The COVID-19 pandemic prompted Pakistan, like many other countries, to impose a lockdown on its population. An unfortunate consequence of this was that individuals (predominantly women) who are in abusive relationships or households saw their mobility and freedom curbed significantly.

Mahnoor Ali Syed, a feminist activist and community organizer from Lahore, has been working to help women in such situations both in her capacity as an individual and through her organization, Her Turn.

When the lockdown was implemented, people began reaching out to Mahnoor on social media, especially Twitter, bringing her attention to the problem. “That’s when I figured that … more groundwork needs to be done around [this issue],” Mahnoor said in an interview. Since then, she has been working with two Pakistan-based pro bono lawyers.

“I think the biggest confusion people have in most cases is … what legal steps can be taken,” Mahnoor explained. In addition to providing counsel, the lawyers are available to take on cases if any of the survivors wish to file one. “No one has done that so far. [For] most of the people who have reached out to me so far, it’s only been about taking legal advice, and then seeing how things can be solved through mediation,” Mahnoor said.

Mahnoor has also been working with the organizations Shirkat Gah and Sahil, both of which focus on gender-based violence in Pakistan. They work on providing shelter, legal resources, and other aid to survivors. “For now, I have been working with them on shelter. Housing is one of the biggest problems,” Mahnoor said.

In the past, the people who have reached out to Mahnoor for help have done so through personal contacts and later Twitter. Now, Mahnoor is trying to build a more robust model, by using her own non-profit networks and forming a team. “This kind of work is usually very emotionally taxing. It also requires a lot of research and muscle work,” Mahnoor added.

Mahnoor is currently facilitating the cases of five women. “There’s usually a lot of parties involved. In some cases I’m in the capacity of a connector and an advice-giver, where I reach out to the lawyers and get advice for them,” Mahnoor said. “In other cases, I help them fundraise, in which case I use my non-profit network and resources.”

Fundraised money is spent in helping people who are trying to move out of the households they share with abusive partners or family members. “In those cases, they are looking for shelter or some kind of investment or starting money to move out,” Mahnoor said. “In one case I recently took, the wife was trying to take *khula* [divorce]. In such cases, they also need funding.”