



25 November 2018 – This week the world celebrates the International Day of Eliminating All Forms of Violence against Women on 25 November. The 2018 theme is Orange the World: #HearMeToo. To draw global attention to the issue, iconic buildings and monuments will be lit up in orange, the official colour of the campaign, symbolizing hope and a violence-free world. This date also marks the launch of 16 days of activism that conclude on 10 December, International Human Rights Day. On 25 November, WHO joins other UN agencies and the League of Arab States in calling for strengthening policies and legislation that address violence against women and girls, in health and other arenas, across the Region both in development and emergency contexts.

The Eastern Mediterranean Region is estimated to have the second highest prevalence (37%) of ever-partnered women who have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence at some point in their lives, after the South-East Asia Region (37.7%). The humanitarian crises and the sociopolitical and economic instability in the Region further compound inequalities and violence, shaping not only women and girls' experiences of gender-based violence but also affecting their choices and ability to receive assistance, cope, access health care and build economic and social assets and resilience.

In response, in recent years WHO has been supporting countries and policy-makers in the Region, individually or through regional initiatives, to strengthen the health system's role in addressing violence against women and girls. Along the same lines, WHO and Member States endorsed the global action plan to strengthen the role of the health system to address violence against women and girls, within a broader multisectoral response, through a World Health Assembly resolution in 2016. A myriad of WHO tools and guidelines have been developed and used to integrate violence against women and girls in existing health systems, strengthen the capacities of service providers and boost multisectoral coordination to ensure comprehensive, survivor-centered care through a public health approach.

As such, the WHO Regional Office has been actively engaged in global and regional initiatives to advocate for the need to scale up the health system response to violence against women and girls in countries of the Region, both in development and emergency contexts. In October 2018, WHO brought together representatives from health and other concerned national non-health stakeholders, as well as concerned UN agencies and partners from 12 countries in the Region, in a regional workshop on strengthening the health system response to violence against women and girls. The aim of the workshop was to assist countries to identify concrete actions and draft preliminary road maps to build their efforts for enhancing the capacity of the health system to respond to gender-based violence, in line with the global action plan.

WHO health-specific efforts have also been coupled with close coordination with other UN agencies to jointly promote sustainable interventions, both at the regional level through the joint action initiative for the elimination of violence against women and girls in the Arab States and at country level, such as the ongoing work in Egypt and Tunisia to pilot the essential service package for women and girls subject to violence.

The tireless efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment while combating violence against women and girls have already produced remarkable results in a number of countries through active collaboration between health ministries and WHO. In Pakistan, a national clinical handbook on health care for survivors of gender-based violence was developed through adapting the WHO global handbook to the local context in 2017. In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Public Health endorsed a gender-based violence treatment protocol for health care providers, published in 2014. Many efforts have taken place since then to apply the protocol through the health system. In Egypt, WHO, in coordination with UNFPA and other concerned UN agencies, is now working in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Population to revise the national medical protocol/guidelines for management of victims of gender-based violence based on the most recent WHO normative guidance.

Many efforts have also been done to address violence against women and girls in the emergency situations affecting many countries in the Region. During the Sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York, in March 2018, WHO organized a regional side-event in partnership with UNFPA, UN Women and the League of Arab States, to shed light on the plight of women and girls exposed to violence in humanitarian settings in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

In 2018, WHO started an initiative to address gender-based violence in emergencies from a

health perspective, building on exiting efforts. The main objective of the project is to enhance the capacity of the health sector and health care providers to deliver essential response and prevention services to survivors/victims in crises, including among refugees, and to strengthen interagency coordination in humanitarian settings. This work also looks at institutionalizing these services in WHO preparedness, response and recovery plans. In the Region, the initiative is being piloted in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syrian Arab Republic. Scoping missions have been conducted by WHO during 2018 to each of the three countries. The missions included technical consultations with national authorities, key health sector partners, protection sector/gender-based violence sub-sector, and national and subnational workshops. With WHO technical support, health clusters in these countries are now integrating gender-based violence into their Humanitarian Needs Overview and Response Plans.

The active involvement of local counterparts at country level, demonstrates once more how gender-based violence is a significant public health concern. WHO's commitment to combating violence against women and girls from a health perspective approach is an important step towards scaling up collective efforts to improve the health system response to women and girls subjected to violence. Without striving to reach these women and girls with the appropriate health services, we cannot claim to be achieving the universal goal of leaving no one behind and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 3 on health and Goal 5 on gender equality.

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