and physical arguments among family members

Context

Domestic violence against women in the MENA region is a pressing and persistent issue. According to projections by the United Nations (UN) Women, approximately 37 percent of women in the Arab region have encountered some form of violence throughout their lives (slightly higher than the global average of one in three women). Looking at a broader definition of gender-based violence, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation, there are indications that this percentage could be even higher.¹ Measures implemented to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as lockdowns and movement restrictions, confined survivors and perpetrators in the same physical space. Further, stress due to economic uncertainty could trigger conflict within the family that can exacerbate domestic violence. The

Due to the difficulty of and ethical concerns around collecting data on gender-based violence (GBV), measures of prevalence and incidence of GBV are generally scarce across the globe, but especially in the MENA region. GBV surveys are typically conducted face-to-face to ensure the privacy, confidentiality, and

Middle East and North Africa Gender Innovation Lab

The Middle East and North Africa Gender Innovation Lab (MNAGIL) carries out impact evaluations and inferential research to produce rigorous evidence on what works in closing gaps in assets, economic opportunities, and agency between women and men, and how closing these gaps can help achieve other development outcomes. Ultimately, MNAGIL promotes the adoption of policies and interventions that are shown to close gender gaps and improve the well-being of women and men in the Middle East and North Africa.

¹ UN Women – Arab States. 2022. *Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women and Girls*.

security of respondents. Mobility constraints during COVID-19 render phone surveys the only feasible option to collect data. To ensure the safety of respondents, World Bank researchers in consultation with GBV experts, develop proxy questions asking perception of violence in the community, instead of querying individual experiences of violence.^{2,3}

The same approach is later adopted by UN Women's Rapid Gender Assessment surveys conducted in 13 countries, primarily outside of the MENA region. The report finds 45 percent of women reported that they or someone they know has experienced some form of violence against women since the onset of the pandemic.⁴ It is also adopted by the World Values Survey used in this brief.

What did we do?

We use a novel survey collected in collaboration with the World Values Survey (WVS) amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 to analyze the gender differences in perceptions of domestic violence by women and men. World Values Surveys are cross-sectional surveys that assess individual attitudes and values, such as cultural values; attitudes and beliefs towards gender, family, and religion; attitudes and experience of poverty; education, health, and security; social tolerance and trust; and attitudes towards multilateral institutions. In addition to the standard WVS modules, this round includes questions related to COVID-19, such as perceptions of COVID-19 effects on the respondent, their family, and in the community. The survey covers 10 countries in the MENA region: Algeria, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Egypt. A total of 12,366 adult respondents (aged 18+) were interviewed via phone between March and June 2021.⁵ The survey is representative at the national level.⁶

(69 percent), Algeria (63 percent), Jordan (57 percent), Egypt (56 percent), Palestine (56 percent), and Iran (53 percent). This surge can be attributed to multiple factors, including increased stress and anxiety, enforced isolation and confinement measures, disruption of supportive networks, as well as intensified power dynamics and control within households. Even in high-income countries such as Saudi Arabia, where people generally faced fewer socio-economic stressors during the pandemic, such as unemployment and other stressors such as food insecurity, a significant 38 percent of respondents reported an increase in domestic violence or other abuse towards women since the beginning of the pandemic. It is worth noting, however, that respondents in Saudi Arabia reported the lowest increase in domestic violence against women compared to other countries. This could highlight the potential impact of economic stressors on domestic violence against women.

What did we find?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic violence against women in MENA communities was devastating, with countries experiencing fewer economic stressors being no exception. More than 63 percent of respondents in 10 MENA countries reported, on average, an increase within their community in violence or other abuse towards women from their husbands or other family members since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The largest increase was reported in Lebanon (82 percent of respondents), followed by Tunisia (80 percent), Morocco (78 percent), Iraq

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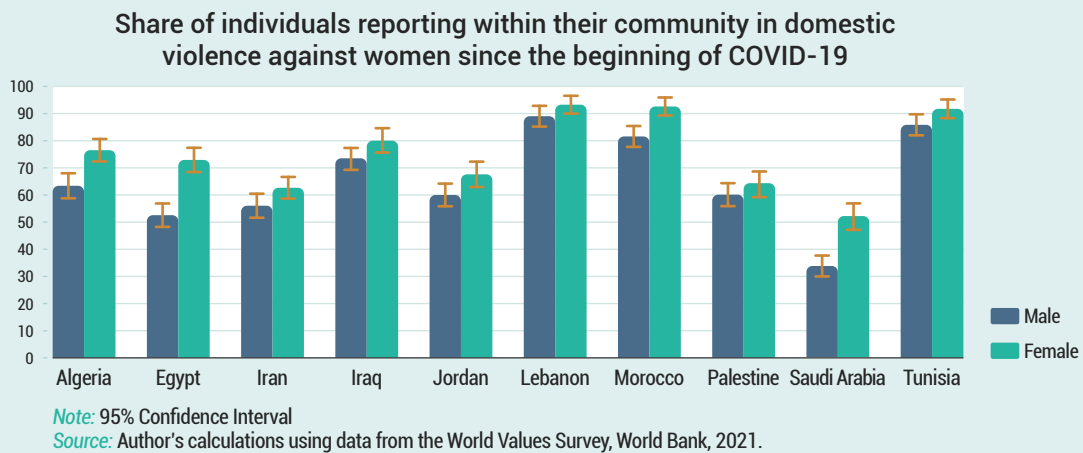
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- 2 Halim, Daniel, England Rhys Can, and Elizaveta Perova. 2020. *What Factors Exacerbate and Mitigate the Risk of Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19?*
 - 3 Perova, Elizaveta; Jarvis, Forest Brach; Arango, Diana Jimena; Peterman, Amber. *Can We Capture Exposure to Gender-based Violence (GBV) through Phone Surveys during a Pandemic?*
 - 4 UN Women. 2022. *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19.*
 - 5 There are slight differences in the interview timeframe. For example, in Lebanon, the survey was concluded in a week (April 2-8), while it took two months to finish the survey in Iran (April 14-June 19). All 10 country surveys started in a similar timeframe, between March 28 and April 17.
 - 6 Stratified random sampling was used to minimize selection bias. However, it is worth noting that the response rate varies across countries, from a low of 8 percent in Iran to a high of 79 percent in Lebanon and Morocco.

Expectedly, female respondents tend to have a higher perception of domestic violence compared to male respondents. The most significant gender differences in responses are observed in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Algeria (Figure 1). This is because women are more directly affected by and have a deeper understanding of the issue due to their personal experiences, societal roles, and awareness

of the challenges faced by women in their communities. The variation in perceptions based on the gender of the respondent is not as high as anticipated though.

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Figure 1



The substantial increase in domestic violence or abuse against women reported at the community level in MENA during the COVID-19 pandemic does not align with the reported physical arguments at the family level, suggesting concerning underreporting issues or a lack of awareness regarding the definition and recognition of domestic violence or abuse. The WVS has specific questions that differentiate between observations of domestic violence or abuse against women at the community level and personal experiences of physical and verbal arguments within families. While over 63 percent of respondents reported an increase in violence or other abuse towards women in their community since the beginning of COVID-19, only 23 percent of respondents in our sample reported occasional or frequent physical arguments within their families in the 10 months prior to the survey. It is not entirely surprising to observe a discrepancy between what respondents report about the situation in their community and what is happening within their own households. While lack of awareness may contribute to this pattern, it is likely that individuals feel safer to reveal truthfully the prevalence of gender-based violence at the community level, even extrapolating from their own household to the community. However, due to social norms, shame, fear of retaliation, and other factors, they are less likely to report arguments occurring within their own household.

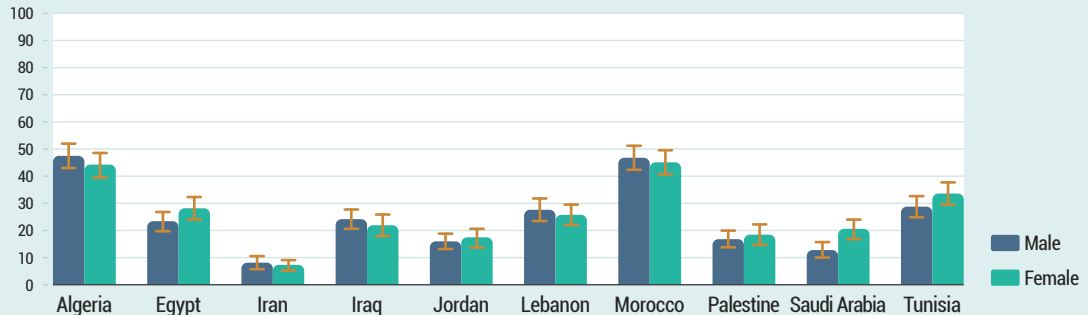
Our analysis also reveals considerable heterogeneity across countries in the reported occurrence of physical arguments at the household level (Figure 2A). The percentage of respondents reporting occasional or frequent physical arguments within their families ranges from as high as 41 percent in Morocco and Algeria, to as low as 7 percent in Iran. The percentage falls within moderate levels in the remaining countries: Tunisia (28 percent), Lebanon (24 percent), Egypt (23 percent), Iraq (21 percent), Palestine (16 percent), Jordan (15 percent), and Saudi Arabia (15 percent).

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Figure 2

Panel A.
Physical Arguments

Share of individuals reporting there were physical arguments between their family members sometimes or often in the 10 months preceding the survey

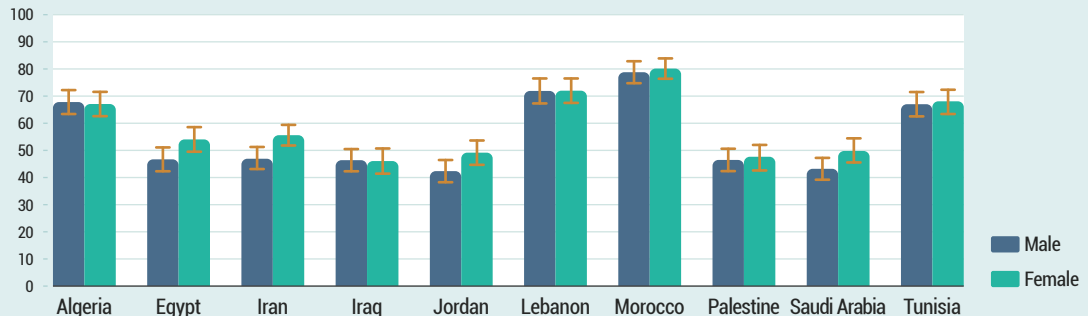


Note: 95% Confidence Interval

Source: Author's calculations using data from the World Values Survey, World Bank, 2021.

Panel B.
Verbal Arguments

Share of individuals reporting there were physical arguments between their family members sometimes or often in the 10 months preceding the survey



Note: 95% Confidence Interval

Source: Author's calculations using data from the World Values Survey, World Bank, 2021.

Interestingly, in half of the 10 MENA countries, a larger percentage of male respondents (compared to female respondents) reported occasional or frequent physical arguments (Figure 2A). In Algeria, for example, 43 percent of male respondents reported occasional or frequent physical arguments compared to 40 percent of female respondents. The respective percentages are also larger for males than females in Morocco (42 percent, 41 percent), Lebanon (25 percent, 23 percent), Iraq (22 percent, 20 percent), and Iran (8 percent, 7 percent). This pattern cannot be fully explained by differences in reporting behavior because we do not observe the same pattern when reporting on domestic violence at the community level (Figure 1). It is possible that men may feel more comfortable or socially accepted in acknowledging and reporting physical arguments within their families compared to acknowledging and reporting

violence or other forms of abuse specifically directed toward women. This could be because reporting violence or abuse towards women may implicate men as perpetrators or raise questions about their behavior and actions. Further research is needed, however, to delve deeper into the underlying reasons for this observed difference.

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The COVID-19 pandemic was additionally associated with increased verbal arguments between family members in MENA. More than half of respondents (51 percent) in the 10 MENA countries of our sample reported occasional or frequent verbal arguments within their families in the 10 months prior to the survey. The largest increase was reported in Morocco (71 percent of respondents), followed by Lebanon (65 percent of respondents), Tunisia (61 percent), Algeria (61 percent), Iran (46 percent), Egypt (45 percent), Jordan (41 percent), Palestine (42 percent), Saudi Arabia (42 percent), and Iraq (42 percent). While verbal arguments between family members alone may not always be considered domestic violence, they can be a potential indicator or precursor of an unhealthy or abusive relationship. Importantly, there are no significant differences between male and female respondents in reporting verbal arguments between family members (Figure 2B). This suggests that both genders are equally likely to acknowledge and report such conflicts within their families.

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Socioeconomic shocks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—such as a death in the family, job and income loss—are associated with an increased likelihood of domestic violence, physical and verbal arguments. Regression estimates suggest that economic stressors following the COVID-19 pandemic, such as death/illness in the family, the main income earner losing their job, and a decline in household income are associated with a higher likelihood of reporting domestic violence in the community, as well as physical and verbal arguments between family members (Figure 3).⁷ This is true for both male and female respondents, and after controlling for demographic characteristics and contextual differences across countries.

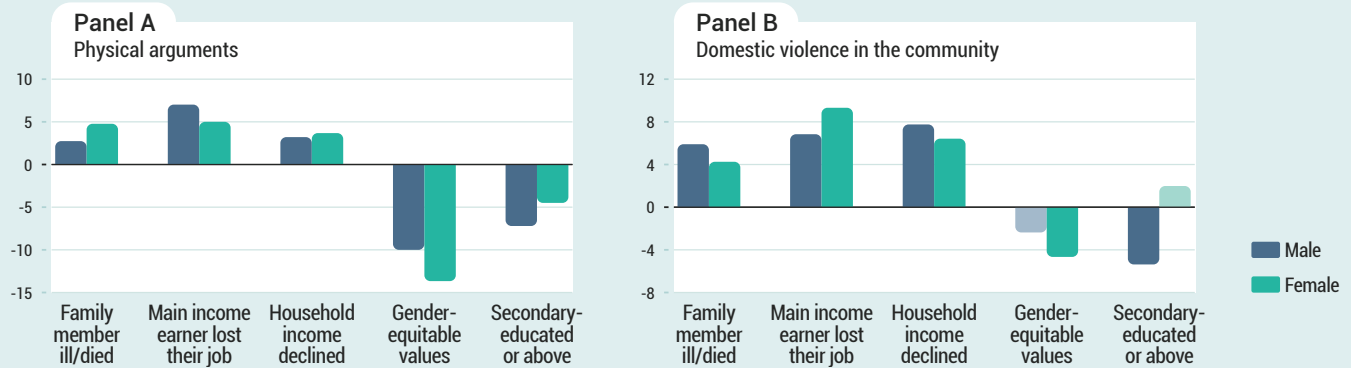
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⁷ The OLS regressions control for COVID-19-related shocks (death/illness in the family, main income earner losing their job, and decline in household income), an index for gender-equitable values, educational attainment, respondent's age, marital status, and urban residence, as well as country fixed effects. Regression estimates of verbal arguments are not shown, but all the coefficients are pointing in the same direction.

Figure 3

Share of individuals reporting there were physical arguments between family sometimes or often in the 10 months preceding the survey (%)

Share of individuals reporting an increase in domestic violence against women in their community since the beginning of COVID-19 (%)



Note: the chart shows coefficients from an OLS regression of physical arguments among family members (Panel A) and domestic in the community (Panel B) on economic stressors since the COVID-19 pandemic (death/illness in the family, main income earner losing their job, a decline in household income), an index of gender-equitable values, a dummy for having at least secondary education, demographic characteristics (age, urban residence, and marital status), and country fixed effects. The regressions are estimated separately for male and female samples. Positive (negative) coefficients indicate an increase (decrease) in the likelihood of physical arguments and domestic violence. Solid-colored bars indicate statistically significant coefficients and light-colored bars indicate not statistically significant coefficients.

Source: Authors' calculations using World Values Survey data (World Bank, 2021).

Education and positive attitudes toward gender equality are powerful mitigating factors. Men and women with more gender-equitable values and with at least secondary education are less likely to report domestic violence in the community and physical arguments among family members.⁸ In the case of physical arguments, these two factors completely offset the increased likelihood due to all economic stressors combined—for both women and men (Figure 3). The mitigating effects of education and gender-equitable values are not as pronounced on—but still largely point towards—lowering the likelihood of domestic violence in the community.⁹ Women’s education may have opposite effects on the reporting of domestic violence in the community. On one hand, education may empower women and improve their bargaining power, which reduces their likelihood of experiencing domestic violence or abuse. On the other hand, education may also improve women’s awareness of what is considered domestic violence. Further research is needed to disentangle these two effects.

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8 The gender-equitable values index takes a simple average of 11 ordinal questions on attitudes and values towards equality between men and women. All 11 questions have a Likert scale (1-4) ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. We reverse the order on some of the questions to ensure that larger values consistently point to more equal gender values and attitudes. Please refer to Chaudhury, El-Shal, and Halim (2023) for more details on its construction and the list of 11 questions.

9 Except for secondary education among women which is not a statistically significant factor. Gender-equitable values for men are also not a statistically significant factor.

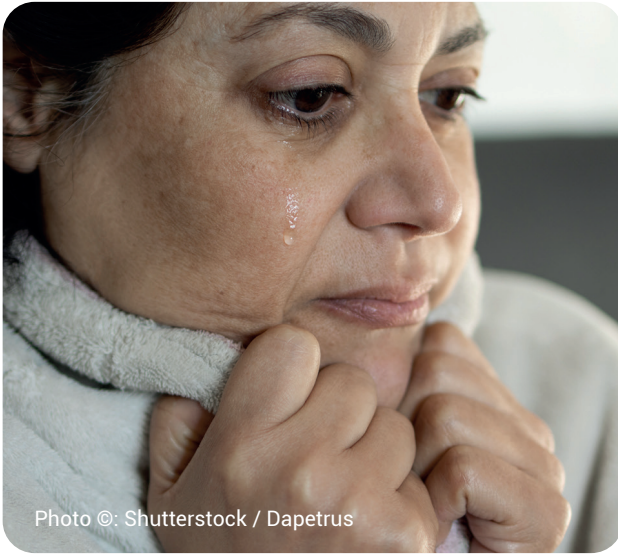


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Insights for policy

Persistent domestic violence in the MENA region, which has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, will have profound gendered implications on the well-being of women. Addressing domestic violence is crucial not only for safeguarding women's well-being and the well-being of their families and communities but also for promoting economic growth and development, as women thrive and contribute to their full potential. Globally, the overall direct and indirect costs associated with violence against women are estimated to range from 1 percent to 2 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP).¹⁰ This translates to substantial economic costs at the regional level in MENA, amounting to millions of dollars. In Egypt, for example, it was estimated in 2015 that marital violence leads to the loss of more than 500,000 working days annually, and the health sector incurs a cost of over USD 14 million to provide services to only a quarter (600,000) of the survivors.¹¹

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Our results suggest a few policy implications:

1. Data is needed to measure the prevalence and incidence of gender-based violence (GBV). Better data sheds light on the issue and enables policymakers to prepare policy responses to safeguard and protect survivors. Data collection on gender-based violence should adhere to "safety first" principles, taking extra precautions to ensure the safety, security, and privacy of respondents. Data should be collected with the intention of reducing the incidence of violence and better addressing the needs of GBV survivors, instead of collecting data for data's sake.
2. By providing education and promoting women's empowerment and positive attitudes towards gender equality, it is possible to mitigate the occurrence of domestic violence and alleviate its well-being impact on women across the MENA region.
3. Efforts to address domestic violence must include a focus on transforming gender attitudes and norms. Promoting respect, equality, and non-violence in relationships is a core strategy for creating lasting change.
4. Policymakers in MENA should pay attention to the underreporting of domestic violence and develop contextually-relevant strategies to overcome the barriers preventing survivors from seeking help while simultaneously addressing the underlying factors contributing to underreporting.

¹⁰ UN Women – Arab States. 2022. *Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women and Girls*.

¹¹ Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, National Council for Women in Egypt, UNFPA. 2015. *The Egypt Economic Cost of Gender-Based Violence Survey*.

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