



COVID-19 and violence against women

25 March 2020

- Violence against women (VAW) tends to increase during every type of emergency, including epidemics. Women who are displaced, refugees, and living in conflict-affected areas are particularly vulnerable. The health impacts of violence on women and their children are significant.
- While data are scarce, reports from China, UK, and the USA suggest an increase in intimate partner violence cases since the COVID-19 outbreak.^{1,2}
- As social distancing measures are put in place, and people are encouraged to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) is likely to increase. For example:
 - The likelihood that women in abusive relationships and their children will be exposed to violence is dramatically increased, as family members spend more time in close contact and families cope with potential economic or job losses.
 - Women bear the brunt of increased family care work during this pandemic. School closures further exacerbate this burden and place increased stress on them.
 - The disruption of engagement in economic activities, including for women (many of whom are informal wage workers), will decrease access to basic needs and services, increasing stress on families, with the potential to exacerbate conflicts and violence.
 - Perpetrators of abuse may use restrictions due to COVID-19 to exercise power and control over their partners to further reduce access to services, help and psychosocial support.
- As health systems become stretched in order to respond to COVID-19, access to vital sexual and reproductive health services including for women subjected to violence will likely become more limited. Other services, such as hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, legal aid, and protection services may also be scaled back, further reducing access to the few sources of help that women in abusive relationships might have.

What can be done to address VAW during the COVID-19 response

While recognizing that COVID-19 has placed an immense burden on health systems including frontline health workers, there are things that can help mitigate the impacts of violence on women & children during this pandemic.



Governments and policy makers must include essential services to address VAW in preparedness and response plans for COVID-19, resource them, and identify ways to make them accessible in context of physical distancing measures.



Health facilities should identify information about services available locally (e.g. hotlines, shelters, rape crisis centers, counselling) for survivors, including opening hours, contact details and whether these can be offered remotely, and establish referral linkages.



Health providers need to be aware of the risks and health consequences of VAW. They can help women who disclose violence by offering first-line support, and relevant medical treatment. First line support includes: listening empathetically and without judgment, inquiring about needs and concerns, validating survivors' experiences and feelings, enhancing safety, and connecting survivors to social support.



Humanitarian response organizations need to include services for women subjected to violence and their children in their COVID-19 response plans, and gather data on reported cases of VAW.



Community members should be made aware of the increased risk of domestic/partner violence during this pandemic, and the need to keep in touch and provide support safely to women subjected to violence. It is important to have information about where help for survivors is available.



Women who are experiencing violence may find it helpful to reach out to supportive family and friends, seek support from a hotline, or seek out local services for survivors.

¹Melissa Godin, "As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way Out," *Time*, March 18, 2020, <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>

²Women's Aid UK, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse, and the Life-Saving Services that Support Them," March 17, 2020, <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-and-children-experiencing-domestic-abuse-and-the-life-saving-services-that-support-them/>