



## ACTION BRIEF

# A GUIDE FOR ACTION TO STEM INCREASING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



Photos © UN Women/Niels den Hollander

## Key issues

Even in “normal” times, women in the Asia-Pacific region experience high levels of violence. About 37 per cent of women in South Asia, 40 per cent in South-East Asia, and 68 per cent in the Pacific say they have suffered abuse by their intimate partners, according to World Health Organization research.<sup>1</sup> Now women face even greater risks during the COVID-19 emergency. There is evidence that during previous public health emergencies, violent attacks on women increased.<sup>2</sup>

This is a guide for governments, aid agencies, service providers, businesses and other groups on what to do to protect women from violence during the pandemic and its associated array of lockdowns, movement restrictions, services closures, and other disease control measures.

## Quick facts: Violence against women in the region during the COVID-19 pandemic

Several countries in the region have reported dramatic increases in cases of women seeking help from domestic violence during the pandemic. In other countries, the number of reports has decreased -- but that does not mean violence has decreased. Women’s organizations say that many women are facing greater violence while confined to their homes as part of coronavirus control measures -- but they find regular support services closed or limited and in any case, no longer have the privacy or freedom to call for help. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, few women reported violence to authorities or service providers because of shame, stigma, lack of options for safety and fear of increased violence if abusers learned about the report.

It is important to have current data on reported cases so we can adjust outreach or service delivery, but this data cannot give a full picture of the prevalence of violence against women. Only population-based surveys with strictly defined methodology and guarantees of women’s safety and privacy can do this.

Nevertheless, currently reported cases show an alarming trend:

- The hotline of the Women’s Aid Organisation in **Malaysia** received 44 per cent more domestic violence calls in March, when the lockdown began, than in February.<sup>3</sup>
- In **Singapore**, AWARE’s Women’s Helpline received 33 per cent more violence-related calls in February 2020 compared to the same month last year.<sup>4</sup>
- In **China**, the national hotline of Yuanzhong Family and Community Development and Service Centre received 50 per cent more domestic violence complaints in February compared to the same month last year.<sup>5</sup>
- The Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation of the Indonesian Women’s Association for Justice, which helps survivors of violence, recorded a tripling of reported cases after the lockdown began in March, in **Indonesia**.<sup>6</sup>
- In **India**, the number of domestic violence complaints received by the National Commission for Women more than doubled in four states in the north -- Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Punjab -- during one period of the lockdown.<sup>7</sup>
- In **Australia**, in a Women’s Safety New South Wales survey in March, many front-line workers in the state said cases of violence not only have increased but have become more complex during the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>8</sup>
- In the **Republic of Korea**, the police received 5 per cent fewer reports of domestic violence in March compared to the same month last year. But the Korea Women’s Hotline said this could indicate women are in greater danger, confined with their abusers and finding it even more difficult to speak to counsellors.<sup>9</sup>

## Emerging issues

The COVID-19 pandemic has put women and children at greater risk of violence as their movements are restricted and protection systems are weakened.<sup>10</sup> A trend is unfolding across Asia and the Pacific: Violence is worsening for many women who are trapped at home with an abusive partner or family member and less able to call or go out to get help – and at a time when service providers are less available.

Survivors of violence can find it difficult to access health care due to movement restrictions, closed clinics and overburdened health services.<sup>11</sup> Epidemics can divert health-care resources away from services for survivors of violence.<sup>12</sup> And fear of infection or mistreatment can deter survivors from seeking health care.<sup>13</sup>

To resolve the problem, we must take into account the varied characteristics and situations of different women -- age, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, migrant status, race, disabilities and other factors that influence how women are affected by the pandemic and how they experience violence. A comprehensive response must include steps to protect all women and girls, ensuring no one is left behind.

For instance, due to lockdowns and closures of businesses, women migrant workers are facing increased risks of sexual and other violence while returning to their home countries, especially in quarantine facilities and at the hands of border police and armed guards. Those who still have their jobs face increased risks in their workplaces.

People's tendency to blame outsiders for bringing in the disease worsen the stigma and discrimination women migrant workers face. Thus, they and other vulnerable groups, such as women with disabilities and women from the LGBTIQ and indigenous communities, must be included in programmes to mitigate the COVID-19 and violence linkage and must be able to access services and protection.

### All groups can take important steps to stem violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis.

*Some women have reported that they would prefer to put themselves at risk for COVID-19 in public, rather than stay at home isolated with a violent and abusive partner.*

*- Report by women's organization aiding survivors of violence in Viet Nam -*

## A. Recommendations for governments, United Nations agencies and donors

- **Recognize that violence against women and children during emergencies and epidemics requires immediate action** and it is not necessary to do new surveys before acting. These surveys can be done later.<sup>14</sup> Surveys with women about violence during the COVID-19 pandemic -- especially if they are confined -- pose safety risks for the women since privacy and confidentiality cannot be assured. However, service providers must continue to collect sex-disaggregated data about violence against women, in order to understand service demand, usage and outcomes.
- **Keep essential services for survivors of violence running and available.** These include health, police, shelter, psychological, social and justice services. Ensure that staffing, funds and other resources remain adequate to deal with the problem. Adapt protocols to guard against the virus spreading. In New York, shelters have been categorized as essential services.<sup>15</sup> Governments can declare services for survivors of violence as essential during the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> [Guidance](#) is available on how to keep these services running during this period.<sup>17</sup> It is essential to support non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) that are protecting women from violence. Governments can declare that they will not tolerate violence against women, will give priority to such cases, and will strengthen support services.
- **Bolster remote delivery of services** to reach women facing violence at a time when they are less mobile. This should include mental health and counseling services for families experiencing domestic violence. [Guidance](#) is available on setting up remote service delivery.
- **Include survivors of violence as a fundamental part of social protection plans** and of investments for medium- and longer-term recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Crisis support for survivors is urgent and can prevent further trauma, disability and death. There is evidence that giving cash to poor households, when designed to reduce the risk of domestic violence, can result in lower rates of such violence.<sup>18</sup>
- **Support shelters for survivors of violence** to keep them running, and create protocols to prevent the virus from spreading there. [Guidance](#) is available on running shelters safely.<sup>19</sup> Countries including France have turned hotel rooms into shelters for survivors of domestic violence.<sup>20</sup> Governments can cooperate with businesses on such initiatives. Albania adopted a protocol to ensure shelters ran without disruption during the COVID-19 emergency.<sup>21</sup>

- **Support helplines** so that all calls are free of charge and provide mobile phones, phone credits/data, Wi-Fi mobile hotspots, and operational or technology assistance to front-line providers of services to survivors of violence.
- **Improve systems for responding to violence against women during emergencies.** The COVID-19 crisis has exposed gaps in national and local systems. In some countries, helplines for women are being restructured so that they have clear protocols and can provide comprehensive, quality services during the pandemic. Similarly, some countries without a national protocol or task force on ending violence against women are taking steps to address these gaps and better coordinate services, during normal times and emergencies.
- **Use expert guidance on planning for, preventing and responding to violence against women during emergencies.** The [Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines](#) offer guidance from many humanitarian groups. Guidance is available on [food security](#), [shelter](#), [health](#), [protection](#), [water](#), [sanitation and hygiene](#), [camp coordination and management](#), [child protection](#), [education](#), [housing](#), [land and property](#), [livelihoods](#), and [nutrition](#).
- **Support CSOs that are struggling** with shortages of funds, staff and resources as they are overwhelmed by the number and needs of women seeking help during the pandemic. Consult front-line groups, especially CSOs and crisis responders, for quick assessments of the evolving situation and its impacts on violence against women.
- **Integrate the [Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse guidance](#) in COVID-19 response plans** developed with partners, including service providers and employers. Everyone should be safe from sexual exploitation and abuse at work or while accessing health, police, and other services. Whether at home or abroad, women should have access to safe and confidential reporting channels and services.

## **B. Recommendations for civil society organizations and front-line service providers**

- **Tell people about changes in service delivery.** Use websites, social media and news media to keep people up to date on what care facilities and remote services are available. Work with media outlets and opinion leaders to highlight increasing violence against women and girls, and to ensure accurate and ethical coverage of the problem.
- **Adapt services** in order to help women endangered by the movement restrictions due to the pandemic. Use helplines, chat and messaging services to help survivors online. [Guidance](#) is available on using technology while guarding the safety, privacy and confidentiality of women who are isolated. Provide remote services in different languages for the benefit of women migrant workers.

- **Adopt a [safety plan](#) for women experiencing violence during the COVID-19 pandemic**, including those in isolation. Trained service providers can help women stay safe in difficult situations where they cannot access services such as shelters.
- **Use technology solutions:** Online platforms for survivors to get help include [MyPlan](#) in the U.S., [iSafe](#) in New Zealand, [iCan](#) in Canada, and [SAFE](#) in the Netherlands. Where online platforms are not available, text-based networks such as WhatsApp can be used to get women connected when they are physically isolated.
- **Train service providers and front-line workers** to show women escaping domestic violence how to do things such as turning off cloud services, in order to keep their phones digitally secure. [Guidance](#) is available for service providers who are using mobile phones for advocacy and services and want to ensure women's safety and confidentiality.
- **Give "safe phones" for emergency calls to women** living in abusive situations.<sup>23</sup> Phone companies can donate them or basic phones can be purchased to give to women.

## **C. Recommendations for Businesses**

- **Demonstrate commitment to gender equality and ending violence.** Business owners, top executives and managers should declare this commitment and back it up with active support for employees experiencing violence. Sign the [Women's Empowerment Principles](#) and take the needs of women into account in the [businesses' wider COVID-19 response and recovery strategy](#).
- **Investigate whether sexual harassment, violence and exploitation is occurring in workplaces, operations and supply chains.** Ensure that systems are in place to prevent and respond to reports of abuse and harassment. Ensure the safety and confidentiality of employees who report instances. Note the increased risks during the COVID-19 emergency.
- **Support employees who are experiencing domestic violence.** Provide information about where to seek help, and provide leave time if needed. Employers can play unique supportive roles for employees facing violence.
- **Support women's shelters, crisis centres and helplines for survivors of violence.** Businesses can donate their business services such as hotel rooms to shelter survivors, free calls to helplines, advertising space for crisis services; supplies such as mobile phones, clothing, cash or vouchers; give technology help for shifting to web, text and remote crisis support services; and help fund service providers so they can maintain or expand services during the COVID-19 emergency.



## Promising practices from the region to stem violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis:

- In **Viet Nam**, the Government developed a guideline to ensure the safety and dignity of women and children in quarantine centres. The guideline covers four key areas: hygiene and nutrition, accommodation, protection from violence and sexual abuse, and information security. Experience of previous emergencies has shown quarantine centres may present risk for sexual abuse and exploitation.<sup>24</sup>
- In **Cambodia**, CSOs are sharing information through radio programmes on COVID-19, violence against women migrant workers and where women migrant workers can get help.
- In **Bangladesh**, the National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 includes programmes to tell people how to stop domestic violence and violence against children.
- UN Women, through the Spotlight Initiative of the European Union and the United Nations, is updating directories of services for survivors of violence against women in **South-East Asian countries**, including women migrant workers.
- In **Fiji**, UN Women helped create a resource kit for front-line workers including a do's and don'ts checklist during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Safety Net Australia<sup>25</sup> has been joining the mobile network Telstra since 2014 to give survivors of violence mobile phones, \$30 in credit, tech tips and connections with support services in **Australia**.<sup>26</sup>
- In **Viet Nam**, the Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender-Family-Women and Adolescents has shifted six counselling helplines to Zoom and Facebook. The center trained its community partners how to use Zoom.
- In **Nepal**, three women's networks wrote a [Charter of Demand](#) to meet the needs of vulnerable women during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been submitted to several top national and provincial government offices.
- Women's shelters and crisis centres in **the Pacific** have formed a network to help newer and less experienced centres strengthen their ability to respond to emergencies.

## Resources

- [COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls](#). This UN Women document discusses the impact of the pandemic, along with recommendations and promising practices worldwide.
- [Violence against women and girls data collection during COVID-19](#): This how-to guide was jointly produced by UN Women and World Health Organization.
- [Infographic: The shadow pandemic - violence against women and girls and COVID-19](#): This UN Women infographic shows how security, health and money worries combined with cramped and confined living conditions have increased violence against women.
- [The first 100 days of the COVID-19 outbreak in Asia and the Pacific](#): A gender lens: This UN Women report discusses how the pandemic has hurt women and girls and what can be done about it.
- [COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement](#): This guide by the Regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working Group discusses ways to support at-risk people such as involving them in making community decisions on responding to and recovering from disasters.
- [Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility](#): This website provides the latest information and tools on violence and the COVID-19 emergency.
- [Inter-agency minimum standards for gender-based violence in emergencies programming](#): This outlines 16 minimum standards that aid groups need to achieve, in order to effectively respond to the problem and comprehensively assist survivors.
- [Gender-based violence pocket guide](#): This links the [Gender-based violence guidelines](#) and [Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility](#) to show humanitarian groups how to support survivors. Available in Arabic, Burmese, English, French and Spanish. The mobile app can also be downloaded at [Google Play](#) or [iTunes](#).
- [Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls](#): This report includes evidence from previous epidemics that helps us understand the increased risks for women and girls today. It is produced by the U.K.'s Department for International Development.
- [Using technology to communicate with survivors during a public health crisis](#): This site by the National Network to End Domestic Violence shows women's shelters, crisis centers and hotlines how to reach survivors during the COVID-19 crisis. It includes a [Digital Services Toolkit](#).

1. Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, p. 16, World Health Organization, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and South African Medical Research Council, 2013.

2. [Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls](#), Department for International Development (DFID, U.K.), Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Help Research Desk, 16 March 2020.

3. [Women's Aid Organisation Twitter post](#), 9 April 2020.

4. [Commentary: Isolated with your abuser? Why family violence seems to be on the rise during COVID-19 outbreak](#), Channel News Asia, 26 March 2020.

5. [Domestic violence reports rise in China amid COVID-19 lockdown](#), The Globe and Mail, 29 March 2020

6. [Jakarta records spike in domestic violence reports during work-from-home period](#), The Jakarta Post, 7 April 2020.

7. [Domestic violence cases across India swell since coronavirus lockdown](#), Outlook, 7 April 2020.

8. [Domestic violence spikes during coronavirus as families trapped at home](#), 10 Daily, 27 March 2020

9. [Has COVID-19 really decreased domestic violence?](#), Sisa (in Korean), 20 April 2020.

10. [COVID-19 preparedness and response](#), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) interim technical brief, 23 March 2020.

11. [COVID-19 and women's human rights: Guidance](#), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 15 April 2020.

12. [Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls](#), DFID VAWG Helpdesk Research Report, 16 March 2020.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. [For abused women, a pandemic lockdown holds dangers of its own](#), New York Times, 27 March 2020.

16. [COVID-19 and women's human rights: Guidance](#), OHCHR, 15 April 2020.

17. [Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility](#), UNFPA; [COVID-19 and women's human rights: Guidance](#), OHCHR, 15 April 2020.

18. [Evidence brief: Cash transfers and intimate partner violence](#), The Prevention Collaborative, 2019.

19. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has [Interim guidance for homeless service providers to plan and respond to coronavirus disease 2019](#).

20. [French government to house domestic abuse victims in hotels as cases rise during coronavirus lockdown](#), Time, 31 March 2020.

21. [Albania adopts new protocol to ensure uninterrupted shelter services](#), UN Women, 21 April 2020.

22. [The invisible pandemic of violence against women and children: How you can help](#), Promundo, 10 April 2020; [Pandemics and violence against women and children](#), Center for Global Development, Working Paper 528, 1 April 2020.

23. [Australia coronavirus lockdown pushes 'safe phones' demand for women](#), Reuters, 25 March 2020

24. [Prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence in COVID-19 quarantine centres](#), International Committee of the Red Cross.

25. Safety Net Australia is a partnership between WESNET, a network of groups helping domestic violence survivors, and the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

26. [Safe Connections](#), WESNET.