

Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) response – UNODC Thematic Brief on gender-based violence against women and girls

1. IMPACT of COVID-19 on gender-based violence against women and girls

Gender-based violence against women and girls (GBVAWG), with intimate partner violence as its most common form, is highly prevalent in many societies, where it erodes social cohesion and development. Emergency situations, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, aggravate the threat of GBVAWG to individuals, families and societies.

Indeed the risk and consequences of GBVAWG may be exacerbated by lockdown policies implemented by many countries throughout the world, the disruption of economic, social and protective networks, sudden changes in family functioning, stress, increased substance use and decreased access to services.

Some countries have imposed mass quarantine and travel restriction measures for people entering their territory, which may entail confinement in accommodation in conditions that place women and their children at a heightened risk of violence, among other challenges.

As distancing measures are put in place and people are encouraged to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase. (For specific examples and more information, see the [WHO fact sheet on COVID-19 and violence against women](#)). Staying at home is not the safest option for many women and children, as the home is often where they are at risk of sexual and other forms of violence, including homicide, physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, economic abuse, neglect and/or coercive control. It is important to recognize that children who witness abuse are themselves victims of violence.

Children who ordinarily live according to shared care arrangements are at particular risk if placed with an abusive parent during the COVID-19 emergency, including the trauma of being separated from the second parent and/or siblings.

Economic abuse is a prevalent correlative to other forms of GBVAWG. In the context of the unemployment and other adverse economic impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, women and their children may be particularly vulnerable to economic abuse and associated deprivations during this time. There may be particular risks for women who cannot purchase essential goods (food and medicine) because they are prevented by an abusive partner from leaving their home, or fear leaving their children with the abusive partner, or are denied the funds for those purchases.

In some cases, adolescents engage in violent behaviours in the home. Women (mothers) are disproportionately targeted by this violence. Despite the prevalence of this form of violence it is not always recognised by the criminal justice system. The risks to women's safety are likely to be greatly increased by a context in which a violent adolescent child is in enforced lockdown at home.

The impact of measures to curb COVID-19 is thus not spread evenly, but bound to disproportionately affect certain groups, including victims and survivors of domestic violence,

homeless women, older women and women and girls with disabilities. Women and girls who are deprived of their liberty, displaced, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and those living in conflict-affected areas are particularly at risk during the COVID-19 emergency. For example, evidence from refugee camps and humanitarian assistance zones confirms that where families or individuals are held or housed in close proximity for extended periods of time, rates of violence against women and violence against children are high.¹

2. CHALLENGES faced by police, prosecution services, the judiciary and other parts of the criminal justice system during the COVID-19 outbreak

- Resources are being diverted away from the criminal justice system towards more immediate public health measures to deal with COVID-19.
- Police and other law enforcement agencies have less time and human resources to respond to incidents of GBVAWG, may lack specific plans on how to respond to such incidents during the emergency and are likely to shift priorities towards enforcing quarantine, monitoring social distancing and other related measures. In countries with weak rule of law and existing economic constraints, the focus may also shift towards responses to public unrest, looting and other crime that may increase as a result of economic and social consequences of the responses to COVID-19.
- In many countries, judicial proceedings are suspended and/or postponed, which impedes immediate judicial protection (e.g. issuance of emergency or interim measures like protection and restraining orders) and creates a backlog of cases that affects the effectiveness and quality of criminal justice responses to GBVAWG in the long run.
- Other services, such as hotlines, crisis centers, shelters, access to a lawyer including through legal aid, and victim protection services may also be scaled back or closed, further reducing access to the few sources of help that women in abusive relationships might have.
- Due to the lockdown policies in place, women and girls may have more difficulties in accessing police stations for promptly reporting cases of GBVAWG and seeking judicial and other forms of protection. They will also find it more difficult to place phone calls to report violence or access hotlines as they live 24/7 with their abusers and have no privacy to make such phone calls.

¹ See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24818066>. See also [WHO fact sheet on COVID-19 and violence against women](#).

3. CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESPONSES to gender-based violence against women during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis

3.1 Governments and policy makers should:

- Relevant State authorities (e.g. Ministries of Interior, Justice, Social Welfare) should clearly and publicly indicate that preventing and responding to GBVAWG, even in times of pandemic and lock down, should be a priority for relevant criminal justice officials and specific warning and sanctioning measures should be in place for not following this policy.
- Prioritize resources and efforts to ensure continuity and access to essential services to address violence against women and girls, including to prepare for an increase in demand for emergency hotlines, shelters and other essential housing options, legal aid and other essential police and justice services.
 - As a minimum, criminal justice institutions must remain able to identify, protect and provide remedies to victims who are at risk.
 - Any measures/policy packages that follow after declaration of state of emergency should include this budget line.
 - Sustainable funding for NGOs is crucial, particularly where they provide essential services to victims and survivors.
- Invest in awareness campaigns to inform the public that: dedicated hotlines for women and for girls are still working; judicial and other protective measures are operational; the shelters are open and are complying with health recommendations relating to COVID-19; and that women and girls seeking protection can leave the house even in lock down situations without the fear to be stopped, sanctioned and/or punished by the authorities.
 - Such campaigns should be made available via multiple channels (e.g. TV, radio, internet, social media) and in all major languages spoken in the community.
- Ensure continued availability and accessibility of judicial protection measures by using flexibility in existing procedures, for example by:
 - allowing remote applications for protection and restraining orders;
 - automatically extending existing orders;
 - enabling submission of statements and other evidence through electronic means; ,
 - adequately involving lawyers to represent and protect victims to explore all available legal options, particularly in cases where the victim may be charged with a crime due to action taken to resist the offender that may have resulted in physical harm.
- Allocate sufficient public funding to enable the justice system to reduce the expected backlog of criminal cases and protection procedures, prioritizing cases of violence against women and girls and other serious crimes.
- Recognize the risks to children in instances where interrupted shared care arrangements may result in a child or children being forced to reside with an abusive parent. Irrespective of



whether movement between parents is permitted, in all cases involving the shared care of children, parents should be offered additional supports, including access to free legal services, measures to ensure that children are not residing with an abusive parent during the lockdown period and, in instances where this is identified to be the case, children should be provided with support to ensure their safe return to a non-abusive parent.

3.2 Criminal justice agencies should:

- Ensure that perpetrators of violence are removed from the home and develop plans and implement measures to keep them in a separate accommodation during lockdown measures.
- Ensure that women and girls subject to violence can leave their house to escape abuse without being subject to any type of sanctions or limitations and that they have a safe place to go within the designated recommendations related to the pandemic. There must be increased cooperation mechanisms between police, CSOs and domestic violence shelters so that victims can safely make their way to a safe location.
- Brief police and other relevant personnel on COVID-19 and how issues such as self-isolation will continue to impact violence against women and girls, in order to prepare for the potential increase in volume of emergency calls. In line with operational needs, police can be diverted from other crime units to work on cases of violence against women and girls.
- Develop ad hoc, special protocols with relevant health providers (i.e. doctors, nurses and pharmacies) to enable women and girls at immediate risk to report violence, considering the following examples:
 - The Spanish city of Valencia turned city's pharmacies into 'safe spaces to activate the victim protection protocol' with a code.
 - In England and Wales, the police have made provision for an increase in calls for assistance in situations of domestic violence during the lockdown. Silent calls can be made to the ordinary three-digit emergency number, and persons subjected to violence can enter a code.
- Support and publicly promote online reporting/advice mechanisms for women and children (through apps and websites), including "quick escape" buttons and other measures to avoid detection by the aggressor.
- Ensure continued and increased availability and accessibility of protection and other essential services for women subject to violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, including through electronic or other remote means, the continuation of existing measures and through special duty shifts for lawyers, prosecutors and judges.
- Issue instructions to police and other relevant officials to support victims in safety planning based on risk assessments that consider the particular risks of quarantine, home confinement and other measures to address COVID-19.



- While taking necessary measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in prisons and reduce prison overcrowding through the use of release measures, avoid releases or other alternative measures that may place women and children at greater risk of violence. In particular:
 - Assess and address the safety risks of victims in decisions concerning release and other non-custodial measures, such as the granting of bail, conditional release, parole or probation, especially when dealing with repeat and dangerous offenders;
 - Ensure the right of victims to be informed of the aggressor's release from detention or imprisonment.

3.3 Criminal justice officials should:

- Ensure that incidents of violence against women and children continue to be given high priority, taking into account the increased level of risk for women and children in situations of lock down, particularly when they live with the person who victimizes them.
- Recognize that children who witness domestic violence are themselves victims of violence, for whom a full range of protective measures should be made available. Such measures include: child-sensitive counselling and psycho-social support, free access to legal assistance, and legal recognition as victims of violence (including being listed on restraining orders).
- Recognize the complex risks in situations where adolescents engage in violence towards their parents (usually their mother) and, in such cases, ensure that protective measures are taken to ensure the safety and psychological well-being of victim/s, while also implementing age-appropriate responses that uphold the rights of the child that is alleged to have engaged in violent behaviors.
- Seek opportunities for enhanced communication and outreach by police and security personnel, e.g., through remote outreach, taking advantage of greater attention by the public to media feeds.
- Take proactive measures to monitor and police high-risk neighborhoods and households, based on previous reports or incidents of GBVAWG, with a view to increasing access to protection and support for victims and reducing opportunities for victimization. For example:
 - Police could conduct checks on homes without entering and justifying their visit without triggering the abuser and endangering the victim. They could share information about essential services operating in the area. They could say they are canvassing the area, and they will be back in a few days to check in. This could also be done by phone and be outsourced to social workers or domestic violence counsellors.
 - Mobile police units could be stationed in neighborhoods that are hotspots as a visible reminder of police presence, including in the context of police deployed to enforce social distancing.

4. UNODC RESPONSES

4.1 *SHORT TERM options (during measures to restrict freedom of movement)*

Public advocacy:

- Publish key messages via Twitter and other social media on how criminal justice systems should respond to GBVAWG in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and to indicate what should be the priority in this area;
- Work with relevant media to publish an op-ed or interview with the UNODC Country and Regional Representative or other relevant official to call for necessary interventions based on international standards and offer UNODC support.
- Advocate for programmes to prevent potential negative coping mechanisms including resorting to substance use, household violence (access to mental health and stress relief services, tools for parenting in stressful circumstances, etc.).

Policy support:

- Organize calls or virtual workshops with relevant officials of criminal justice institutions to discuss the impact of measures to address COVID-19 on GBVAW survivors and promote options to ensure effective criminal justice responses in the short and longer term;
- Support drafting or revision of standard operating procedures for criminal justice institutions, in an inclusive manner with all stakeholders involved, to ensure availability and accessibility of victim protection and other essential police and justice services for survivors of GBVAW during the COVID-19 emergency.

Assessment and monitoring:

- Collection of evidence, in any format, about levels and trends of violence in the domestic sphere, with a focus on femicide and physical/sexual assault. This can be done through gathering of data/reports/articles from national focal points and field offices; furthermore, consider the possibility to harvest data through web-scraping tools is currently being tested.
- Organize electronic surveys, interviews and virtual focus group discussions with relevant criminal justice professionals (police, prosecutors, judges and magistrates, lawyers and legal aid providers, etc.) and CSOs to document the specific impact of COVID-19 and measures to curb its spread on victims and on CJ responses to GBVAW, as well as to create baseline data and discuss interventions to ensure effective criminal justice responses in the short and longer term.
- Assess the likelihood and magnitude of the existing and expected backlog in GBVAW cases in light of the COVID-19 emergency.

Capacity-building:

- Preparation and coordination of training programmes for criminal justice professionals and other technical assistance activities to be started as soon as measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 are lifted. Where possible, an initial phase of training can be started, using relevant e-learning modules and/or webinars. The training should be tailored to specific existing needs and gaps, based on the issues covered by existing [UNODC tools and manuals on violence against women and violence against children](#).

4.2 LONGER TERM OPTIONS (after measures to restrict freedom of movement have been lifted)

- Implement training programmes for relevant criminal justice professionals (police, prosecutors, judges and magistrates, lawyers and legal aid providers, etc.) and CSOs, with a focus on the specific impact of COVID-19 and related measures on victims and survivors of GBVAWG and the lessons learned for gender-sensitive and child-sensitive violence prevention and response law and policy.
- Technically advise and support prosecution services and the judiciary in reducing the backlog of GBVAWG cases due to or exacerbated by COVID-19, through measures geared towards the specific country context. This could include:
 - Setting up of special hearings or additional (mobile) courts dealing exclusively with GBVAWG cases;
 - Internal organizational measures (e.g. setting up a backlog reduction team, a more efficient case management system, the use of electronic forms, electronic court files and videoconferencing);
 - External organizational measures (e.g. SOPs or MOUs with other relevant institutions to reduce delays);
 - Procedural measures (e.g. improving the system for scheduling court hearings, minimizing adjournments).
 - All these measures need to safeguard the principles of victim safety and offender accountability, as well as the best interest of the child, which are fundamental in GBVAWG cases. The use of restorative justice, diversion or alternatives to imprisonment is subject to specific caveats, in line with relevant international standards and norms (e.g. no automatic or mandatory referral to restorative justice or other alternative dispute resolution; strict adherence to informed consent, due process, legal and procedural safeguards; obligation to consider safety risks in decisions on diversion and non-custodial measures; right of victims to be notified of the release of the offender).