

KEY MESSAGES:

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND COVID-19

23 March 2020

Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread, persistent and devastating human rights violations in our world today. It occurs in every country and in every context.

Humanitarian emergencies, natural disasters and global pandemics put women and girls at increased risk of violence. This was true during the 2015–16 Zika virus epidemic and during recent outbreaks of Ebola virus disease, where reports of violence against women and girls – an often-underreported statistic – spiked. The current COVID-19 crisis is no exception.

Increased stress levels, economic and food insecurity, unemployment, and movement restrictions are all creating conditions which are contributing to significant reported increases in the levels of domestic violence as response to the global pandemic increases in scale.

Reports from China during the lockdown indicated a three-fold rise in reports of domestic violence, with one women's NGO noting that 90% of the causes of violence were related to the pandemic. While it is still early days in the US, a domestic violence hotline in Portland, Oregon reported calls doubled last week and the national domestic violence hotline says that a growing number of callers are reporting that their abusers are using COVID-19 to further control and isolate them – some threatening to throw victims out on the street so they will get sick or withholding financial resources or medical assistance.

While these examples reflect only more developed country reporting at this point, they, as well as the lessons learned from past health pandemics and emergencies, are indicative of what is certain to be a global trend.

These increased incidents are taking place alongside a decrease in services and response. Specifically: The COVID-19 crisis is limiting access to justice for survivors as state institutions scale down operations. Health services for survivors are hampered as overwhelmed health systems shift focus. Movement restrictions are disrupting the ability of civil society organizations to support survivors, much less provide critical lifesaving services. And shelters are being repurposed as health centres or their staff are left off the list of 'essential services'.

There are some initial positive responses to point to – Canada for example has included millions of dollars for domestic violence shelters as part of its domestic COVID-19 response, and some

countries are considering limiting access to alcohol as part of movement restriction, recognizing it as an aggravating impact on violence in the home. But these responses are far too few and limited in scope.

For all of these reasons, a comprehensive and global response to the COVID-19 pandemic must include interventions to prevent violence against women and girls. Gender-based violence is a barrier to effective crisis management – which can only be successful when basic human needs are met, and collective fears are addressed.

SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE'S RESPONSE

In line with World Health Organization and United Nations guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Spotlight Initiative and its partners are delivering an appropriate and gender-responsive effort to stem the spread of the virus, while working to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Specifically, Spotlight Initiative secretariat is encouraging all country teams to:

- initiate business continuity and contingency plans to minimize programme implementation delays and maintain the health and wellbeing the staff, partners and counterparts in affected countries;
- integrate gender-based violence mitigation measures in national COVID-19 response plans;
- engage national and civil society partners to identify, map and mitigate COVID-19 risks, and leverage opportunities including asset and resource allocations to continue critical service delivery;
- scale up activities related to gender-based violence prevention and services, such as hotlines, government subsidies, radio, television, social media and virtual chat programmes; and
- ensure current interventions such as shelters and one-stop centres do not increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission.