Report

Expert group meeting on the theme “Shelters for survivors of violence: availability and accessibility study”
Beirut, 18-19 February 2019

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) organized an expert group meeting at the United Nations House in Beirut, on 18-19 February, to review the report entitled “Shelters for survivors of violence: availability and accessibility study”. The study was prepared by the ESCWA Centre for Women in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund—Arab States Regional Office, Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) and ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality.

The study highlights the importance of shelters as an integral element of a comprehensive response to violence against women. It provides a more detailed picture and a nuanced understanding of how shelters in the Arab region operate, and address issues such as the availability and accessibility of shelters in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen.

Participants reviewed the study, assessed its key findings and proposed policy recommendations. They also exchanged knowledge and good practices in the area of women’s shelters. This report summarizes the meeting discussions and highlights areas how to further enhance the study.
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Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Centre for Women (ECW) held an expert group meeting at the United Nations House in Beirut, on 18-19 February, to review “Shelters for survivors of violence: availability and accessibility study”, which was prepared by ECW in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund – Arab States Regional Office, Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) and ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality.

2. The publication offers a detailed picture and a nuanced understanding of how shelters operate in the Arab region and addresses the availability and accessibility of shelters for women and their children escaping violence in the countries of Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen. It highlights the importance of shelters as an integral element of a comprehensive response to violence against women. Despite limitations in the collection of data due to a limited number and some inconsistencies in responses, the study made it possible to provide a snapshot about shelters in the Arab region, a discussion that was missing from the literature on shelters in the region. Therefore, this study has been successful in bridging one of the knowledge gaps – a much needed step as States move towards acknowledging and designing programmes to address violence against women. The results of the questionnaire have raised concerns about the ability of existing shelters to provide support and their accessibility to all women. It also suggests that the protection element of shelters may be undermined by reconciliation services. For the future, it was suggested that a longer-term study be conducted at local levels across the Arab region to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of shelter services for women.

3. Experts who participated in the meeting discussed and assessed the study’s key findings and policy recommendations. They also exchanged knowledge and best practices in the area of women’s shelters. The following summarizes the discussions and presents the main recommendations.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Experts provided substantive inputs, including primary data on the study, validated its findings, and provided additional perspectives to improve its analysis. They reviewed each chapter in detail and made the following recommendations.

A. CONTENT RECOMMENDATIONS

5. The discussions produced the following recommendations to enhance the content of the study:

Chapter I

6. Enhance the chapter by providing an introductory paragraph on the general background of addressing violence against women in the Arab region. Consistently use the term “survivor” in the study instead of “victim” and explain the rationale for the usages of these terms in the footnotes. Similarly, systematically use the term “violence” instead of “abuse”, also with further explanation in the footnotes on the variances between the two terms. Clarify how most women’s shelters have emerged in the Arab region (for example, from non-governmental organizations, to provide specific services, etc.). Ensure that the introduction is concise and does not exceed four pages, listing key arguments and keeping the methodology at the end of the chapter.

Chapter II

7. Consider utilizing the Istanbul Convention as a reference when creating an Arab regional convention and examine all types of shelters with a clear definition of each type shelter. Adopt a structure that starts with the due diligence standard, then transitions to protection mechanisms and then moves to standards of shelters, highlighting experiences from the Arab region. Dedicate a section for discussing State actions in shelter
services. Address the issue of tribal laws that are common in the State of Palestine and Jordan, proposing approaches to solve issues within these structures and highlight the rationale for State standards for all shelters.

Chapter III

8. Examine how women access shelters (for example, through self-referral). Highlight that the findings in the study are indicative and that data only provides examples which cannot be generalised as representative statistical data. Therefore, it is suggested to eliminate the numerical data and include it only in the annex and instead, present more case studies from the region.

Chapter IV

9. The chapter should clarify who is entitled to establish a shelter and what is the admission process. This would mean examining laws that hinder women’s access to shelters (for example, male guardianship; the right to travel; custody over children; marriage and divorce; laws on adultery) and to identify Arab States that provide regulations for shelters and laws that protect women from violence. The chapter should discuss the problem of discriminatory regulations that employed women face when they are absent from work while utilizing shelters. It would also benefit from including real life stories from shelters and inserting them as boxes in the study.

B. STRUCTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

10. The following recommendations were made to improve the structure of chapter V. The chapter should start with a discussion of international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Istanbul Convention, then move to a discussion of the importance of national action plans, and finally continue with the need to harmonize national law with international legal frameworks. The chapter would benefit from looking into the 5Ps approach to due diligence, meaning prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment and the provision of redress, and consider the implementation of such elements when conducting legislative awareness-raising.

II. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

A. OPENING

11. ECW Director Ms. Mehrnaz El Awady, opened the meeting and welcomed all participants. She thanked the participants for reviewing the draft study and for participating in the meeting. She introduced the main pillars of ECW’s work: violence against women; women, peace and security; and gender justice.

12. Ms. El Awady commented that the research on women’s shelters was a challenging endeavour due to the inability to conduct fieldwork, as well as the somewhat reluctant cooperation of States in the region to share data with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The main objective of the two-day meeting was to enhance the overall quality of the study. After short presentations of each chapter, discussions took place that were used to identify gaps in the draft study and to propose solutions to bridge these gaps. After a brief introduction of the participants, Ms. El Awady expressed gratitude to ESCWA’s partners, WAVE, UNFPA and ABAAD, who contributed their experience and expertise to the study.

B. SESSION 1: SETTING THE SCENE

13. The ECW focal point for the study, Ms. Nada Darwazeh, opened the first session of the meeting by presenting a general overview of how the study was conducted as well as the key information that can be retrieved from the study. The starting point was to examine existing legal frameworks, such as policies and laws, that were linked to women’s shelters in the Arab region and review whether these were aligned with international frameworks. Furthermore, the study looked at multisectoral services with the aim of assessing
whether laws on women’s shelters, already exist or that were about to be enacted, were in accordance with international frameworks and, if not, how they might be amended accordingly. The speaker highlighted the capacity of ESCWA, as an intergovernmental organization, to assist with concrete recommendations that could facilitate the policymaking processes for member States.

14. The participants discussed the need for shelters in the Arab region as well as the challenges faced in the preparatory steps of the study. It was noted that the field of research on violence against women in the Arab region, including women’s shelters, was negligible. Additionally, the number of shelters in the Arab region was estimated to be around only 50-60 shelters, which was insufficient to meet the needs. Shelters in the Arab region have limited resources and are often developed as ad hoc initiatives. Ms. Darwazeh pointed out that most shelters emerged from NGOs that also provided direct contact with women victims of violence who were seeking legal counselling and other services.

15. The speaker stressed evidence that demonstrated that shelters for women undoubtedly make a difference. Case studies from the United Kingdom and Canada have shown that shelters have improved the situations of women who have experienced violence. Research had also shown that women who accessed shelters benefited from safety services and other amenities such as health care, parenting counselling, etc. It was argued that the availability, accessibility, acceptability and effectiveness of shelters would be strengthened by bringing operations in line with international frameworks.

16. The analysis framework used in the study developed by Ms. El Awady examined whether States had implemented due diligence standards at the national level and if they had ratified international commitments. Forefront in the study’s analysis was the availability and accessibility of shelters: the number of shelters available, how women access shelters and were there barriers that hindered their access.

17. In terms of methodology, the study looked at other international cases and good practices, data collected from questionnaires and relevant laws. Two types of questionnaires were used: the first questionnaire was a short survey distributed to national women’s machineries, while the second, more extensive survey, was distributed through ABAAD and UNFPA at the country level. The exact number of shelters that received these questionnaires was not known. In general, the response rate of the survey was low and responses in the questionnaires exhibited several inconsistencies when collated. Hence, the limitations on data generated some restraints that needed to be discussed in terms of the validity of the data.

18. The expert group discussed the use of the term “survivor” as opposed to “victim” in the study. Ms. Camelia Proca, Ms. Randa Siniora and Ms. Fatima Outaleb, representing organizations in Romania, the State of Palestine and Morocco respectively, argued in favour of the term “survivor”, explaining that it was more inclusive, and the term “victim” implied a lack of agency and victim blaming. Ms. Janet McDermott from Women’s Aid in Bristol, England, and the consultant for the study Ms. Hilary Fisher, raised the point that some women wanted to be acknowledged as victims. The expert group agreed on using the term “survivor” in the study with an informational footnote that referred to the use of “victims”. It was also agreed that the study refer to the term “violence” and not “abuse” with the addition of an explanatory footnote on the meaning of “abuse”.

19. An amendment of the structure of the first chapter suggested by Ms. El Awady was agreed. Accordingly, the first page of the introduction would include the objective of the study and the problem that the study aims to solve including the key arguments, followed by frameworks and a discussion of the due diligence standard. The chapter should not exceed four pages and should end with the methodology. Ms. McDermott suggested including paragraphs on the overall regional context (meaning political, cultural, religious and community) of the lived experiences of women who face violence.

20. Ms. El Awady summarized the content that comprised the first chapter: (1) addressing violence against women as a significant problem in the Arab region; (2) noting that violence against women requires a comprehensive approach including the 5 Ps (prevention, protection, prosecution punishment, and the provision
of redress); (3) presenting options for abused women, including a discussion of stigmatization that prevents women from accessing shelters; (4) presenting the main objective of the study and its key arguments; and (5) concluding the chapter with the methodology.

21. Lastly, some examples from the Arab region and elsewhere were presented as part of the discussion on why shelters matter. In most cases, the driving factor for women to seek out a shelter was to ensure their safety. Ms. Siniora, General Director of the Women’s Center for Legal Aid and Counselling in the State of Palestine, elaborated that initially women tend to access shelters in order to seek protection and, once accommodated, request a specific set of services such as legal advice and counselling. This type of procedure was reaffirmed among the experts present in the meeting, internationally as well as regionally. Ms. El Awady asked the participants from the Jordan, Morocco and the State of Palestine to provide brief paragraphs with country case studies on the relevance of shelters and how they were established to be added as textboxes in chapter 1.

C. SESSION 2: THE ROLE OF SHELTERS IN A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

22. The consultant, Ms. Fisher, introduced the second chapter which focused on international human rights instruments that establish the importance of shelters as part of an integrated response to violence against women and shows how they are linked to States’ obligations to address violence against women. Specifically, the chapter was focused on the 2017 thematic report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, CEDAW General Recommendation no. 35, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPFA) and the Istanbul Convention. Secondly, it reviewed international and regional treaties that highlight the importance placed on shelter provision as a crucial element of protection and prevention for women escaping violence.

23. A structure for the second chapter proposed by Ms. El Awady was approved by the expert group: (1) a discussion of the due diligence standard (the 5 Ps); (2) a discussion of protection mechanisms; (3) a discussion of shelter standards; (4) a discussion of experiences from the Arab region.

24. The chapter reviews a variety of shelters ranging from general shelters, to domestic violence shelters to specialized women’s shelters. Ms. Darwazeh pointed out that it was useful to examine what type of shelters are available in the region as well as in the international context and whether similarities or differences could be detected. How shelters were initially established needed to be discussed by examining whether they started off as part of a grassroots movement or a government initiative. Moreover, she pointed out the study must provide a clearer definition of shelters.

25. It was further highlighted that protection orders needed further discussion as it was not clear how protection orders were an important addition to shelter. Ms. Proca, Director of the Association for Liberty and Equality of Gender in Romania, stressed the relevance of discussing protection orders in the study more thoroughly. She highlighted two cases in Romania that underlined the danger of competing options. First, the budgeting allocations of women’s shelters were increasingly shifting towards protection orders, once they had become available. Secondly, funds were also spent on establishing shelters for perpetrators, clearly putting rehabilitation in the context of caring and accommodation instead of prosecution. These examples should be used in the study to highlight that certain options should not be privileged over others.

26. Participants shared examples of the significance of family cultural contexts. Noting that women were often expected to be reintegrated into their families after incidents of violence, shelters may actually reinforce this practice. Ms. Proca mentioned that shelters in Romania were frequently embedded in a religious orthodox and patriarchal setting in which the underlying purpose of shelters was often to reunite the woman with her family. In Malta, where traditional family structures predominated, shelters emerged quite late as a solution. In the cases of Jordan and the State of Palestine, Ms. Siniora added, the customs of tribalism, whereby matters of violence were traditionally solved according to tribal law, needed to be taken into account as a constraining factor.
27. The case of shelters in Lebanon was introduced. In Lebanon, shelters were usually set up by NGOs because the State had sidestepped responsibility for the issue and left the response and regulations to sectarian groups. Ms. Jihane Isseid, Emergency Safe Housing Program Manager at ABAAD, described the different types of shelters available in Lebanon, namely specific shelters for women as survivors of gender-based violence, shelters for protecting children, shelters for homeless children or children in need and shelters for homeless and people in weak socioeconomic circumstances.

28. It was noted that in the Arab region, shelters were mostly established by women and later on supported by governments. Ms. Darwazeh stressed the point that civil society and governments needed to negotiate with each other regarding government-issued national standards. Accordingly, national standards needed to comprise the experiences of these grassroots women’s movements to form standards that are responsive to survivors.

29. Ms. Fisher concluded the session by stating that to create sustainability, the government’s support in funding needed to continue beyond a three-year time frame as shelters struggled to manage without support. When analysing the data on shelters, it was clear that those shelters that received resources from the government tended to benefit, as an example shared of a shelter in Bahrain aptly illustrated.

D. SESSION 3: OVERVIEW OF SHELTERS IN THE ARAB REGION

30. The third session discussed the survey data that was collected from shelters and national women’s machineries in the Arab region. Ms. Fisher presented some examples from the qualitative data, as well as obstacles and discrepancies that were linked to the methodological procedure and results of the surveys. She also highlighted the contrast between shelters run by NGOs and government-run shelters. Most government-run shelters receive partial funding from the government while also relying on resources from donors, which was seen in the case of Iraq. The only shelter run solely by the government and with full government funding was in Bahrain. Information on shelter staff was limited: only Iraq and Saudi Arabia had provided data. The majority of shelter staff held higher education degrees, except in Algeria. The number of staff members that specialized in the field of violence against women was marginal throughout the region. Furthermore, the number of child specialists was low, yet many shelters did provide some childcare services, which was exemplified in the case of Yemen. NGO-run shelters tended to provide more trainings and capacity-building measures compared to government-run shelters. Most of the shelters in the Arab region accepted self-referrals, except for Bahrain and the State of Palestine where victims were required to report their cases to the authorities first, which then referred them to shelter services.

31. Ms. El Awady pointed out that chapter 3 faced several methodological challenges. Due to the reluctance of Arab governments to share data with NGOs, the response rate of the surveys was low. Secondly, which NGOs received questionnaires was not known. The survey received 13 responses in total and these had several inconsistencies. Consequently, she stressed that the findings in the study were only indicative as they provided examples but could not be generalised as statistical data. For the study to advance, the methodological shortcomings in chapter three needed to be addressed without weakening the argument too much. The expert group agreed on omitting specific data numbers, presenting them instead in an annex to the study and to include the indicative conclusions that can be derived from the data.

32. The third session concluded with the proposal to include case studies from the Morocco and State of Palestine in the chapter.

E. SESSION 4: NATIONAL LAWS INFLUENCING THE EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SHELTERS

33. The fourth session discussed the legal system in the Arab region in terms of policies and regulations for women’s shelters. Ms. Darwazeh presented an overview on national laws and the extent to which they influenced the efficiency of shelters. Several States in the Arab region, such as Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon,
Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia as well as the Kurdistan region of Iraq, have stand-alone laws on violence against women.

34. However, these laws were often narrow in focus as certain forms of violence, such as marital rape, economic violence and psychological violence, were not acknowledged as violence. It was also noted that along with laws on violence against women, there were several legal barriers that hinder women’s access to shelter.

35. The study specifically looked at the three factors of the definition of violence adopted by these laws, the scope of protection and the scope of provision of shelters. A broad set of laws and regulations impacted women’s access to shelter. In many States the admission of women into shelters was regulated via certain ministries or via criminal justice channels. These regulations could have a negative impact on the accessibility of shelters. Furthermore, male guardianship impeded women’s movement (meaning her right to travel) which in turn hindered women’s access to shelters.

36. The expert group discussed the absence of legislation and the discriminatory aspect of current legislation and regulations that impeded the efficiency and accessibility of shelters in the Arab region. The State of Palestine noted that all steps in a shelter’s admission process had to be reported to government authorities, sometimes to the detriment of the survivor. An example provided by Mr. Hakam Matalka of Jordan’s National Council for Family Affairs raised the problem of employed women in Jordan who feared losing their jobs due to accessing women’s shelters while working. Real-life examples of women who faced obstacles in accessing shelters in Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco were shared and proposed to be included as text boxes in the study.

F. SESSION 5: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

37. The discussions resulted in the following policy recommendations:

(a) Reinforce the adherence to international frameworks to combat violence against women, particularly CEDAW and the Optional Protocol to CEDAW;

(b) Ensure States are periodically reporting to international treaty bodies and responding to CEDAW Committee recommendations;

(c) Encourage States to ratify the Istanbul Convention;

(d) Include reference to addressing violence against women protection in national constitutions;

(e) Introduce specific laws against violence against women that also call for the creation of shelters and regulate their work;

(f) Promote a national strategy on violence against women addressing the 5 Ps of a State’s due diligence (prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment, and the provision of redress);

(g) Involve NGOs and civil society in developing a national strategy on violence against women.

(h) Define clear standards as part of the national action plan;

(i) Acknowledge that both protection orders and shelters are important approaches that can be applied simultaneously to enhance the protection of women;

(j) Raise awareness of shelters in the region.
G. CLOSING REMARKS

38. Ms. El Awady thanked participants for their active participation and valuable inputs. She indicated that the final version of the study will be shared with participants once it is finalised.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE

39. The meeting was held at the United Nations House in Beirut, on 18 and 19 February 2019.

B. ATTENDANCE

40. The meeting brought together a group of international experts from the non-governmental and academic sector and regional experts in the field of women’s shelters. The annex to the present report provides a list of participants.
Annex*

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