

Op-ed: Are we safe at home?

Dr. Sharifa Noaman Al-Emadi, Executive Director of QF member the Doha International Family Institute, on the family pressures and risk of domestic violence that the COVID-19 lockdown can create – and how Qatar is ensuring vulnerable groups are protected.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, several countries around the world have reported a high number of domestic violence cases. For example, the number of cases in some regions of China reached three times the previous rate within only a few weeks of the country imposing isolation and quarantine measures due to COVID-19. In France, this percentage rose to 32 percent.

On one hand, in the Arab world, the number of calls reporting domestic violence in Lebanon has risen to 60 percent, and in Tunisia the rate has multiplied by five times. Several reports also confirm that children and women are the groups most vulnerable to violence in a number of countries such as China, Italy, Germany, Spain, and Brazil. On the other hand, Kuwait has shown a decrease in its divorce rate during the pandemic.

Domestic violence lies in imposing power and control, isolating the victim from family and friends. With the social distancing and quarantine measures implemented by governments to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, and the increase in psychological pressures generated by this situation, the aggressors and perpetrators of domestic violence can exploit the situation, continue to be violent, and even increase the level of their violence.

However, institutions in many countries – both in the Arab world and beyond – have been making efforts to reduce violence by establishing protective measures for individuals. The National Union of Moroccan Women, for example, has activated a national communications network that provides psychosocial support. In Lebanon, associations are also working on a national response plan. Similarly, the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Elderly People in Tunisia has worked to provide psychological support and shelter for abused women. In France, the Ministry of Interior indicated that as an additional way of assisting victims of violence, these victims could report their cases to nearby pharmacies, who would in turn inform the police.

Institutional efforts in Qatar confirm its continued commitment to providing and developing protection services for women and children. The Center for Protection and Social Rehabilitation (AMAN), besides being a shelter for the cases that have been subjected to violence, provides hotline reporting services that are available around the clock, and receives many types of consultation requests on violence. AMAN also offers a phone application called Shawreni ('consult me'), which provides free social, psychological, and legal counseling, and aims to raise awareness about women's rights. Also, AMAN has a dedicated office in the Public Prosecution building to receive cases of domestic violence, ensure measures are swiftly taken, and provide advice, assistance, and rehabilitation before transferring cases to the courts.

Moreover, the establishment of the National Committee for Women, Children, Elderly People and Persons with Disabilities, of which the Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) is a member, is a continuation of Qatar's efforts in this field. This committee works on monitoring the conditions of these vulnerable groups and reviewing the laws and legislations related to them, in order to align these laws and legislations with what Qatar has ratified through international agreements and conventions, to ensure protection, justice, and a decent life.

Importance of mental health

Feelings of tension and fear are normal in the current time, due to the exceptional circumstances that the whole world is going through, and they result from the uncertainty of what these circumstances might lead to. However, such feelings and fears may vary in strength and intensity from one person to another.

On the one hand, there is a fear of infection due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 and the daily increase in the number of infected people; and, on the other hand, there is the physical closeness imposed by self-isolation or lockdown, and having to be around the family member all the time in closed living spaces, that might be even small in size.

This can lead to increased level of tension in family relationships, especially in the absence of finding what keeps those members busy for long periods, which may turn to physical or psychological violence between family members.

In addition, not everyone has a guaranteed job and financial security, which may result in financial difficulties if the current situation continues for a long period. This will undoubtedly reflect on the wellbeing of the family and its members, and its ability to meet its needs, consequently causing severe psychological pressures for the breadwinner.

Given the nature of the role of women within the family in our Arab societies, the possibility of them falling under psychological and health pressures is higher, compared to the rest of the family is, especially during this period. A woman might have to play multiple roles, whether as a wife, mother, sister, or daughter, in addition, to having to respond rapidly and effectively in order to meet family needs, even if help is available from domestic workers. Women may supervise the household or actively do chores, or meet the needs of husbands, children, fathers, brothers and sisters, or follow-up and check on the education of their children if they practice distance learning. If women are employed, they must either work remotely or still have to go to their workplace. Therefore, the inability to harmonize all these tasks, or a failure to meet such needs, may put them under psychological pressure or make them subjects to violence or abuse by a family member.

As for children, staying home and being unable to meet family or friends and play with them outside the house may result in boredom, anger, and stress. Children, as a result, may become a tool used by adults to relieve their own feelings of anger and frustration, which will lead to the accumulation of negative emotions such as anger and fear in children given that they are not aware of the surrounding circumstances.

Community efforts

The societal efforts that individuals offer to each other are complementary to the efforts made by the government, and, in general, they represent one of the ways of reducing the impact of these circumstances on the mental and physical health of the individual and the family.

It is interesting to see community cohesion, support and innovative solutions at multiple levels. For example, I joined a volunteer team with a group of my colleagues in the field of psychological counseling, where we work to provide psychological, social, and educational support consultations to all members of society over the phone.

While on the social media, the Instagram account of the 'Scorpionsqa' initiative, for instance, provides awareness on domestic violence. The initiative has received several cases seeking advice and assistance. This is in addition to other awareness contributions by influencers who strive to enhance awareness, reduce loneliness, and to promote interdependence, the need for family cooperation, and commitment to the measures imposed by the government to overcome the crisis.

This is an invitation for everybody to join forces in an attempt to support those around us through compassion and sympathy, in any way we can, in order to ensure we overcome this crisis with our mental health being preserved.