

Syria Country Office

COVID-19 Humanitarian Response Flash Update #7

1 - 31 August 2020



Picture Credit : UNFPA - Syria

Situation Overview

As of September 15, 2020, the Syrian Ministry of Health (MoH) has reported 3,654 COVID-19 cases across Syria: 2,602 active, 889 recoveries and 163 registered deaths¹. The first positive case was announced on 22 March 2020, with the first fatality reported on 29 March 2020.

According to the Syrian Ministry of Health (MoH), as of 21 August, 76 healthcare workers (four percent of reported cases) have tested positive for COVID-19, an increase of 31 health workers since the last report on 04 August.² This highlights the particular risks faced by healthcare workers; and underscores the potential the already fragile and overstretched healthcare capacity to be further compromised. The Syrian healthcare system is unable to absorb all suspected cases and adapt wards to accommodate increased numbers of COVID-19 patients.

In light of an increase of COVID-19 cases in various areas, humanitarian access and border crossings remain impacted as authorities, as well as neighboring countries continue to implement or re-enforce precautionary measures. Most land borders into Syria remain closed with some limited exemptions, including commercial and relief shipments, humanitarian and commercial cargo, humanitarian personnel, students, and medical cases³.

A recent inter-agency socio-economic impact analysis of COVID-19 that revealed that COVID-19 and the lockdown, in particular, seem to have exacerbated previous gender norms, roles and responsibilities but had little impact on the decision-making processes in daily life. The traditional role of women cleaning the house became more burdensome and complex due to the increased need of disinfection and sanitation due to the fear of COVID in light of a lack of information on how the virus spreads. Other domestic tasks like cooking and caring for family members also increased as well as the mental stress involved in being responsible for additional family members present in the house, including those with disabilities. This added to the challenges facing women as a result of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown. In addition, there is increased risk of child labour, GBV, early marriage and other forms of exploitation. People with disabilities are also faced with challenges accessing health services. Precautionary measures that included movement restrictions and suspension of many businesses in various sectors have adversely impacted the already dire humanitarian situation.



Immediate Response

UNFPA continues to work with key line ministries and implementing partners (IPs) to ensure continuity of reproductive health (RH) and gender-based violence (GBV) services, while ensuring that health and social workers as well as beneficiaries are protected from COVID-19. UNFPA response includes provision of maternal and SRH services for pregnant and lactating women, operation of WGSS', distribution of SRH and dignity kits (both male and female), distribution of hygiene kits, e-voucher system for hygiene supplies, community awareness raising and referrals to both RH and GBV services.

¹ [The Syrian Ministry of Health COVID-19 Cases Dashboard](#)

² https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/FINAL%203%20DRAFT%20COVID-19_Update%20No.%208.pdf

³ [Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response Update No. 09 - 21 August 2020](#)



Advancing Dignity and Protecting Women & Gender Based Violence (GBV)

During this period, UNFPA supported the following:

- GBV awareness sessions continued to be provided during this reporting period, at the women's and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) and by the integrated GBV/SRH mobile teams. The sessions covered: the effects of denial of resources and opportunities, early marriage, gynaecological infections, contraceptives, social and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and methods of prevention. The mobile teams distributed awareness brochures on the COVID-19 pandemic and provided health and psychological counseling. Participants were also provided with information about the services provided by the UNFPA-supported WGSS and clinics. In all the awareness sessions organized, basic preventive measures against the COVID-19 are explained before the beginning of each session; emphasizing on the need to wear masks, the importance of social distancing and awareness on the risks of the virus. UNFPA mobile teams also conducted awareness sessions in health centers and in schools such as Beit Sahem, Rural Damascus, targeting adolescent girls aged between 10-14 years. At the WGSS', the number of awareness sessions are held with a few beneficiaries at a time, considering preventive measures of COVID-19. In some WGSS, the staff and mobile team distributed brochures about COVID-19 while posters on COVID-19 were posted on several walls by the mobile teams. GBV awareness raising activities also continued to be provided through online platforms.
- UNFPA caseworkers continue to provide individual psychosocial (PSS) support and GBV case management at the WGSS', with staff rotation measures in place to ensure adherence to COVID-19 prevention measures. In some WGSS, beneficiaries were provided with facemasks before participating in activities while maintaining spacing to ensure social distancing. During this reporting period, 36 out of the 48 WGSS established by UNFPA continued to operate providing individual counseling and GBV case management to those at risk including GBV survivors. UNFPA implementing partners noted an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence and early marriage especially in: Hassia camp, Hassia industrial camp, Hussainiya camp, Wadi Majar farms, and Shamsin.
- Vocational trainings such as: literacy course, English literacy course, computer course, sweets and pastry course, first aid, sewing, hairdressing, and handcrafting were provided with a minimum number of beneficiaries in each course considering the preventive measures for COVID-19. In some locations, vocational trainings were provided through online platforms, where the trainers shared videos and illustrative images. Online links were also provided to enable women interested in vocational training to register in time.
- UNFPA continues to provide essential assistance targeting pregnant and lactating women in partnership with WFP and UNICEF using the WFP e-voucher system, to support women to buy hygiene items that they may need from designated stores in Dara'a governorate. The most purchased items during this reporting period include: soap, shampoo, diapers, detergents and paper towels. A Total of **1,682 pregnant and lactating women** were reached in the month of August.
- **3 Community Wellbeing Centers (CWCs)**⁴ continued to provide integrated GBV and RH services while ensuring the respect of precautionary measures against COVID-19. The two centers in Sweida were suspended temporarily due to COVID-19 cases, and during this time services were provided online to make sure beneficiaries in need could still be reached with the centers' services (medical consultations and awareness, COVID-19 awareness, PSS and case management, vocational training, and awareness raising activities related to RH and GBV).

⁴ A community wellbeing centre is a space which offers comprehensive GBV prevention, awareness-raising and care services to women and girls, and general capacity building to enhance their livelihood opportunities and reduce their vulnerabilities. This is in addition to the provision of SRH and GBV services including PSS services to IDPs and host communities including integrating men and involving them in GBV prevention.

- **The Family Protection Unit (FPU)**⁵ in Rural Damascus continued to provide integrated GBV and RH services both for the residents of the shelter at the unit and through the external clinics. The FPU closed the external clinics temporarily as a necessary measure due to the detection of COVID-19 cases among the beneficiaries; however, an online intervention programme (consultations, awareness activities, etc) continued, to ensure that the services can still reach the beneficiaries in need. The shelter and the internal services for the residents continued uninterrupted. To compensate for the closure of the external clinics due to the COVID 19, and to adhere to measures of social distancing, an online group of approximately 195 beneficiaries was created for the FPU. Vocational training visual and audio materials on topics such as: hairdressing, cooking, sewing, life skills, literacy classes, recreational activities such as aerobics are disseminated by trainers weekly through the group. In addition, awareness-raising on topics such as: COVID-19, stress management, raising children through different development stages, etc. is being implemented in the online group by social workers.
- The staff and beneficiaries of UNFPA supported facilities have been provided with hygiene kits including masks, disinfectants, and sterilizers, as a protective measure against the spread of COVID-19. All activities were done in accordance with social distancing measures, such as keeping the numbers of participants to a minimum and ensuring adequate spacing between beneficiaries.



Advancing Access to Reproductive Health (RH)

During this period, UNFPA supported the following:

- UNFPA continues to conduct awareness-raising sessions on SRH topics, including COVID-19 infection and prevention measures in RH static clinics and mobile teams, targeting; women, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women. The sessions are being conducted in: Damascus, Rural Damascus, Dara'a, Sweida, Quneitra, Hama, Lattakia, Homs, Hama, Tartous, Aleppo, Al-Hassakeh and Deir-ez-Zor. The awareness raising methods varied from conducting individual sessions, distributing awareness brochures issued by WHO and broadcasting messages. A total of **10,047 beneficiaries** were reached through IPs with awareness raising, including messages on COVID-19.
- UNFPA supported the MoH-RH National Program, in 2 trainings for midwives and physicians working in public health facilities on: high risk pregnancy care and techniques to manage the high risk pregnancy, nutrition for pregnant and lactating women. **30 health service providers** were trained.
- UNFPA was present in all the health-sector meetings during the last period and presented the update of COVID-19 emergency response of UNFPA in addition to the standards of reproductive health services.
- The UNFPA team joined WHO and other UN agencies on an inter-agency mission to Al-Hol camp, Al-Hassakeh governorate, in order to evaluate and monitor health facilities from 4 to 10 August, 2020.

⁵ A family Protection Unit functions as a shelter for women and girl survivors of more serious cases of GBV. The unit is open 24/7 to receive new and urgent cases and sometimes life-saving, services, it also serves as a temporary residence for the women and children who sleep, eat, and receive services.



Enhancing the Livelihoods of Young People

During this period, UNFPA supported activities as follows:

- As part of celebrating the International Youth Day on the 12th of August, UNFPA held 2 dialogue sessions in Hama. The first session was an intergenerational dialogue between young people and elderly people on; the impact of COVID-19 on both groups and the role of young people in raising awareness and supporting elderly people in their community. The second dialogue was held among young people on the role of youth in raising awareness amongst their peers on COVID-19, and in promoting gender equality and building peace. Protection measures and social distancing were applied during the sessions.
- UNFPA IP carried out a dialogue in Dara'a / Al-Hirak area) where young people discussed the spread of COVID-19 and its impact on young people's lives, study, and the role of youth in overcoming its effects.
- A total of **640 young people** were reached with awareness-raising sessions related to COVID-19 through various online platforms by UNFPA IPs. The activities covered topics related to COVID-19 prevention measures and GBV with a focus on the young people's role in raising awareness on COVID-19 amongst their peer groups. Additionally, awareness raising activities were conducted in the Youth Friendly Spaces⁶ (YFS), through outreach teams, and social media platforms.



Operational and Logistic Support

UNFPA continues to provide family planning methods to MoH, MoHE and implementing partners.

- UNFPA has supplied and delivered different types of dignity kits and sanitary napkins in Damascus and North-West Syria (NWS) in response to the urgent needs in Damascus, Deir-ez-zour and Al-Raqqa. The items that were distributed include : **22,772 sanitary napkins, 10,900 hygiene COVID-19 Kits, 6,949 female dignity Kits, 500 pregnant and lactating women kits, 1175 adolescent girls' dignity kits, and 3,192 male dignity kits.**
- UNFPA supported MoH-Health institution in Damascus with protective equipment and supplies: **10 manual sanitizer dispensers, 30 alcohol-based hand gel sanitizers, 100 liters of alcohol-based hand gel sanitizer and waste bins.**
- UNFPA supported MoH and the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) with **3,750 boxes of examination gloves** as part of the emergency response for COVID-19 for national health workers.

⁶ A Youth Friendly Space (YFS) mobilises communities to provide safe spaces for young people, with programming which could include education activities, life skills trainings, psychosocial support, awareness raising and referral to other services.



During the reporting period (1-31 August 2020), UNFPA achieved the following (GBV & RH & Youth):

- Beneficiaries for RH awareness raising, including COVID-19 related topics: **10,047**
- Young people reached with awareness raising on COVID-19 related topics: **640**
- RH static clinics: **87**
- RH mobile teams: **74**
- Psycho-social support and counseling on COVID-19 provided to: **19,779 beneficiaries**
- Awareness raising on GBV and COVID-19 provided to: **16,861 beneficiaries**
- Vocational training provided to: **892 women and girls**
- Number of supported Women's and Girls' Safe Spaces operating: **36**
- Number of Community Wellbeing Centers operational: **3**
- Number of integrated mobile teams operating: **4**
- Number of Family Protection Units operational: **1**
- Number of GBV mobile teams operating: **100**
- Number of distributed sanitary napkins: **20,164**
- Number of Dignity Kits⁷ distributed: **2,953**



From the beginning of COVID-19 response (1st of April-31st of August), UNFPA achieved the following (RH & GBV & Youth):

- Beneficiaries reached with PSS and counseling related to COVID-19: **187,895**
- Beneficiaries reached with awareness raising sessions on COVID-19: **166,091**
- Beneficiaries reached with sanitary napkins packs and dignity kits: **101,345**

Next in response:

- UNFPA signed an agreement with WFP in Syria to scale up the e-voucher cash based transfer mechanism delivered via SCOPE card, targeting pregnant and lactating women across Syria. UNFPA will provide additional top-ups using the WFP e-voucher system to support women to buy hygiene items that they may need from designated stores in: Aleppo, Damascus, Dara'a, Deir Ez-Zor, Hama, Hassakeh, Homs, Latakia, Quneitra, Raqqa, Rural Damascus and Tartous governorates of Syria; with potential for expansion to other affected areas. This initiative is based on a successful pilot that UNFPA and WFP have implemented in Dara'a. With the scale-up, the programme aims to provide additional support to 70,000 extremely vulnerable families so they can purchase nutritious food and hygiene products. The UNFPA investment in the scale-up amounts to USD 3.37 million for the period of September-December 2020⁸.
- The review of the GBV Sub-sector strategy and workplan for 2020-2021 in line with COVID-19 responses is planned to start in September.

⁷ [UNFPA standard dignity kit items](#)

⁸ [UNFPA and WFP scale up the e-voucher emergency cash-based transfer mechanism targeting pregnant and lactating women \(PLW\) across Syria](#)



Challenges

- A total of 26 mobile team activities in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Sweida, Qunaetrah , Raqqa, Aleppo and Al-Hasskeh were suspended due to COVID-19 containment measures.
- A total of 12 WGSS in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Sweida, Qunaetrah , Raqah and Alhaskeh were partially suspended because of suspected cases of COVID-19.
- Some IPs were unable to refer GBV cases to some centres in locations such as Al-Zarha, as a result of disruption of services due to the COVID-19.
- UNFPA implementing partners noted that in the camp settings such as Al-Husayniyah and Shamsin, affordability of masks remains a huge concern.
- Prolonged power outages have affected online sessions organized by UNFPA IPs.
- The very high transportation costs are still a burden and an obstacle for beneficiaries to access services.
- The volatility of the exchange rate (and banking challenges in Lebanon), and other factors that impact the import of certain medical supplies critical to an effective COVID-19 response are still a concern.



Immediate Needs

The financial gap for COVID-19 response is estimated at : \$879,000

A Dream Come True



Picture Credit: UNFPA Syria

“I gave birth to my first child at the age of fifteen, and after four years, I got divorced. I had my moments of severe pain, but there was a light at the end of the tunnel for me” Samah started recalling her story.

Samah, a 31-year-old woman, has been forced by her difficult circumstances to leave university and seek employment to generate income during this difficult time in Syria. Since childhood, Samah’s dream had been to be a hairdresser, and she was looking for an opportunity to make her dream come true. Her friend told her that there were women and girls safe spaces (WGSS) in Qamishly that offer a variety of vocational training courses for free. Samah did not hesitate to enroll in the women’s hairdressing course, taking into account that the private hairdressing schools and salons offering this training were expensive for Samah, and she could not afford the fees of the course.

"And that is where my success story began, when you work with your hands and feel your creativity is recognizable, it gives you a sense of satisfaction and pride," Samah excitedly said. "I was outstanding in my course, and I had a goal that every hairstyle should look charming to anyone around, and that is exactly what I have managed to achieve so far."

Samah was then offered a job at a popular beauty salon in Qamishli city after her work was admired by the staff of the beauty salon. Samah is content, and currently building a career that she has always dreamed of and loved. "I faced the fear which was inside me, I became self-confident, I worked on it. I came across many obstacles to be where I am now and to feel good", Samah concluded her story.



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