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**Justice for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in the Arab Region:  
Access to Information and Legal Support Networks**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

International human rights law and principles, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid, include obligations on states to ensure equitable access to justice for women. These obligations include providing accessible, affordable, and gender-sensitive legal aid services, reforming discriminatory laws, prosecuting perpetrators of violence, and establishing mechanisms for legal and psychological support for survivors. States are also expected to align national legislation with international standards and to challenge social and cultural norms that impede women from seeking justice.

Despite international recognition of the vital importance of legal aid, ensuring meaningful access to justice for women survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical challenge worldwide, and the Arab region is no exception. In Arab countries, initiatives to combat GBV through legal reforms, expanding social support and protection services, raising awareness and shifting public discourse, and enhancing access to legal support networks have expanded in recent years, driven both by official government programs and the longstanding efforts of civil society and women's advocacy groups. Over decades, women's rights activists and human rights groups have championed legal reforms, raised public awareness, and provided volunteer legal support, laying the groundwork for broader legislative and policy advances.

Notwithstanding these developments, significant gaps remain. Across the region, research indicates that only a small proportion of gender-based violence cases are reported to law enforcement authorities, and among those, few lead to official charges being brought against perpetrators.<sup>2</sup> While the enactment of laws is an important first step toward addressing violence against women, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how well they translate into practical access to justice for survivors. Legal frameworks must be supported by accessible legal aid,

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Euro-Mediterranean Feminist Initiative (EFI) Regional Civil Society Observatory (RCSO), *Policy Brief: Public Services for Women Victims of VAWG*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.efi-rcso.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Policy%20Brief%20-%20Public%20Services%20for%20Women%20Victims%20of%20VAWG%20in%20South%20Med%208.12.2021.pdf>; UN Women, *Essential services package for women and girls subject to violence*, 2015, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/essential-services-package-for-women-and-girls-subject-to-violence>.

survivor-centered services, and enforcement mechanisms that ensure protection, accountability, and equitable remedies. Strengthening these systems is essential to transform legislative progress into real protection and justice for women across the Arab region.

Limited access to reliable information about women’s legal rights and available support services, combined with fragmented or inaccessible legal aid and support networks, continues to restrict women’s ability to seek justice. Access to legal aid, in particular, is a critical determinant of whether women can navigate the justice system effectively. Many Arab women face significant gaps in access to legal aid, and where services exist, they are often under-resourced, unevenly distributed, and not tailored to the specific needs of women, particularly survivors of violence.

Addressing these gaps requires stronger collaboration between governments, policymakers, and civil society. Strengthening access to information, survivor-centered support systems, and effective legal aid can play a transformative role in promoting justice and dignity for GBV survivors across the Arab region. Implementing comprehensive legal aid frameworks and effective legal aid delivery mechanisms is not only a fulfillment of international obligations but also a necessary step toward ensuring that women can effectively exercise their rights.

## **II. CONTEXT: THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS**

Legislative instruments addressing violence against women in Arab countries vary widely. Some countries have enacted laws that target different forms of violence against women, some have opted for laws that focus primarily on domestic violence, and others retain scattered legal provisions in penal codes that broadly criminalize certain forms of violence, which can encompass crimes against women. The enactment of laws specifically addressing domestic violence and broader gender-based violence is a relatively recent development in the Arab region. This development reflects governments’ attempts to meet international standards, as well as responses to decades of activism and advocacy by domestic women’s rights and civil society groups.

To date, several Arab countries have enacted laws to combat violence against women. Lebanon introduced its first domestic violence law in 2014, followed by Bahrain in 2015, Jordan in 2017, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2019, and Kuwait in 2020. Tunisia and Morocco passed more comprehensive laws that address violence against women, in 2017 and 2018, respectively. Earlier,

in 2013, Saudi Arabia enacted its Law on Protection from Abuse, which includes provisions that address different forms of domestic violence.

Other Arab countries lack comprehensive legal frameworks explicitly designed to protect women. Instead, they rely heavily on general penal codes to criminalize physical or sexual violence. These codes are limited in scope, failing to address all forms of violence against women – which may include physical, sexual, verbal, economic, and psychological violence – and to include preventive measures, protective provisions, or survivor support measures beyond punishment. For instance, the Egyptian Penal Code of 1937 provides the same criminal protection for women and men in cases of assault or beating, for example, without acknowledging gender-specific aspects of these forms of violence. Recent amendments, however, have been introduced to criminalize certain types of violence that impact women, including female genital mutilation (2008) and sexual harassment (2014). Some countries retain laws that tolerate certain forms of violence against women, including the Iraqi Penal Code of 1969, which excuses spousal violence as a form of discipline.

#### *Legal Aid and Support Mechanisms in the Legislative Frameworks*

Access to legal aid and support services is a crucial component of effectively ensuring women's access to justice. While criminalization of GBV is an essential foundational step, survivors' ability to access justice depends heavily on mechanisms that provide effective legal support and transparent access to legal information and knowledge. In the Arab region, legislation differ widely in its treatment of legal aid as an essential component of the state support system: some acknowledge and incorporate a state responsibility to provide legal and assistance measures for women who experience violence, while others provide minimal or no legal assistance measures.

For example, Tunisian law establishes a comprehensive legal framework to combat violence against women, mandating the provision of legal aid, psychological support, and social services to survivors of violence, and requiring the Ministry of Justice to ensure access to legal aid for survivors.<sup>3</sup> In Morocco, the government is mandated by law to establish a multi-tiered institutional

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<sup>3</sup> Tunisia Organic Law No. 58 of 2017.

framework to support women who experience violence, which includes creation of specialized support cells within courts, health services, and law enforcement agencies.<sup>4</sup>

Lebanese law establishes an institutional framework to assist survivors of domestic violence, including a dedicated fund to provide rehabilitation programs and support services for survivors, including legal representation and aid.<sup>5</sup> Similarly in Kuwait, the law provides for the creation of temporary shelters for women who experience violence, offering legal assistance and counseling, among other services.<sup>6</sup> In Jordan, the law provides for various forms of social and psychological support services for women who experience violence, yet it does not address the need for structured, dedicated legal aid or guidance services beyond what courts may order.<sup>7</sup> UAE law does not provide for legal support outside the judicial and prosecution system.<sup>8</sup>

In countries without legislation that specifically addresses gender-based violence, women who experience violence often have few guarantees of access to legal aid or dedicated support services. The absence of laws and institutional mechanisms that address the needs of these women leaves them dependent on general penal codes, which often fail to acknowledge the particular needs of vulnerable populations, including women who experience gender-based violence, for specialized guidance, protection, or legal aid and representation. In many of these contexts, private networks, civil society activists, and legal aid organizations frequently bear the burden of filling the gaps. Reliance on these informal or under-resourced systems highlights the urgent need for comprehensive legal frameworks that explicitly ensure access to legal aid, guidance, and holistic support for survivors of gender-based violence.

### **III. GAPS IN ACCESS TO LEGAL AID AND SUPPORT NETWORKS**

Access to legal aid for women in Arab countries varies significantly, shaped by national legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and the role of civil society organizations. In many Arab countries, comprehensive legal aid programs for survivors are either absent or severely under-

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<sup>4</sup> Morocco Law No. 103-13 of 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Lebanon Law No. 293 of 2014 on the Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence, amended in 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Kuwait Law No. 16 of 2020 on Protection from Domestic Violence.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Law No. 6 of 2008 on Protection from Domestic Violence.

<sup>8</sup> UAE Federal Law No. 10 of 2019 on Protection from Domestic Violence.

resourced. Even in countries with formal legal provisions on legal aid, there is a notable gap between legislation and real-world access, including limited availability of lawyers with specialized training in responding to gender-based violence, high costs, and logistical barriers such as travel distance and the complexity – whether real or perceived – of reporting procedures. The uneven coverage and inconsistent quality of these services underscore the urgent need for well-funded, widely accessible, and coordinated legal aid mechanisms to ensure that all women can exercise their right to justice and effectively pursue remedies.

There are several examples of successful efforts by civil society and non-profit organizations to fill the gaps in access to legal aid for women. In Jordan, for example, the Justice Center for Legal Aid provides legal consultations, court representation, and awareness programs targeting financially vulnerable women.<sup>9</sup> In Palestine, the Women’s Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC) offers legal representation, social counseling, protection services, and guidance on accessing emergency resources.<sup>10</sup> A number of Egyptian civil society organizations similarly play a crucial role in filling the legal aid gap, including the Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance (CEWLA), which provides legal counseling, representation, and advocacy for women, with multiple locations across Egypt’s capital city. Collaborations with international partners often serve to assist local organizations in expanding their reach and capacity. For example, between 2008 and 2023, the UNDP supported the establishment of multiple legal aid offices across Egypt, which has notably increased access to legal services, with over 1.14 million individuals receiving assistance over that period, 70 percent of whom were women.<sup>11</sup>

Some countries have incorporated legal provisions that guarantee government-sponsored or subsidized legal aid to women who experience violence, alongside other protective measures, yet implementation is often constrained by funding shortages, limited personnel, bureaucratic obstacles, and sociocultural barriers. In Kuwait, for example, the government has established Al-Fanar Shelter, with its associated counseling center, to provide safe shelter for women alongside medical, psychological, and legal support services. The shelter, which became operational in 2022, continues to struggle, however, with limited financial and human resources and therefore

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<sup>9</sup> Justice Center for Legal Aid, Jordan, <https://jcla-org.com/en/homepage>.

<sup>10</sup> Women’s Center for Legal Aid and Counseling, Palestine, <https://www.wclac.org/en>.

<sup>11</sup> UNDP Rule of Law and Human Rights Global Programme, Egypt, <https://rolhr.undp.org/annualreport/2023/arab-states/egypt.html>.

inadequate capacity to meet the needs of women who experience violence.<sup>12</sup> In Tunisia, both government and civil-society run shelters have been established and offer legal aid services to support survivors of gender-based violence, and in 2020, the country adopted its first national procedure manual for women's shelters, providing uniform guidelines for shelter management and legal services.<sup>13</sup> Despite these efforts, challenges persist, including limited resources, regional disparities, and ineffective training for personnel.<sup>14</sup> A Human Rights Watch report on Tunisia, for example, revealed that only a small number of women are informed of their legal rights or referred to shelters or legal support centers for assistance.<sup>15</sup>

In practice, access for survivors of gender-based violence is often uneven, concentrated in urban centers, and largely inaccessible to rural or marginalized populations. Many national legal systems lack comprehensive provisions for legal aid, leaving women without the necessary resources to navigate the justice system effectively. Even where services exist, they are often insufficient, under-resourced, or not tailored to women's specific needs. Limited staffing and a lack of gender-sensitive training for legal professionals further limit effective representation and support, exacerbating challenges for survivors who require immediate legal assistance. Insufficient awareness and knowledge of legal rights and the real-or-perceived complexity of navigating the legal system often discourage many women from seeking justice.<sup>16</sup> Cultural and social factors further compound women's ability to seek justice, especially in remote or rural areas, in areas experiencing poverty, and among women with limited education.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Abolish 153, Musawah, and Harvard Program on Law and Society in the Muslim World, *Thematic Report on Muslim Family Law and Muslim Women's Rights in Kuwait*, May 2024, <https://www.musawah.org/resources/cedaw-thematic-report-on-kuwait-2024/>.

<sup>13</sup> See International Development Law Organization, "Manual for Women's Shelters in Tunisia Becomes Law," September 28, 2020, <https://www.idlo.int/news/manual-womens-shelters-tunisia-becomes-law>.

<sup>14</sup> See Human Rights Watch, "So What If He Hits You?" *Addressing Domestic Violence in Tunisia*, December 8, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/12/08/so-what-if-he-hit-you/addressing-domestic-violence-tunisia>.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> A recent study published by the Arab Barometer revealed general low levels of confidence in the police's ability to help women in cases of abuse in most countries, with the exception of Morocco and Tunisia. See Roche, MaryClare. *Gender-Based Violence and Sources of Support in the Middle East and North Africa*. Arab Barometer, March 2025. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/GBV-Mini-Report-EN.pdf>, [https://www.efi-rcso.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Policy%20Arabic%201\\_0.pdf](https://www.efi-rcso.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/Policy%20Arabic%201_0.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> See World Bank data on literacy rates by country: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=IA>.

The prohibitive cost of legal services continues to be a major barrier for economically disadvantaged women in accessing formal justice. In many communities, women, especially those who lack independent financial means and face a myriad of social and cultural constraints, hesitate to pursue their rights through the justice system. Across the Arab region, public legal aid is chronically underfunded, inconsistently available, and often subject to narrow eligibility criteria. Oxfam’s exploration of justice access in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Yemen underscores that poor and marginalized women in family law matters—particularly personal status cases—have extremely limited recourse, as neither waivers nor subsidized pro bono services are reliably provided outside of criminal defense.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, the provision of legal aid in many countries often fails to consider the distinct realities and needs of women. Lawyers, paralegals, and officials engaged in legal aid delivery frequently have little or no training in handling cases of gender-based violence or in gender-sensitive approaches. This gap in knowledge and sensitivity means that women seeking legal aid, particularly in cases of domestic violence, may not receive guidance that adequately protects their rights or addresses the unique complexities of their cases. For many women, especially those navigating issues tied to religion or traditions, the absence of adequate representation and gender-sensitive support undermines their confidence in legal aid as a conduit to justice.

Awareness of legal rights is a critical factor enabling women to effectively pursue justice and protection from gender-based violence (GBV). In many Arab countries, knowledge of laws related to domestic violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of GBV remains limited, particularly among women in rural areas and marginalized communities. Even where laws or support systems exist, insufficient dissemination of information, low public awareness campaigns, and societal norms that normalize violence often prevent women from understanding their rights or the remedies available to them, leaving many survivors without the tools or confidence to realize their rights. Access to clear and reliable information about legal rights is therefore closely tied to the effectiveness of support systems for survivors. Several countries have taken steps to integrate informational and educational measures within their legal frameworks, providing guidance on procedures, support services, and protection mechanisms. In contrast, in countries without specific

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<sup>18</sup> See Oxfam, *The Cost of Justice: Exploratory assessment on women’s access to justice in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Yemen*, 2018, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-cost-of-justice-exploratory-assessment-on-womens-access-to-justice-in-leban-620488>.

legislation on violence against women, reliable information is often provided informally by civil society organizations. Strengthening formal mechanisms for awareness-raising and ensuring that women can access clear, accurate information about their rights remains an essential step toward improving justice and protection across the region.

#### **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the well-documented exposure of women to gender-based violence, it is increasingly urgent to adopt comprehensive measures that not only protect women from harm but also ensure their ability to access justice and legal support. These measures should prioritize legal reforms, the provision of accessible and effective legal aid, preventive strategies, awareness-raising, and capacity-building for justice and support institutions, alongside mechanisms that enhance women's safety, empowerment, and ability to seek redress. The following recommendations focus specifically on actions that governments, policymakers, and civil society can take to strengthen women's access to legal aid:

##### **1. Strengthen legislative frameworks that protect women from violence and ensure support services that meet the needs of survivors.**

- Enact or amend comprehensive legislation addressing gender-based violence to establish national legal aid systems, ensuring state-sponsored, accessible, and free or affordable legal assistance tailored to the needs of women, including survivors of violence.

##### **2. Expand the availability of reliable legal aid and remove systemic and logistical impediments to access.**

- Establish state-funded, free or affordable legal aid services for women who experience violence, ensuring women can obtain legal counseling and representation in relevant criminal, civil, and family court proceedings, as well as administrative complaints.
- Expand access to marginalized and rural communities through mobile clinics and remote consultations, removing financial and geographic barriers to justice.
- Provide legal aid through diverse, accessible channels—such as hotlines, secure online platforms, and anonymous reporting or legal counseling options—to help women who

- experience violence or violent threats overcome reluctance to seek legal help and reduce any fear of stigma or further exposure to harm.
- Provide gender-sensitive training for legal professionals, including prosecutors and lawyers, to ensure cases involving gender-based violence are handled with adequate attentiveness, responsiveness, and a survivor-centered approach.
- 3. Encourage women’s access to legal aid services by integrating them within broader support networks.**
- Promote and encourage women’s utilization of legal aid services by integrating them within a broader framework of support services tailored to the needs of survivors of violence, such as medical assistance, mental health counseling, social assistance, and facilities that offer safe shelters, while ensuring that qualified and trained social workers are engaged to offer proper guidance and continuous support during any legal proceedings.
- 4. Increase awareness of women’s legal rights and the support systems available to survivors of violence.**
- Develop written and audiovisual materials that clearly communicate legal rights and procedures to GBV survivors and the wider community through TV, radio, digital channels and social media campaigns.
  - Offer targeted legal literacy workshops and justice-focused community outreach initiatives in schools, workplaces, shelters for women, and local community centers, especially for rural and marginalized groups, including foreign and domestic workers.
  - Train frontline responders (police, social workers, and health providers) to give accurate, survivor-centered information about legal rights and procedures.
- 5. Integrate civil society actors and women’s groups in policymaking and establish clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.**
- Establish mechanisms to ensure transparent and ongoing consultations with civil society and women’s groups, and engage them in the design, implementation, and review of policies and systems related to legal aid for women who experience gender-based violence.

- Create monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the reach and outcomes of legal aid and support services for women in GBV cases, and ensure ongoing accountability and improvement of state-sponsored services.

### **1. Develop and Expand Networks of International and Regional Collaboration and Mutual Support.**

- Establish formal partnerships with regional and international networks to exchange knowledge and expertise, design and implement joint programs, collaborate on co-funding projects, and conduct training initiatives that strengthen national capacities to provide sustainable legal support to women affected by gender-based violence.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS**

In summary, several key factors contribute to the gap in women’s access to legal aid and integrated legal support services in Arab countries. These include: (1) the lack of a legislative framework that guarantees standardized access to legal aid and support for women who experience gender-based violence; (2) limited availability of specialized legal services tailored to women’s needs, including trained legal professionals; (3) inadequate awareness among women – particularly in rural and remote areas – of their legal rights and available mechanisms and networks for obtaining legal aid, thereby reinforcing exclusion from justice systems; and (4) at the policymaking level, a general lack of systemic coordination and engagement with civil society organizations and women’s groups, who are often on the frontlines providing these services to women, combined with insufficient reliable data on access to legal aid.

Addressing these gaps requires sustained political will, long-term investment, and stronger partnerships between governments and civil society. Without such efforts, legal reforms risk remaining disconnected from women’s lived realities, and many survivors will continue to face barriers in seeking protection and justice. Strengthening comprehensive legal aid systems is therefore not only a matter of procedural fairness but also a cornerstone of broader gender equality and human rights commitments. Ensuring that women can access legal support when they need it most is essential for building safer, more just, and more inclusive societies across the Arab region.