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HOW UN WOMEN USES TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL APPLICATIONS TO HELP WOMEN AND GIRLS DURING COVID-19

Case study nr. I:

Tech Giants Partner with UN Women to Provide Life-Saving Information to Survivors Of Domestic Violence During COVID-19

As billions of people are still under COVID-19 lockdown, the shadow pandemic of violence against women has been growing within homes around the world.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against women and girls, a gross human rights violation, impacted one in three women worldwide. Recent data from multiple countries already show a spike in reporting of domestic violence through helplines since COVID-19 lockdowns started. As countries now contend with economic crisis, service shortfalls and high levels of stress, many women find themselves trapped in isolation with abusive partners, without access to information and support services that they need.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls has intensified in countries around the world. While lockdown measures help limit the spread of the virus, women and girls experiencing violence at home increasingly find themselves isolated from the people and resources that can help them.

To counter this alarming rise, UN Women offices around the world have partnered with tech giants like Google, Twitter and Facebook to provide important information about helpline services for domestic violence survivors.

Among the “Big Five” tech giants, Google and Facebook have partnered with UN Women to make information and resources available to survivors of violence.

Google has recently provided Ad Grants valued up to USD 1 million to UN Women through the “Ad Grants Crisis Relief Program” to promote content on COVID-19 and gender equality in 2020, including resources

on ending violence against women to address the alarming spike in domestic violence globally. Google has linked to UN Women's main section on the issue through its COVID-19 information hub in the USA and will later expand this to additional languages and countries.

Facebook is also making resources for survivors of domestic violence easily and quickly available through its platform. Together with UN Women's longstanding partners, the U.S. National Network to End Domestic Violence and the Global Network of Women's Shelters, 62 UN Women country offices contributed to a helpline repository on Facebook. Other information and resources include tips on how to recognize the signs of domestic abuse, how to help someone you suspect might be experiencing domestic violence, and how to keep yourself safe. These resources will be available worldwide and spotlighted strategically on the platform, for example in the COVID-19 information Center and in Facebook groups.

"For the millions of women in these desperate circumstances, getting accurate information about local shelters and helplines can make all the difference," says UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka. "It can be difficult to find out where to get help, and keep that search private, especially when under tight control by an abusive partner. We really appreciate the massive boost to accessibility this collaboration brings, so it's easy for women searching for help to find it safely."

In Asia and the Pacific region, where 2 out of 3 women reported experiences of violence even before COVID-19 lockdowns started, a partnership with Twitter is providing helpline numbers for accelerated support. When a Twitter user searches for terms associated with violence against women (such as "abuse," "sexual assault," "domestic violence," etc.), the top search result will be a notification in their local language: "If you are experiencing violence, help is available", followed by a relevant hotline number and the Twitter handle of that service.

Twitter, with support from UN Women, launched these notifications in Thailand, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea and Viet Nam as part of Twitter's #ThereIsHelp campaign.

"Violence against women and girls across Asia-Pacific is pervasive, but at the same time widely underreported," says Melissa Alvarado, UN Women Asia Pacific Regional Manager on Ending Violence against Women. "Fewer than four in 10 women experiencing such violence actually report these crimes or seek help of any sort. As lockdowns and stay-at-home orders are being prolonged by countries around the world to contain the spread of COVID-19, women with violent partners increasingly find themselves isolated from the people and resources that can help them. Connecting women who are feeling fearful or in danger is critical for their safety."

As part of the #ThereIsHelp campaign, Twitter users are also encouraged to send messages of support and let others know that services are open and available to help women experiencing violence.

First published on [UN Women](#)

Case study nr. II:

Connected by Their Phones, Women Peacebuilders Lead COVID-19 Prevention Efforts Across Libya

“We believe that we should be one Libya,” said one member* of the Libyan Women’s Network for Peacebuilding, a new network of women representing a broad social, political, generational and geographic spectrum of war-divided Libya. The network was created with support from UN Women in July 2019.

Separated by their country’s divisions, both geographically and politically, 36 Libyan women have since used their phones to connect, discuss and overcome their differences in the interest of one goal: Peace.

Members of the group are not new to activism. Each member has her own network of activists in her own region where she is already working to support their own communities. Although rarely documented, Libyan women have always had a vital role in managing conflicts and making peace in their own families and communities.

For almost a year now, the Network has met weekly on WhatsApp and Zoom to find ways for Libyan women to enter male-dominated decision-making and negotiation spaces. They seek to have a say on how to rebuild peace in their country, acting as mediators between the warring parties, and find common grounds.

Their online meetings are not always done comfortably on a sofa using high-speed internet. Often, you can hear the conflict just outside their doors, and electricity or cellular network outages are frequent. Some members have to drive for miles to get a signal on their phones to participate in meetings.

But none of these barriers have kept them from showing up virtually, launching and joining the many calls for a ceasefire. They have followed up on cases of threats against women and youth activists and referred them to UN agencies; they’ve effectively advocated for releasing imprisoned activists; and worked with woman members of the parliament to speak up on violence against women in politics.

And now, the COVID-19 pandemic cannot keep them from protecting their communities. As soon as the threat of the pandemic became known, Network members quickly adapted their online activism to respond to the pandemic. “We started raising awareness of the coronavirus pandemic through social media pages and pamphlets. We have provided gloves and masks, and some members even started sewing protective clothing for health workers,” said one of the members.

In Libya, mobile devices have become critical in helping women peace mediators continue their work in calling for a ceasefire and following up on cases of threats of violence against women.

To reach Libya’s most vulnerable populations, the group started disseminating vital information on national and local radios to make people aware of the risks posed by the new Coronavirus and how to limit its spread. They helped disseminate hotlines numbers for those experiencing gender-based violence and distributed cleaning and sanitizing products to low-income households. They linked up with the “We are with You” campaign to provide doctors and nurses with protective clothes, masks, gloves, sanitizers so they could safely treat people. As in most parts of the world, the majority of Libya’s nursing staff are women.

Aware of the heightened risk of outbreak in crowded places such as prisons, the Network teamed up with a legal aid network to distribute masks and gloves in prisons and detention centres and called for the release of prisoners who are either on a short sentence or about to finish their sentence, particularly those

who are elderly or ill. They also worked with NGOs in vulnerable migrant and refugee communities to distribute food, sanitizers and information on preventive measures in local languages.

Living in different parts of Libya, the members have been instrumental in highlighting the humanitarian needs of the various population groups throughout the country, and particularly those who have been disproportionately impacted by the conflict.

In August 2019 and just a month after the Network's formation, violent clashes between the warring parties erupted in Murzuq, southwest Libya, reportedly killing 90 civilians and displacing thousands. During this humanitarian crisis, the Network provided vital information to humanitarian actors on the needs of the trapped civilians, including gender-sensitive needs, which helped guide aid to the affected population.

UN Women, together with partners, continues to provide training sessions to Network members to strengthen their conflict resolution and negotiation skills.

"Libyan women are at the forefront of response to problems; from COVID 19 to the horrific consequences of a conflict that has divided their country and inflicted unimaginable suffering on their communities," said Begoña Lasagabaster, UN Women Representative in Libya. "It is high time that they had their rightful place in peace talks and their say on the future of Libya."

First published on [UN Women](#)

Case study nr. III:

Using Technology to Assist Vulnerable Syrian Refugees during COVID-19 Lockdown

Amid the coronavirus pandemic and the social distancing measures, UN Women is providing urgent support, information and essential services to more than 5,700 Syrian refugees in Za'atari and Azraq refugee camps.

In the Za'atari and Azraq refugee camps in Jordan, a curfew is in place from 6 p.m. to 10 a.m.. Even during the day regulations are in place: people must stay indoors, unless they have to buy food or seek medical help. Only a few essential services, such as hospitals, clinics and supermarkets, remain open.

Even the movement of UN staff has been restricted, complicating the work of reaching the people who need it most. But UN Women's innovative blockchain cash-disbursement system has proven to be a reliable and resilient system, because it can be managed remotely. As a result, UN Women is one of the agencies in Jordan that has been able to seamlessly and remotely ensure cash continues to reach 213 Syrian refugee women involved in its cash-for-work programmes at the Oases women's empowerment centres in the camps.

Work is scarce as many workplaces remain closed during the lockdown. UN Women beneficiaries however, continue to receive their salaries at World Food Programme-run supermarkets, which remain open and where iris-scanning technology identifies and links to each woman's account on UN Women's blockchain. Women can choose to save their money, receive cash-back, or purchase food and essential supplies. The IrisGuard system involves no physical contact and beneficiaries need not touch any buttons, making it a safer and more hygienic method.

UN Women is also using WhatsApp to disseminate reliable information on COVID-19 prevention and services made available by the Government and WHO. As many beneficiaries are also community mobilizers, they've created their own WhatsApp groups to reach out to other women to disseminate information on how to protect themselves from the virus and safely care for family that may fall ill.

"At first, I was skeptical about these messaging groups," admits Ghodoun Mohammed Daeef, 27-year-old Syrian refugee enrolled at the UN Women Oasis Centre at the Azraq refugee camp. "Then, I realized the importance of such information, and I started to spread the messages with my own friends and neighbours within the camp," she says. "In a way, this situation helped me realize that I could help other refugees like me."

School closures and the shift to the Government's e-learning platform have created additional challenges for students and families. In response, UN Women has increased the number of teaching assistants in cash-for-work positions to provide remote support with the online curriculum being delivered by the Ministry of Education.

Nahid Ali Albuhair, 31, is a Syrian refugee teaching assistant at the UN Women Oasis in Za'atari who has been providing Arabic literacy classes, using her caravan wall as a canvas for her lessons and disseminating video-based lessons to parents throughout the lockdown.

The camps are home to 113,035 refugees, who now spend most of the day in their caravans – one-room, prefabricated housing units for entire families, measuring 16 by 9.5 feet.

In many parts of the world, the increased isolation, added financial stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic and lockdowns have exacerbated existing problems such as gender-based violence.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak began, four UN Women field staff have been on the front lines of prevention, proactively undertaking sometimes more than 100 calls on a daily basis to provide information, counselling and psychosocial support to vulnerable Syrian refugee women in the camps, via phone and WhatsApp.

"At this critical time, we have scaled up our efforts to assist women facing protection issues, providing dedicated counselling, essential referrals to medical partners and shelters, and preparing safety plans," explains Yafa Jaffal, UN Women Protection Assistant. Safety plans often involve helping women compile a list of trusted family members, friends or protection workers they can reach out to, if the abuse happens again or escalates, and discussing positive coping mechanisms.

UN Women has also equipped all its Oasis centres with additional sanitization materials and partnered with UNICEF to distribute its stockpile of nearly 1,000 baby kits made by Syrian refugee women in UN Women Oases to the families of all newborns in the camps.

UN Women's work in the refugee camps is funded by the Governments of Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Japan, Iceland, Italy, Zonta International Foundation, the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis (the "Madad Fund") and UN Women National Committees.

First published on [UN Women](#)