

Inter-Agency Statement on Violence against Women and Girls in the Context of COVID-19



Introduction

The Secretary-General urged all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women and girls a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19. The appeal was answered in a statement by 146 Member States and Observers that expressed strong support. As the UN system, we continue to be dedicated to ending violence against women and girls and stand ready to support efforts that respond to this call.

Violence against women and girls is pervasive during normal times. It is a product of unequal gender power relations and discrimination against women and girls, which is exacerbated by conflict and humanitarian crises, poverty, economic stress, and, at times, the harmful use of alcohol or other drugs. Some of the measures to contain COVID-19, such as restrictions in movement and staying at home have increased exposure for those already in abusive relationships. This has been compounded by increased burdens and stress from domestic and care responsibilities and from loss of livelihoods, combined with fewer opportunities for social contact with informal and formal networks and limited access to services and community support.¹ This has resulted in alarming increases in reporting of violence against women to helplines and other services in some places and decreases in reporting in other settings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is imperative that practical steps be taken to ensure victims/survivors are safe and receive the support and services that they need now. This includes proactive efforts to integrate measures in all COVID-19 related preparedness and recovery plans to address violence against women and girls and ensure that these efforts are adequately resourced. The sad reality that violence against women and children often co-occur and intersect in many other ways merits attention to ensure prevention and response strategies are coherent and can impact on both.²

“I appealed for an end to violence everywhere, now. But violence is not confined to the battlefield. For many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest. In their own homes.”

António Guterres
UN Secretary-General

¹ See: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/series-evaw-covid-19-briefs>; <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25749&LangID=E>

² <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/pandemics-and-violence-against-women-and-children>

Critical Areas for Action

In solidarity with the Secretary-General, we highlight six critical areas for action:

1. Make urgent and flexible funding available for women's rights organizations and recognize their role as first responders

Increase funding from national and international aid budgets for women's rights organizations that are first responders during this and every crisis, including through [mechanisms such as the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women](#) as called for by the United Nations Secretary-General. As an Inter-Agency grant-giving mechanism, the UN Trust Fund EVAW is committed to supporting civil society and women's rights organizations' needs through this crisis.

2. Support health and social services to continue their duty of care to VAW survivors and to remain accessible, especially to those most likely to be left behind

Identify and provide information about services available locally (e.g. helplines, shelters, rape crisis centres, counselling) for survivors, including opening hours, contact details, and whether services can be offered remotely, and establish referral linkages, including for sexual and reproductive health services (e.g. HIV & STI testing and treatment, family planning, gender-based violence and harmful practices counselling). Inform health providers on the risks and health consequences of violence against women and girls. Offer first-line support and medical treatment for women and girls who disclose violence. Ensure that immediate post-rape care is continued to be provided and made accessible including through emergency services 24/7. Explore the use of mHealth and telemedicine to determine if support can be provided safely and with non-judgmental, empathetic listening tailored to the needs, concerns and experiences of survivors.

3. Ensure that services for VAWG survivors are regarded as essential, remain open and are resourced and made accessible especially to those most likely to be left behind

Ensure that VAWG organizations are able to stay open and continue to provide services for survivors, while able to establish the appropriate measures to protect staff and clients from COVID-19. Update information in service directories (including online) to ensure information about services available, opening times and contact numbers are widely disseminated. Ensure availability of services including counseling and other services for psychosocial support and equip specialist services with PPE and COVID-19 prevention related supplies and guidelines. Integrate an expansion of specialist services within recovery plans to account for the expected increase in support-seeking post-lock downs. Ensure that shelters and other safe accommodation (e.g. hotels, private rental schemes, unused public facilities) are protected and available, allowing for women and adolescent girls to bring their children, with tailored services to address their needs.

4. Place a high priority on police and justice responses

Mandate police and judicial systems to promptly respond to violence against women and children with specific warning and sanctioning measures should policies not be followed. Ensure continuation of court processes and allow applications for protective measures (including for children) through remote and electronic modalities. Remove perpetrators from the home (where safety can be ensured) and extend and enforce protection and restraining orders. Support victims in safety planning based on risk assessments. Assess and address safety risks concerning release, the granting of bail, parole and probation of offenders and inform victims when and where perpetrators are released.

5. Put preventative measures in place

Reduce the risk of violence occurring by putting in place measures, such as: providing financial and material support to women and households through cash transfers, loans, social safety nets and other modalities; encouraging healthy coping mechanisms and positive messaging around gender equality and healthy masculinities through public service announcements, distance learning, workplace communications and broader media; supporting access to mental health services; curtailing alcohol sales; and identifying opportunities to challenge gender stereotypes and roles, and social norms around gender and violence, while promoting prosocial and equitable behaviour. Incorporate key stakeholders in programming, including women and girls, men and boys and faith-based leaders. Invest in medium and longer-term approaches to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and in strategies that work to prevent violence against women and children by implementing the strategies outlined in [RE-SPECT Women: Preventing Violence against Women Framework](#) and [INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence against Children](#).

6. Collect data only if it is clear that it is needed, it will be used to improve services/programmes and ethical and safety standards can be met

Do not prioritize data collection on violence over women and girls' safety, privacy and confidentiality or where referrals to support services cannot be made. Only collect data if the objectives and rationale for data collection are clear and there is no risk of doing harm. Support institutions providing essential services (including health, police, legal aid, prosecution and judicial services) in the collection and analysis of anonymised data to enhance service delivery and the formulation and implementation of evidence-based and gender-responsive policies. Ensure services are prioritized, regardless of the availability of data given the well-established need.

As United Nations entities working to end violence against women and girls, we will:

- Continue to advocate for, and support governments in the implementation of effective approaches to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls
- Work with partners providing evidence-based guidance to inform national response and recovery plans
- Promote funding to women's rights organizations working at the front lines through the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women.
- Work to ensure that COVID-19 response mitigation and response plans integrate efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.
- Continue to document and share innovative solutions for the unique challenges posed by COVID-19.

In recent years, the global community has made significant progress towards the elimination of violence against women and girls. During these challenging times, we must, more than ever, be vigilant and remain steadfast in our efforts to ensure a positive trajectory and avoid regression of those hard-earned gains.