



**MWMN**  
MEDITERRANEAN  
WOMEN MEDIATORS  
NETWORK

# COVID-19 AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

## *ABIGAIL FURLONG\**

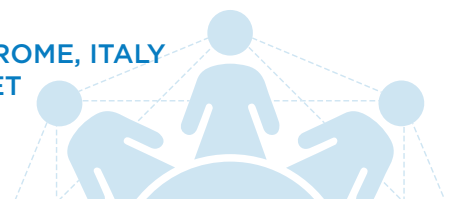


On 20 July 2020, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) organised a webinar on “COVID-19 and Domestic Violence against Women”. Overall, the webinar was aimed at discussing the hidden impact of COVID-19 with regards to the augmentation of gender-based violence. In addition to the four panellists – Yakin Ertürk (Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara and member of the MWMN), Vlora Tuzi Nushi (UN Women Head of Office, Kosovo), Migena Lahi (gender expert, Differenza Donna) and Lubna Dawani (Mizan for Law Secretary General) – the webinar saw the participation of international experts and practitioners in the domain of human rights, Women, Peace and Security, and gender equality.

This webinar – which was moderated by Francesca Caruso, MWMN’s member of the secretariat – aimed at turning the spotlight on a phenomenon that affects many women throughout the course of their lives and that unfortunately sharpens during the phases of crisis and conflict. Through the case studies of Kosovo, Cyprus, Jordan, Italy and Turkey, some of the many countries that have seen, during the quarantine, a significant increase in domestic violence, the webinar wanted to open a debate on this phenomenon, analysing the measures implemented by the various governments and civil society organisations to mitigate it.

**Yakin Ertürk**, narrating the situation in Turkey, began by stating that “violence flourishes in times of crisis”, and even though COVID-19 caught the world by surprise, it has not created an overarching sense of equality. She pointed out that the world is far from equal. This is especially apparent in terms of gender inequality, which she states has deepened during the pandemic. During her speech she noted that States are failing to prevent violence against women. According to Ertürk this is partly due to the overwhelming response by nations to the health concern, thereby taking resources from other aid sources and law enforcement that could protect women from domestic abuse.

In Turkey, anecdotal evidence, reports and media all point towards the fact that there has been an increase in violence against women and children in the last six months. Ertürk proceeded to share some statistics regarding gender-based violence in Turkey since January 2020: 123 femicides have been legally recorded, 291 cases of battered women who needed medical attention and 444 cases of forced prostitution. These were followed

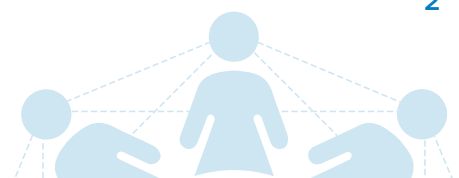


by innumerable cases and stories of rape and child sexual abuse. All of these statistics showed an increase from 2019, with the exception of femicides. Additionally, due to the pandemic schools have been closed, which means that many children will not return to school, mostly girls. Through Ertürk's research, as well as a study by the International Labour Organization, those children who cannot return to school will be susceptible to child labour and forced marriages in Turkey.

Overall, she recognises the successes shown by female government leaders around the world, and questions what female leaders can do differently from men. As for the Turkish government, she believes that they have been relatively successful with health measures but have implemented “absolutely no measures” towards the violence against women during the pandemic. She stated, “We, in Turkey, are at a crossroads in terms of rights, freedom and democracy” since right-wing groups have “waged warfare” on women in the nation. To conclude her remarks, she mentioned that Turkey needs to develop an international solidarity for its women, so that progress for women and children is not illusory.

Subsequently, the webinar moved to **Migena Lahi**, providing an overview for Italy during the discussion. Lahi's goal is to prevent and fight against gender-based violence, as well as seeking to protect women through unemployment support. During her portion of the webinar she discussed the impact that COVID-19 has had on women's shelters in Rome. The shelters operating in Rome never shut down during the pandemic, however during the lockdown it was difficult for women to leave their homes in search of shelter. She mentions that it is obvious women were experiencing domestic abuse during the lockdown because of the control exerted by their partners. Therefore, after the lockdown ended in May, the numbers in the shelters doubled because women were able to seek protection from their abusers. To conclude, Lahi put forth a call to action for the Italian government to better protect women by taking the abusers into custody and criminalising their violent behaviour.

**Vlora Tuzi Nushi**, from Kosovo spoke next in the discussion, expressing the views of UN Women in Kosovo, which has recently supported the establishment of a national database for domestic violence. In her speech she detailed the formation of the database which is a huge success for the country and a step forward in female progress. The database documents cases of domestic violence and allows police, social services and legal firms to access the information for further justice. The database also has implemented a tracking system to trace cases of abuse in the nation, which has witnessed over 2,000 confirmed instances of domestic abuse reported this year. The database is considered a successful tool to aid women in seeking help and protection from gender-based violence. According to Tuzi Nushi, Kosovo experienced a 30 per cent increase in domestic violence during the pandemic due to the isolation of victims and the newfound opportunities for the abusers. She is hopeful the database will continue to grow as a strengthening tool for women, due to the insecurities that women face when reporting their abuse. Overall, she is hopeful for the future and believes that women will grow stronger with these new preventative actions taken in collaboration with government and organisations.



Lastly, **Lubna Dawany** spoke about the situation in Jordan. Dawany is presently the Mizan for Law Secretary General in Jordan. She advised that by contributing to a “rebirth” of human rights in the nation, the framework for reporting domestic violence will become easier to establish. Dawany shared that domestic violence has increased during the pandemic, similar to other nations, which has created a population of “silent women” because of Jordan’s lack of safe spaces. She continued that there are certain elements in society that encourage gender-based violence, such as culture and economic security. Additionally, Jordan lacks public shelters for women, so they have nowhere to turn to when they are trying to flee their abusers. Due to the culture, there is a stigma against speaking up against abuse as well, according to Dawany. These factors result in women being unable to protect themselves during the pandemic. She concluded her remarks by stating that Jordan needs gender equality, because there is a dire lack of security for women in the nation currently.

During the closing remarks, **Irene Fellin**, Head of the MWMN Secretariat, posed the question, *What types of advocacy measures can be put in place to help women in the region, and how can the network help?* Tuzi Nuchi advised that sharing experiences within the network and around the region is a great way to build solidarity among women for progress. She also noted that women in headquarters positions are working endlessly on the needs of women in the area. Furthermore, Ertürk described changes at the governmental level, where we as a society need to re-evaluate neo-liberal ideals and our system of welfare, because it is not succeeding. She continued that it is necessary for women to support women whose voices have been silenced during the pandemic. Finally, Dawany echoed the need for solidarity among women in the region to keep each other moving forward against gender-based violence. She concluded that it is important for the networks to raise awareness among women themselves and educate them on how to respond if women are in danger.

To conclude the webinar, **Francesca Caruso**, member of the MWMN Secretariat, summarised the event. Some clear themes that emerged in terms of violence against women, were the need to listen to women’s voices despite the government’s inaction. Also, it is recognised in many places that governmental change is necessary in order for progress to prevail for the protection of women. Moreover, if women’s economic standing can increase, gender-based violence should decrease overall. Finally, solidarity is vital for the survival and well-being of women nationally and internationally. Caruso concluded by reiterating that “this is a critical time for action”.

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