

# The Reality of Women and Girls in Jordan in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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# About Takatoat

Takatoat is a non-governmental, independent feminist collective operating in Jordan. Founded by young feminist leaders, it aims at spreading feminist knowledge and creating safe spaces for women and girls. It also supports the struggle of women and girls against patriarchal culture and discriminatory practices and laws, activating their participation in all fields while being protected from violence. Takatoat envisions a safe society, where women and girls live in solidarity, reach their fullest potential and enjoy equality, full rights and personal freedoms. Its work is driven by basic principles of feminism, intersectionality, solidarity and accountability.



# Introduction

**The Covid-19 pandemic imposed a new reality on the whole world,** and cast its shadow and negative effects on different groups, most notably women, girls and the most marginalized groups. Although there is a lack of statistics and documentation on the various effects of the pandemic on the lives of women in Jordan on various levels and in various sectors, some of the available statistics, reports and facts give a disturbing picture of the reality of those living in lockdown conditions. This said, Takatoat produced **this report to shed light on the most prominent challenges and difficulties facing women and girls in Jordan: citizens, refugees, and migrant workers, including the worsening economic crisis, decreased accessibility to health needs and sexual and reproductive health services, stress, increasing rates of violence in all its forms, and the weakness, and many cases absence, of frameworks that ensure social, economic and health protection.**



## Caught between a rock and a hard place: Unemployment, Economic challenges and inability to access menstrual hygiene products

For many months, Maram (name changed), a Syrian refugee, had been hoping and praying to not menstruate. Not because she was willing to get pregnant, but rather hoping to save the cost of menstrual hygiene products, because other expenditures were a higher priority for her.

Maram (38 years old) is one of the women that Takatoat interviewed to produce this report about the harsh conditions that cast a shadow on Jordanian women / migrant workers / refugees as a result of the emerging Coronavirus crisis; **these consequences** that, as proven by most of the human rights monitoring reports in Jordan, **have been mostly affecting women, whether economically, socially, or even psychologically.** In Maram's story, we see not only the exhausting economic dimension, but also the psychological one. Is it easy for a woman to exchange sanitary pads for other priorities?

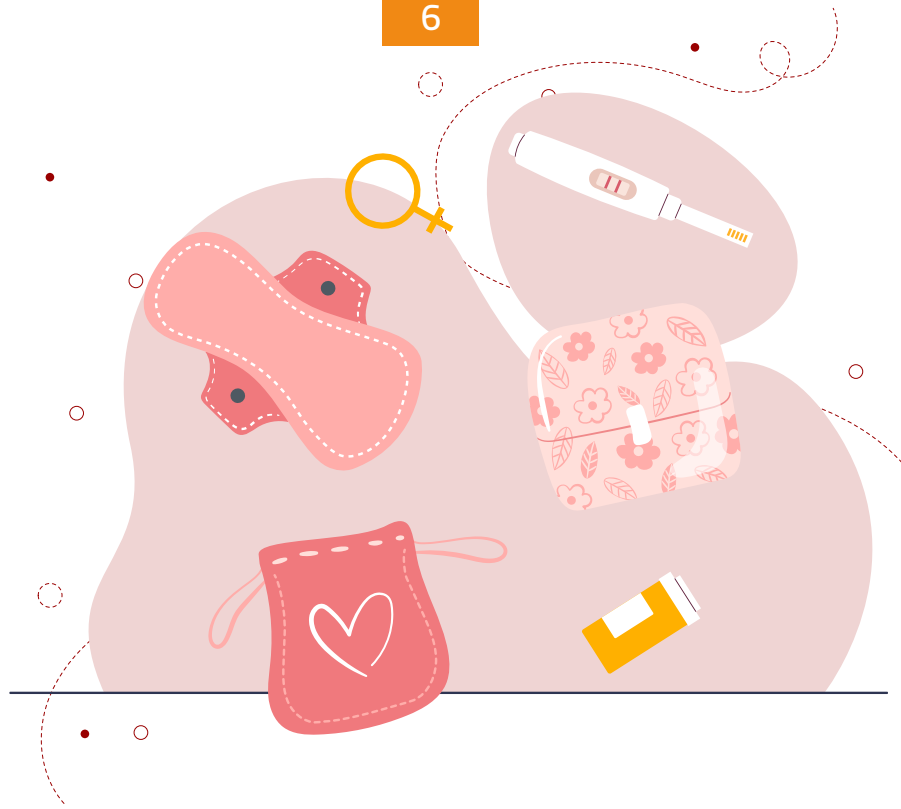
Since her son's needs come first, Maram's priorities have been consisting of securing sanitary napkins for her 1.5-year-old toddler, whom she - a widow - is raising alone during a crisis. Maram says: "Before the Corona crisis, I relied on working in small production projects that were initiated by human rights organizations in Jordan. They helped me provide for my family and cover the most important needs,



such as food, heating in winter, a fan in summer, and most importantly, milk and napkins for my child. **"The pandemic had no mercy on me, it hit me hard"**, said Maram with a trembling voice, barely withholding her tears during the phone call. When asked how she has been handling her family's needs when the pandemic put on hold the projects she used to work at, she replied: "I depend on luck now. If I am lucky, I get to clean someone's house or do a hair removal procedure for a bride. That is how I earn money from time to time to feed my kids."

"When you have the opportunity to earn some money, are you still unable to buy your sanitary pads?"; Takatoat asked Maram, who expressed, concluding the talk, an expected answer that reflects the fact that women are forced to neglect their own needs and priorities for the sake of other members of their families, especially their children: **"I can manage with a piece of cloth instead of a pad, because my child is more important"**.

Maram's story is not relative. Rather, it almost forms a picture of the kind of difficulties refugee women have been facing in Jordan. This reality was confirmed by Samar Muhareb, the Executive Director of the Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development (ARDD). Samar revealed to Takatoat that the organization has been receiving many complaints from refugee women who have been asked to vacate their houses due to their inability to cover the rent. S. Muhareb noted: **"Since the economic crisis began to worsen as a result of the pandemic, the majority of refugee women have been - as always - in the front lines facing the storm; they are more vulnerable to risks that increase their economic challenges, as many refugee women resort to signing random debentures to make ends meet."** It is important to mention in this



context that a study conducted by S. Muhareb's organization in 2019 on refugees and debts, found that 92% of Syrian refugee women residing in Jordan have loans, compared to 65% of Jordanian women.

In addition to that, Dr. Youssef Mansour, researcher and former Jordanian Minister for Economic Affairs, confirmed in a statement that refugees, especially women, are more vulnerable to the consequences of the pandemic. Adding that most of them work in the informal sector and pointing out that women-providers are more affected economically than men, because they are more vulnerable to instability of circumstances, such as the repercussions of the pandemic, especially that their wages are lower than men's, by rates ranging between 17 to 60 percent. Y. Mansour added that during quarantine, refugees lost income from work and are most likely to be affected by unemployment<sup>1</sup>.

Going back to the point raised by Maram about female hygiene products, UNFPA and UNICEF issued a report on 27 May 2020, warning about the disruption of stocks and supply chains of sanitary pads in some countries and the effects on communities who lose access to them. It also underlined the issue of impossibility to ship sanitary pads as they were not listed as essential items during the general lockdowns. UNFPA stressed in its warning that the epidemic has a severe impact on women during their menstruation, due to airport closures and restrictions on import. It also mentioned its impact on access to sexual and reproductive health services for women. **According to UNICEF, the countries that were most affected by the shortage of sanitary pads are Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.**

Speaking of the impact of the pandemic on the economic situation and the rise in unemployment rates,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/> تداعيات كورونا- اللاجئون- في-الأردن- باتوا- أكثر- فقراً

it is important to note that despite the fact that refugee women are in a more vulnerable situation, and despite the absence of clear official data on the extent to which Jordanian women are affected by this new reality, there are some alarming figures. The World Bank confirms in its statistics an (extreme) increase in poverty and hunger in Jordan by 11% compared to the previous year<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.almamlakatv.com/news/49014-توقع-ارتفاع-معدل-الفقر-في-الأردن-11-إضافية-بسبب-كورونا>



# COVID19 exacerbates the crisis of violence against women and girls

A policy paper titled “Protecting Women and Girls from Gender Based Violence During the Coronavirus Pandemic”, conducted by SIGI in early September of this year, indicated that the association dealt within three months with more than **800 cases of violence**. The paper noted that the most common forms of violence that were registered during that period are the following: **psychological, verbal, physical, and economic**. It also noted that **husbands are the most common perpetrators of violence against women, children and people with disabilities**. It added that **only 19% of abused women seek help**, of whom 3% resort to the Family Protection Department.



The low percentage of abused women resorting to the Family Protection Department during the pandemic may be explained by the story of Sanaa (46 years old, name changed). She is a mother of three, who insisted during her talk with Takatoat to not mention any hints that could reveal her identity, fearing the punishment of her husband for speaking up. Sanaa justified her husband's recent abuse: **"He is just blowing off steam. He has been under a lot of economic pressure. I know it is wrong that he is beating me, especially in front of the children, but our situation is extremely difficult."** She adds: **"My husband has always been bad-tempered, but since the beginning of the pandemic he has been beating me"**, and when asked whether she had thought recently to file a

complaint with the Family Protection Department, she replied: "Of course not, even if it is the right thing to do, it can harm me more than it benefits me. Neither my family will like that, nor my husband. He would never forgive me and might divorce me."

The Director of the Family Protection Department, Colonel Mahmoud Al-Fayez, announced on 25 August 2020 that his **department had received 1534 of domestic violence reports during the general**

**lockdown period, an increase of 35% from 2019.**

A study by the United Nations Social and Economic Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), released in April 2020, revealed that **the phenomenon of domestic violence and the social challenges that women and girls face in the Arab region have worsened during the Covid-19 crisis. The study underlined that domestic violence rates rise in emergency situations, such as pandemics, noting that in such times, it is difficult for women victims of domestic violence to seek and receive assistance, due to mobility restrictions or a lack of knowledge about the available assistance services.**

Hadeel Abdel Aziz, the Executive Director of the Justice Center for Legal Aid (JCLA), spoke to Takatoat about the various forms of violence against women, and noted that the rates of violence increased during the lockdown period. According to H. Abdel Aziz, the number of complaints received by the centre about **physical abuse was the highest, followed by psychological and economic violence.** Among the cases the centre dealt with, was a case of a woman who was beaten by her husband and forced to stay on the rooftop of their building for days, because "he could not look at her". Another case was about a young woman's laptop being confiscated by her parents; therefore, she was unable to attend her online university exam. H. Abdul Aziz concluded by saying that one of the reasons that made the reality of women who were subject to violence during the lockdown period difficult, is the fact that their husbands stayed at home. Another reason is the inability of women to use their phones as they are constantly monitored by their husbands. She added: **"All these forms of violence that occurred during the lockdown period show the vulnerability of the protection system during emergencies."**

Several civil society organizations had announced an increase in cases of violence against women and girls during the pandemic, including sexual harassment. **Effat Counselling Center received more than 800 cases of domestic violence against Jordanian and non-Jordanian women within three months, including cases of digital sexual harassment over the phone and on social media.**

The Family Protection Department announced



in May 2020 that the number of cases and complaints increased during the first month of general lockdown by 33% compared to the same period in 2019. The Family Protection Dep. received 145 cases, most of the victims were children and women. The reported violence cases described murder, beatings and physical and psychological harm. This is while **there are not any studies or accurate statistics about the extent of violence against girls and unmarried women. The violence against this group may lead to an increase in suicides.** In 2020, Jordan witnessed several suicide cases or attempts, of which two cases of suicide reached the media lens: two young women in the prime of youth committed suicide within 24 hours. A 20-year-old woman in Ain al-Basha committed suicide at dawn on Wednesday, 22 July 2020, using a rope tied around her neck at her parents' house, while a 17-year-old girl shot herself with a gun in the Baqaa area

In 2020, Jordan witnessed **nearly 15 cases of women and girls murdered by their family members. More than 18 women and girls fell victims to these crimes.** It is important to note that these are crimes that were publicly announced, and it is probable that there have been murder attempts that did not reach the public. **Some of these crimes were committed in the name of the so called "honour". What is common for women and girls' murder cases is the lack of fair punitive measures against the killers, and lack of justice for the victims, as well as hiding the names and stories of the victims from the public opinion.** Therefore, it is important to list the victims and the details of these crimes:

- 1 10/01/2020, a young man stabbed his sister to death in Karak governorate.

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- 2 19/01/2020, a 20-year-old wife died after throwing herself from the balcony of her house on the third floor due to family disputes with her husband in the Batrawi area of Zarqa governorate; investigations are still ongoing, which may lead to stating a murder.

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- 3 20/01/2020, a 20-year-old woman died after falling from the roof of her home in the Wasatia Brigade in Irbid governorate; investigations are still ongoing, which may lead to stating a murder.

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- 4 25/02/2020, a woman was beaten and strangled to death in her home.

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- 5 08/03/2020, a husband killed his wife, few months into their marriage, by deliberately pushing her. She fell into the King Abdullah Channel in the northern Jordan Valley.

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- 6 In the last ten days of March, two sons shot their father and stabbed his wife to death in the northern Badia region, following disputes between them.

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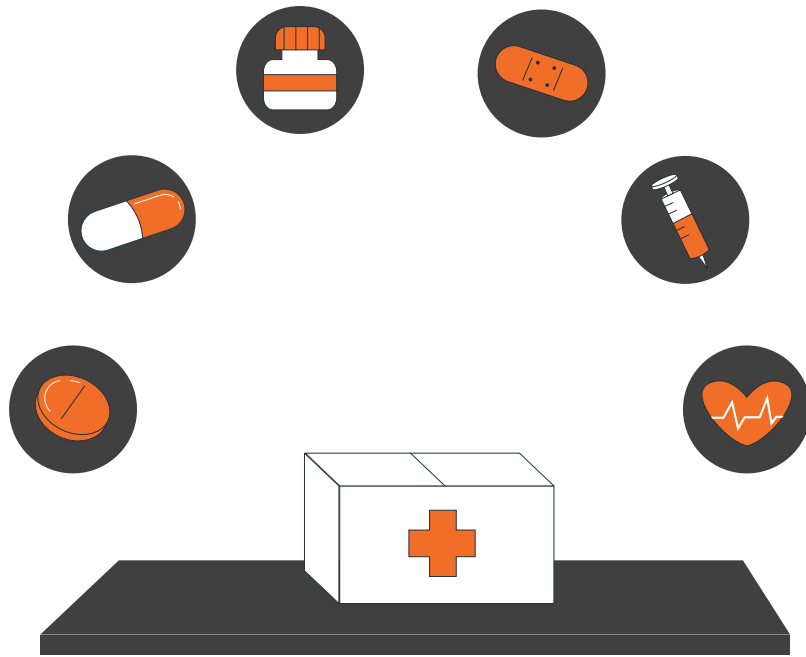
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- 7** 10/04/2020, a 30-year-old woman was killed by a bullet in Ma'an governorate.
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- 8** On the same day, a husband shot and killed his wife, following disputes between them, in the Marj Al-Hamam area in the capital Amman.
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- 9** 06/05/2020, a young man stabbed his 14-year-old sister to death in their home, south of the capital Amman.
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- 10** 16/07/2020, a mother was shot and killed at the hands of her two sons, who also seriously wounded their two sisters in Ma'an governorate.
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- 11** On the same day in the Balqa governorate in Ain Al-Basha region, a father killed his 40-year-old daughter Ahlam, after hitting her with a sharp object on her neck and smashing her head. He let her bleed for 3 hours to make sure of her death. The killer's neighbours reported going to the crime scene and seeing the father drinking tea next to the dead body and not allowing them to help her.
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- 12** 27/07/2020, in the Marka area of the Capital governorate, a terrible murder took place, in which a mother died at the hands of her young son, who was less than 14 years old. He stabbed her dozens of times with a kitchen knife while she was sleeping, which led to her immediate death.
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- 13** 31/07/2020, a brother killed his three married sisters in the Balqa governorate, inside their parents' home.
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- 14** In August 2020, a husband killed his wife after beating her in front of their home in Zarqa governorate.
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- 15** 28/08/2020, a Lebanese woman was burnt to death at the hands of her Jordanian husband in Madaba, who kept watching his bereaved wife burn without trying to extinguish the fire that had caught her and then dumped the body elsewhere.
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- 16** 19/10/2020, a girl was stabbed to death with a sharp object by her brother in Irbid.
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# Increasing challenges and burdens on women in various labor sectors

Women constitute approximately 65% of the health personnel in Jordan; according to the latest figures in 2018, women working in the health sector are divided as follows: 81% work in the pharmaceutical sector, 80% in the nursing sector, and 21% are doctors working in 106 public and private hospitals in the twelve governorates of the Kingdom. They have been facing, along with their male colleagues, great pressures due to the virus, which has limited their ability to communicate with their families, in addition to the psychological pressures and health risks they have been exposed to, because together with their male colleagues they have been the first line of defence fighting the pandemic.

The number of female domestic workers in Jordan holding work permits, according to the annual statistical report for 2018 issued by the Department of Statistics, is 44,749, representing 54.7% of the total number of migrant workers. According to the same report, the number of female workers in the manufacturing industries is 32,943. The remaining number is distributed among different professions, among them are agriculture (1,558 women), trade, restaurants and hotels (984 women). In one of the reports by Tamkeen Center for Legal Aid, which is part of a series of reports entitled In Lockdown, issued by the centre during the Corona pandemic, the centre indicated that the majority of female workers in the agricultural sector work on a day-to-day basis, earning a daily, weekly or post-seasonal wage. The workers interviewed by the monitoring team at the center in Deir Alla,





Irbid, Azraq, Mafrq, and Al-Lib district, reported their inability to reach their workplaces during the lockdown, due to the remoteness of their homes from the farms in which they work. Thus, they were unable to collect their wages. Not to mention **the lack of preventive safety measures**, which was confirmed by Linda Kalash, the Executive Director of Tamkeen Center. In her interview with Takatoat, L. Kalash noted that not being provided with masks, gloves, disinfectants was one of the violations that migrant workers have been subject to in farms. **This increased the economic burden on them** because they had to buy these materials from their wages.



Another report of the above-mentioned series, sheds light **on the economic suffering of migrant workers in beauty parlours during the general lockdown**. A situation that continued after the reopening of the parlours, due to the unavailability of protection materials for the workers, which increased the possibility of contracting the coronavirus during work and contact with clients. Tamkeen also monitored complaints related to workers not being paid by their employers, which affected their capacity to provide for their families in their home countries, as well as pay their house rent and buy food. Although the Ministry of Labour obliged the employers

in the private sector to give workers their full wages, some employers refused to do so. In addition to that, the ministry had introduced e-wallets, a new payment method, to facilitate the wage transfers to workers, but since the majority of migrant workers do not have smart phones, they were not able to collect their wages, let alone the fact that the e-wallets were available only in English and Arabic.

As for **the new reality of education imposed by the pandemic, women also have been the first to be affected, as they constitute 70.2% of the governmental education sector employees and nearly 90% of the private sector. Distant learning came to only increase the hours of unpaid and unappreciated labour, and the burdens of family care for the mothers and employees of the education sector.** A

report issued by Tamkeen on female teachers in the

private sector and the radical changes that occurred to the nature of their work during the Corona crisis after resorting to the distant learning, noted that **this shift has doubled their tasks that include**

**drafting lesson plans, recording videos,** sending students' daily assignments and papers, and other.

The report included 23 female teachers in Mafraq, Al Thaleel, Irbid, and Deir Alla, and indicated that the actual monthly wages for female teachers in the private sector in the targeted areas amounted to between 110-220 dinars, while Jordanian female teachers are paid the minimum wage of 220 dinars.

Teachers from Thaleel and Mafraq informed Tamkeen's monitoring team that **their wages were delayed for March** due to the imposition of the Defence Law and the subsequent disruption of various sectors. Another reason of the delay was the failure of students' families to pay the monthly instalments to the schools. It is important to note that teachers in Mafraq had demanded to be included in governmental compensation programs provided by The Social Security Fund, but their demands did not get the slightest interest of the employers.





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