

Women's Experience of Struggle In the Grip of Pandemic and Violence

THE FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY

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As the Foundation for Women's Solidarity, we have been struggling against gender inequality and violence against women since 1993. We provide free social, legal and psychological support to women who are survivors of violence via our women's counseling center. In doing so, we aim to establish the solidarity among women in order for them to realize their own power in getting back on track, based on the fact that violence can never be justified and no onus of proof in the testimonies of survivors is required.

We have adapted to navigate the remote-work environment since 16 March 2020 following the announcement of first coronavirus cases by the Ministry of Health in Turkey on 11 March 2020. For this reason, we continued our studies for women's counseling center in a more limited way, by forwarding the calls of office fixed line to social workers and by communicating with women who reached our center via telephone and e-mail. We conducted more than 550 interviews with 360 women who reached our women's counseling center in March, April, May, June, July and August, when quarantine measures were imposed. Apart from these interviews, we had to make more phone calls with the relevant institutions and organizations compared to that before the quarantine process in order to be able to follow the differentiated services of these relevant institutions and organizations during the quarantine process in order to convey accurate information to the women applied us. In March, we observed that the number of the applications was decreased due to the reasons such as the initial effect of shock of the pandemic, unexpected and compulsory staying at home orders and intense health concerns. However, as of April, we observed that the number of the applications we got has been as expected before the pandemic.



Our main observation regarding the applications was that the risks posed for women by being at same home 24/7 together with the male perpetrators have increased. In many interviews, we talked about security measures that can be taken inside the home and/or the ways to apply to a shelter and the difficulties of staying at home together with the male perpetrators because of the quarantine process. With the transition of universities to online learning, young women who returned to their families, made applications frequently for themselves or on behalf of their mothers. Feeling insecure in their environment, being subjected to psychological violence or suffering anxiety attacks by witnessing the violence against their mothers were the examples we frequently encountered in the applications. On the other hand, during this period when we were locked up at home, we encountered some cases in which the women were traumatized again due to their past experiences of violence and felt more anxious and insecure in this process. After the applications, we provided legal support via the phone, the most important point we emphasized was that women have various legal rights that can be enjoyed, especially regarding protective and preventive measures against violence. We continued the psychological support interviews via online tools in order to reduce the effects of the trauma caused by violence and to enable women to make decisions about their own lives, and to discuss the stress, worry, fear, panic and anxiety that increased with the quarantine period.

Shortly after the pandemic announcements, we observed that there were problems in the mechanisms of combating violence against women. We made phone calls about how public institutions are continuing their work to enable women to access accurate and reliable information. In the days where the number of cases gradually increased and curfews continued in metropolitan cities, we made applications to obtain information about the activities of institutions such as hospitals, police stations, courthouses, shelters that require access especially in emergency situations; however, after a long time, we got answers that did not cover our questions completely. On the other hand, we have constantly followed up the current economic support systems regarding the economic support requests that become more frequent with the closure of workplaces and increase in layoffs with quarantine measures.



Shelters and Law Enforcement Officials

In March, we contacted the Violence Prevention and Monitoring Center (ŞÖNİM), which is the first application mechanism for women subjected to violence to apply for shelters and to obtain information about protective and preventive measures. Upon the letter sent to them by the General Directorate on the Status of Women (KSGM), it was shared that the necessary measures were taken, women who applied for shelter would not be turned away and the preparations would be completed for their safe stay. In the following days, KSGM published a statement providing that the necessary measures are taken in order to ensure the women and their children in women's shelters have undergone health checks, are not allowed to go out of the establishments unless necessary, the events are canceled and the guesthouses are periodically disinfected, the removal of women and children are suspended in order to prevent the coronavirus spread until the pandemic is over apart from the ones with a high risk of safety and those who need compulsory treatment. In the beginning, women could apply directly to ŞÖNİM, however after the statement: "In the transfer of persons with high safety risks within the framework of the precautionary plan to be formed by law enforcement officials, the admission process to the guesthouses will be carried out after health checks.", women were first subjected to a process to receive a medical report from a healthcare institution stating that they were not posing a risk and then to be admitted to the shelter. At the beginning of the pandemic, the medical report was obtained by being accompanied by law enforcement officials, however with the stretching of the measures, ŞÖNİM started to receive direct applications and refer women to hospitals to obtain their medical reports before they are admitted to the shelter. The difficulty of taking steps for women to stay away from violence has increased with the pandemic, as the coronavirus test is not accessible in every healthcare institution when needed, and the test results can not be obtained immediately. On the other hand, women who are not admitted to shelters due to insufficient capacity or other reasons stated that their right guaranteed by the provision on "Providing temporary places for women to stay with their children, if any, by meeting their needs." stipulated by Law No. 6284 has been usurped in various ways. Women who applied for shelter by reaching police stations stated that their applications were rejected by the officials stating: "it is too crowded



there, your house will be safer”; “there is this virus, we cannot take you to shelters anymore”; “it is better for you to go to a relative you trust” and they also stated that they were not well informed about their rights and were sent back to the homes where they were subjected to violence. Moreover, the main problems of this process were the restriction of contact with outside for women trying to meet their basic needs and the fact that women who applied only with the need for shelter were not given priority on the grounds that they did not pose a security risk. The lack of an emergency action plan by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services to combat violence against women to cover extraordinary situations such as pandemic caused other relevant mechanisms not to implement existing laws and regulations by using pandemic as an excuse. We observed that ŞÖNİM, who worked with a limited number of officials as public institutions started to work in shifts, had difficulties in tracking women who applied before the pandemic due to the excessive workload on their staff, and had difficulty in taking action especially on urgent cases regarding new applications.

The women who reached our women’s counseling center before the pandemic stated that they had difficulties in accessing mechanisms to combat violence. We observed that the difficulty of access these increased even more with the pandemic. As the examples of malpractices shared by women with us, it can be stated that the officials refrain from enforcing Law No. 6284 when emergent protection measures are requested from the police station by stating that “there is a quarantine process, we cannot issue a protection order within 24 hours” or when the 155 Police Emergency Line was called, the women are held for minutes to reach the operator or the officials refrain from helping them by stating that “we are busy, we cannot come immediately” or when the woman went to the station to file a criminal complaint, the officials did not take into consideration their complaint by stating that “why did you come out of the house to come here you are risking our lives” or the accessibility of the KADES app is difficult since it requires internet access. All these examples revealed that smooth and direct access to social support is not possible due to the lack of preparedness for emergency situations.



Due to the requirement for women to obtain a medical report stating that they do not pose the risk of coronavirus in order to be admitted to shelters, we have directed women who seek shelter to police stations to fasten the admission process. However, in our subsequent interviews, the women stated that their requests were ignored by the officials using the workload at the police stations as an excuse, or they were discouraged from submitting their requests by the officials. On the other hand, we observed that although the police stations have the responsibility to take the women applied to the hospital for physical examination and obtaining forensic report, the officials did not support those women by using their workload and the risk of coronavirus as an excuse without providing no alternative. On the other hand, we observed that after these stages, women who had access to ŞÖNİM were informed that the shelters were full and crowded.

Economic Support Services

We observed before the pandemic that the women who mostly worked in precarious jobs, who did not get equal pay for equal work, and who had to work in double shifts due to the invisible labor by being held responsible for housework and child care were the first to be fired from their jobs within the pandemic period. This situation caused an increase in the requests for economic support by the women applying to our women's counseling center. In addition to frequently asking for the information of institutions and organizations where women can apply for economic support, they also stated that they cannot act independently due to the obligation to stay at home 24/7, they could not find spare time and enjoy their personal spaces due to housework, child and elderly care that have become a burden due to health and hygiene precautions with the pandemic.

We experienced that it was difficult to reach the ALO 183 Social Support Hotline, which was also applied for obtaining economic support, due to the intensity and long hold times. In the first meetings we held with Social Service Centers in various districts of Ankara in April, we learned that it is no longer possible to go to homes for social investigation purposes, therefore new applications for



economic support will not be concluded immediately. In the following days, it was announced by the statement of the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services that the applications made through e-devlet system will be evaluated and the financial aids equal to 1000 TRY will be distributed. However, we found out that the special and urgent needs of women who were survivors of violence and who already had difficulties in accessing relevant mechanisms were not taken into account in the planning of those aids. Women counseling centers and social service units of municipalities are among the main mechanisms that women who struggle with violence apply especially for their socio-economic rights. Sending food packages those in need in Ankara; providing tickets for the transportation, covering water or electricity bills, or providing financial aid in cash; providing free use of transportation to healthcare professionals, providing free disinfectant services to restaurants, cafes, courses and some workplaces were among the various campaigns announced by the municipalities. Various women who applied to our center stated that they got benefitted from these services of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality but they are still in need of economic support.

During the pandemic, we observed that the studies of women counseling centers or psychosocial support activities stayed in the background because of the order of priority of the local governments. After various institutions started working in shifts, we had difficulties in reaching the units of many municipalities, such as women's counseling centers, cultural and social affairs offices or healthcare and social services departments, in order to ask about their methods of work and to provide accurate information about economic support to our applicants. We were able to contact easily the Metropolitan Municipalities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, Eskişehir, Ankara and Kocaeli relatively. On 10 April 2020, on the official website of the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, It was announced that there will be the Psychological Support Hotline Against Coronavirus, which will provide professional support services in order to relieve the stress, anxiety and fears of citizens who are concerned about coronavirus. However, we could not reach this hotline, we tried to call at different times, though.



Most of the women could not access the shelter quickly and effectively due to the difficulties experienced in accessing to the shelters of the municipalities only through ŞÖNİM, and due to the full capacity of shelters during the pandemic period. While the number and capacity of shelters were insufficient before the pandemic, the alternative services were also insufficient to meet the increasing need for safe space during the pandemic period. During the pandemic, the lack of structured methods for applying to shelters and the practices that are different in provinces made it difficult for women to apply to the institutions. Considering the obligation of municipalities with a population over 100.000 to provide shelters, we can say that local governments have a great power and responsibility in that regard. Considering the increasing need for shelters in an extraordinary period, we think that municipalities should take the responsibility for opening the appropriate number of shelters and for providing solutions in line with the needs of women who are survivors of violence.

Judicial Units

Within the scope of the Ministry of Justice's coronavirus measures, it has been announced that there will be rotating work schedules in Courthouses and Regional Courts of Justice in such a way that judicial services are carried out with sufficient number of judges and prosecutors providing a flexible working period until a second notice, except in cases of detention cases and urgent cases. After this announcement, the trial dates were postponed in courthouses and only the courts on duty started to work, the process of filing new cases decelerated. The rapid shrink of work in the courthouses made it difficult to reach the existing units of the Bar Associations. Applications made to the Legal Aid Center, one of the units most frequently used by women, were interrupted. As a result of this, the ongoing trials of the women were postponed; those in need could not access legal support. We saw that many of our applicants who would like to reach the courts for filing new applications were discouraged, thinking that the judicial units were completely closed, and we shared information on application methods with them. On the other hand, the postponement of the ongoing trials and the prolongation of the court process put women at risk of further violence in the process of their divorce cases or



ongoing criminal proceedings on account of violence. Women, who were called to stay at home to be protected from the virus and stay healthy, had to live in the same house with the perpetrators. However, the failure to take the necessary measures to ensure that “the coronavirus-free and secure, at the same time, non-violent and safe” environments” cause the rising risk of violence against women.

For example, one of our applicants who had been subjected to violence various times before the pandemic having forensic report and a suspension order, stated that the suspension order was constantly violated, therefore she moved three times, however the violations and violence continued. Our applicant, who had to apply to the same police station which released the perpetrator by keeping him under judicial control who committed severe physical violence against her on the same day twice at home, stated that she faced the teasing by the officials at the station stating that “Hang your suspension order around your neck”. We informed the applicant, who failed to get results from her applications to legal aid services and to Ankara Bar Association Gelincik Center, that she should definitely not leave the police station and request a Criminal Procedure Code lawyer. We informed her that If the officers at the police station did not comply with meeting her request although they are legally obliged to call a lawyer, otherwise she has the right to complain to the prosecutor’s office. After that, the police station was persuaded to call a lawyer and in the following process, the protection orders and electronic handcuffs were provided thanks to the lawyer’s request. We see that the proper functioning of the mechanisms creates direct and positive effects on women’s lives, especially in terms of ensuring safety. However, the constant struggle and resistance by women in order to obtain the necessary precautions both endangers their right to life and causes them to be exhausted psychologically.

Refugee Women

During this period, when the coronavirus affected the whole world, lots of refugee women applied to our counseling center. They stated that they had difficulties in accessing housing, potable water, adequate food or hygiene during the pandemic period ordering “Staying at Home”; they had difficulties in



obtaining basic information about the process, they were deprived of information on the necessary healthcare measures, they did not understand the posts about coronavirus measures via social media or national TV channels. Refugee women had more difficulties in accessing information and related mechanisms due to being a refugee as well as being subjected to violence. They stated that they could not access the Alo 184 Coronavirus Hotline in their native language, and that they could not receive healthcare services in their native language.

Refugee women, who also suffered due to lack of interpreters in the institutions they applied to before the pandemic, were also ignored during the pandemic period regarding their requests for freedom from violence, support for divorce and economic support. When one of our applicants, who was subjected to physical violence by her neighbor, went to the police station to file a complaint, the police officers said "Go and obtain a forensic report, in order to file a complaint". She also stated that when she went to another police station, she was told that she had to apply to the nearest police station to her house. Thus, the police officers who did not inform the applicant correctly in both police stations where she went, who did not accompany her to obtain a forensic report by being negligent prevented her from filing a complaint. During this process, our applicant, who had to change her home to be protected from violence, was left alone with the violence she clearly experienced on account of both being a woman and a refugee. The fact that the Directorate General of Migration Management suspended almost all ID related works during this period also caused the refugee women could not enjoy their rights. Many women stated that since they could not obtain the necessary documents, they could not apply to institutions that provide economic support, and that they had great difficulties in meeting even their basic needs. The obstacles created by the application mechanisms and the negligent bureaucratic procedures affected refugee women to a more severe extent.

As a part of Additional Measures to Covid-19 Measures Announced by the General Assembly of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors on 30 March 2020; it is stated that; "The cautionary decisions made within the scope of Law No. 6284 should be evaluated in a way that does not threaten the health status



of the parties within the coronavirus period". Thus, we saw once again that the sensitivity for protecting the health status of men who committed violence during pandemic period was not shown towards the survivor women in protecting their safety following the violence exposed. In our statement we published on 2 April "We Will Not Find Ourselves Caught in the Middle of Male Violence and Coronavirus!- Erkek Şiddeti ile Koronavirüs Arasında Kalmayacağız!"; we have listed our requests by repeating that women and men experience different problems due to their gender roles during pandemic period, therefore, the state and all relevant institutions should take into account the dimensions of violence against women when determining and implementing their policies. Nowadays, where quarantine measures relaxed although the ongoing pandemic, we repeat that we will not give up all these requests, our acquired rights that are tried to be usurped by using the pandemic as an excuse and the Istanbul Convention, which is the biggest basis of our requests.

