Legal Action Worldwide Response to COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic is a defining moment of our time. In communities across the globe, the arrival of the virus has coincided with an outbreak in human solidarity, as people do their part to cure, comfort and contain. However, the world cannot afford to ignore the darker trends in the response to the crisis, particularly when it comes to the curtailment of human rights and a troubling increase in gender-based violence (GBV). Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) considers it an obligation to remain vigilant, proactive, and agile in these trying times. This is what is needed to ensure that the crisis does not overwhelm the promise of human security based on fundamental rights.

Human Rights and COVID-19

Tackling COVID-19 requires dramatic measures to slow the spread of the virus. As a result, governments of all kinds have become more actively involved in the lives of their citizens. LAW is deeply concerned that the measures taken by several governments around the world infringe on human rights in ways which are disproportionate to the intended objective. Unintended consequences of measures to ‘flatten the curve’ of COVID-19 are also disproportionately affecting women and girls. LAW is concerned by the disruption caused to existing support mechanisms for victims, including courts, at a time when there is a horrifying surge in certain pervasive forms of violence and abuse.

Gender and COVID-19

COVID-19 is not ‘The Great Leveller’ and its impact is not gender neutral. It is having a differential impact on women and girls, as well as those with intersectional identities and experiences, such as LGBTQI people or those who have suffered displacement.

Some differential impacts include:

- Increased burden of unpaid care work;
- A loss of income for women who are forced to work in informal economies without leave entitlements, particularly internally displaced persons and migrant domestic workers;
- Limited access to sexual and reproductive health;
- Increase online activity causing more online gendered hate speech.

Domestic Violence

Social distancing presumes that the home is a safe place for all. For far too many people, however, being at home means a heightened risk of violence and abuse. Emergencies increase the risk of all forms of GBV, but particularly domestic or intimate partner violence. Isolation with abusers, combined with the stress and economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic, further add to the risk of domestic violence and child protections issues in households.

A ‘How-To’ Guide to Ensure GBV Survivors Get Legal Help in COVID-19

In May, LAW and Norwegian Church Aid, will circulate a How-To Guide helping lawyers continue to provide essential legal services to GBV survivors during COVID-19. As LAW’s adaptive programming demonstrates, it is possible to respond to urgent and immediate GBV needs by providing effective legal information, assistance and representation to GBV survivors without the need for face-to-face interviews. LAW will ensure that other legal aid providers can benefit from LAW’s lessons learned in remote legal aid provision for GBV during the pandemic.

From the Frontline

Nour* is a 35 year-old Syrian woman whose abusive husband ran away with their three children. Nour approached LAW, afraid that her husband would leave the country with their children. Thanks to the swift action taken by LAW during the COVID-19 crisis, which included filing a complaint with the public prosecution, the police were able to intervene before Nour’s husband left the country. The children were immediately reunited with their mother, and with assistance from LAW she eventually secured a divorce and full custody.

* A pseudonym has been used.
LAW’s Response to COVID-19

LAW programmes have adapted and will continue to serve those who need it most – victims and survivors of human rights violations and abuses in some of the most challenging parts of the world. We will ensure that access to justice remains a fundamental feature of the COVID-19 response. LAW continues to provide essential legal services and support local justice actors across its country offices, including the use of telephone and online legal information, assistance and representation, and online capacity-building and mentoring of local justice actors. LAW is increasing the number emergency hotlines for GBV survivors to receive remote legal services – these are a lifeline. LAW uses emergency applications in the courts to prevent and deter GBV. LAW is also working with partners to begin to monitor and respond to rises in online gendered hate speech.

In Lebanon:
- In Lebanon the strict nationwide lockdown has been in force since 21 March 2020.
- LAW’s hotline for urgent GBV cases has seen an increase of 30% in complaints since the ‘stay at home’ policy, with most calls relating to domestic violence.
- LAW’s caseload has increased from 195 cases in February 2020 to 334 cases in March 2020.
- There has been an 84% increase in people requiring legal assistance with regard to birth and marriage registration.
- LAW’s lawyers and information officers have been using WhatsApp to respond to these needs.

On the Syria crisis:
- As the virus begins to take hold in Syria, concerns are that only Government held areas will receive a coordinated response.
- Despite a lack of statistics, anecdotal evidence suggests a devastating increase in domestic violence amongst the vulnerable Syrian refugee populations and LAW is preparing to establish a hotline for GBV cases.
- LAW is continuing its work with 10 survivor groups, including LGBTQI groups, and producing tailored justice strategies pursuing justice for the international crimes they have suffered.
- LAW is capacity-building Syrian lawyers online, including on interviewing skills for international justice mechanisms.

In occupied Palestine
- Whilst Palestine has only a limited number of confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19, there is grave concern over its ability to cope as the virus interacts with the structures and consequences of the Israeli occupation.
- Ironically, Gaza has been under lockdown since 2007 as a result of the Israeli siege and is uniquely de-developed and incapacitated to deal with the crisis.
- LAW continues to examine multi-national corporation complicity and profiteering from the occupation, which may both continue during and specifically benefit from COVID-19.

In Bangladesh:
- Bangladesh announced a general holiday on 26 March. A ‘stay at home’ policy is in place throughout the country, with Cox’s Bazar under complete lockdown since 8 April.
- Gender-based violence - and intimate partner violence in particular - is increasing within the camps as restrictions on freedom of movement are increased.
- LAW continues to work with victims and survivors of international crimes committed in Myanmar to pursue international justice for the atrocities committed against them.
- LAW is working to ensure critical services remain available during the lockdown period, including LAW’s network of 50 Rohingya survivor advocates.

In Sri Lanka:
- Colombo and other urban districts have been under 24-hour curfew since March 24, which has been strictly enforced with over 22,000 people arrested for breaking curfew.
- As domestic violence spikes in Colombo, LAW has established a Gender Justice Network of lawyers responding to GBV.
- The spread of hate speech and misinformation on social media appears to have increased during the curfew.
- LAW Sri Lanka’s programme has adapted its capacity-building programme to online training to prosecutors to continue to promote the successful and gender-sensitive prosecution sexual and gender-based violence.

In Somalia:
- As of 20 April, there are 135 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Somalia.
- As restrictions increase, LAW is coordinating with IDP camp managers to set up a hotline for IDPs to call and request legal assistance in cases of sexual violence.
- LAW is capitalising on its reach in Somalia by rolling out GBV and COVID-19 awareness programmes, including over the radio to reach those in the camps.

And in South Sudan:
- A night time curfew is enforced from 8 pm to 6 am.
- LAW is supporting its partners in South Sudan by improving their internet connectivity during lockdown, to facilitate further training.
- Women’s participation and involvement in the communities has reduced, and rates of domestic violence and other types of GBV is rising.