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Arabic version

The Impact of the COVID19 Crisis on the Fragile Situation of Children in Tunisia

Prepared by

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This research paper is a contribution conducted by the participant Ahlam Soualhia within the “Policy Dialogue Capacity Building” course as part of the “Med Dialogue for Rights and Equality” programme.

This paper seeks to shed the light on the problem of violence against children amid the ongoing Corona crisis in Tunisia, as well as, its continuous preventive measures applied by the Tunisian government for more than a year and a half since the emergence of the pandemic. This can be done through trying to analyse the context of the problem and the nature of the effects of the pandemic and its preventive measures that are associated with the restrictions of the spread of the virus on children’s rights and the domestic violence they are subjected to, in addition to identifying the possibilities and opportunities to promote them, together with proposing some recommendations to address this phenomenon.

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This contribution is within the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue Programme’s publication of contributions made by five participants at the end of the “Capacity Building on Policy Dialogue” course. This course is focused on experiences of policy dialogues, assessment of opportunities and constraints, and analysis of the mapping cases of the policy dialogue in the Med-space countries, concerning the topics of economic and social inequality, as well as democracy and local governance.

*Note: These contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the programme; they only express the views of the participants .



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Index

Introduction	3
Context of the problem.....	3
Constraints and Opportunities.....	4
Recommendations	5



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Introduction

There is no doubt that the crisis caused by the COVID19 pandemic has posed great challenges to societies, especially those characterised by the fragility of their economic and social systems, including Tunisia, where families have been economically, socially and psychologically affected as a result of the lockdown and the prolonged curfew hours that were decided by the Tunisian government since the first week of the spread of the virus mid-March 2021. The aim was to reduce the likelihood of being infected by the virus as well as its spread. This lockdown has led to the exposure of large proportions of children to the risk of domestic violence as a result of social isolation and its impact on the employment of parents and hence the economic stability of the family. In addition, the high levels of anxiety and fear caused by the virus have contributed to the recording of increased stress levels appearing in the most vulnerable families; thus, growing risks of violence.

This paper seeks to shed the light on the problem of violence against children amid the ongoing Corona crisis in Tunisia, as well as, the continuous preventive measures applied by the Tunisian government for more than a year and a half since the emergence of the pandemic. Besides, societies around the world are trying to mitigate its effects, both in the short and long term which is done by trying to analyse the context of the problem and the nature of the effects of the pandemic and its preventive measures that are associated to the restrictions of the spread of the virus on children's rights and the domestic violence they are subjected to, It is also done through identifying the possibilities and opportunities to promote them, together with proposing some recommendations to address this phenomenon.

Context of the problem

It must be admitted that the Corona crisis had a negative impact on the situation of young children in Tunisia, since the preventive measures imposed to limit the spread of the virus led to the confinement of children in their homes, isolating them from people, social circles, and educational resources that can help them such as school, nursery or club ..etc. which resulted in them being subjected to psychological, moral and physical violence and subsequently exacerbating their already fragile situation. Additionally, the social distancing, the school, and business closures along with restrictions put on travel and movement may reduce the transmission of infectious diseases, but they may also increase the risk of violence against children.

Violence and exposure to violence in the family context are among the most serious forms of abuse children are exposed to, and these forms of abuse can generally include physical abuse, psychological abuse or emotional abuse. According to a



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UNICEF report in early 2019¹, nearly 90% of Tunisian children are subjected to domestic violence namely physically punishing them at least once a month. This can be considered part of a serious global health and social problem.

Constraints and Opportunities

Despite the existence of a legal and international framework that seeks to restrict the phenomenon of domestic violence against children in Tunisia, as well as, the attention given by local and international organisations to children's rights, there are still some restrictions that impede the activation of this protection. These restrictions exist especially in the context of focusing attention on the health and medical aspect related to the pandemic blockade.

Legal and international framework to protect children's rights

With regard to laws and agreements related to the situation of children in Tunisia, there are a number of laws and articles that guarantee the rights of children not to be subjected to domestic violence, including:

- International Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CIDE) / UNICEF,
- Law. 95-92 of November 9, 1995, relating to the publication of the Child Protection Code
- Child Protection Strategy, which was formulated in 2016 by the Ministry of Women, Family and Children².

¹ UNICEF MENA, Violent Discipline in the Middle East and North Africa Region A statistical analysis of household survey data - January 2019 <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/violent-discipline-middle-east-and-north-africa-region>

² Ministry of Women, Family, Children and the Elderly, 2016, Integrated Public Policy for Child Protection 2016-2025

<http://www.femmes.gov.tn/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AC/>



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Lack of or the absence of encouragement from international organisations on monitoring child abuse phenomenon in the context of the pandemic

Despite the efforts of many international organisations to promote and ensure the respect of children's rights, it is noticeable that there has been a decrease in reports of the follow-up of abuse or neglect of children in Tunisia by local or international organisations since the beginning of the epidemic. Thus, little is known about the extent of the phenomenon of violence faced by children in their homes during periods of compulsory domestic isolation and the decline of social, educational, and recreational circles. Consequently, this entails the need for a rapid intervention through discovering the contexts of this danger and exploring the factors that can increase violence against children and youth in order to be able to treat these phenomena and their negative effects on children and the process of community integration in the post-pandemic period, as well as, the preventive measures.

Recommendations

This paper seeks to present a number of initiatives and tangible measures to limit the spread of violence against children in light of the crisis of the Coronavirus, as well as, the impact of the preventive measures applied, headed by:

- 1- Unifying efforts between various government structures, with the aim of reviewing old laws, and working on a new draft law dedicated to protecting children which seek to reduce violence against them, especially amid the Corona crisis and the impact of its preventive measures on them. It is a project that will probably never see the light of day without the approval and common action of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children with its various structures, as well as, civil society organisations and associations concerned with promoting children's rights. This can happen immediately upon diagnosing the situation and addressing this problem.
- 2- The government's development of policies that include urgent measures to enable children to develop in light of profound changes, including the impact of the COVID preventive measures on them, given that defending and protecting their rights is a top priority.