# COVID-19 and Ensuring Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls

Photo: Ariel Silva/ CDMX

# INTRODUCTION

The brief highlights emerging trends and implications for women and girls' safety in cities and public spaces, recognizing the continuum of violence against women and girls in private and public spaces throughout different phases of the pandemic.

It provides examples of concrete action taken at the local level in partnership with governments, grassroots women and women's rights organizations, the private sector and other partners, including from cities participating in the UN Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Flagship Initiative, and in particular from cities where the disease is widespread. The brief includes recommendations to be considered by governments, international organizations, women's rights and other civil society organizations.

It is a living document that complements other policy briefs prepared by UN Women on COVID-19 and ending violence against women. It draws upon the knowledge and experience of a wide range of experts who support solutions to end sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women and girls in urban, rural and online settings, attentive to the country context in which the crisis is occurring.

# COVID-19 AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN PUBLIC SPACES

## WOMEN AND GIRLS EXPERIENCE AND FEAR VARIOUS TYPES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN DIFFERENT PUBLIC SPACES

- In Canada, **ONE IN THREE WOMEN** are subjected to unwanted sexual behaviour in public spaces[i]

- In India, more than **TWO THIRDS** of young women, adolescent girls and men feel that rural village public spaces are unsafe for women after dark[ii]

- In Cuenca, Ecuador **90 %** of women living in urban areas have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the last 12 months[iii]

- In the European Union, **ONE IN TEN** women have experienced cyber-harassment since the age of 15[iv]

### During COVID-19, sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women continue to occur on streets, in parks, on transport, and online

- In Chile, Canada, Nigeria, the Philippines, Kenya, India, and the US cases of sexual violence against women in public spaces continue being reported during the crisis

- Different forms of online violence are on the rise including bullying, sexual harassment, and sex trolling

### Increased calls to domestic violence helplines, police and shelters have been reported by some cities

- In Vancouver, reports of domestic violence to helplines have increased by 300 % since the lockdown

- In New York, the number of visits to the city's domestic violence resource website, has nearly tripled - from about 45 visits per day to 115 between March 18 to April 5, 2020

## Fear and experience of sexual violence impacts women's right to the city

Freedom of Movement        Livelihoods        Access to Services

## LOCAL LEADERS RESPONDING TO COVID-19 CAN:

### SECURE RESOURCES
for personal protective equipment (PPE) and advocate for local resources in stimulus plans to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the crisis including on violence against women, youth and children.

### GET THE MESSAGE OUT
on COVID-19 and women's safety measures in place online and offline, in coordination with public health, police, schools, economic development, public transportation and other authorities and partners.

### ENSURE SAFE SPACES FOR WOMEN
and reassure victims/survivors including strengthening and expansion of shelters, helplines and counselling adapted to the crisis context.

i   Gender based violence and unwanted sexual behavior in Canada, 2018. Available at: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/191205/dq191205b-eng.htm
ii  Know Fear Project Report (2018). Available at https://www.idrc.ca/en/stories/know-fear-making-rural-public-spaces-safer-women-and-girls
iii UN Women (2018). Baseline Study: Cuenca Safe City and Safe Public Spaces with Women and Girls., p.8.
iv European Union (2018). Cyber violence and hate speech online against women. Available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU(2018)604979_EN.pdf

# TRENDS AND ISSUES

**Sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces is rooted in gender inequality and a human rights violation. It is a universal issue with great impact on victims/survivors, their families, and communities[1], and occurs on a continuum[2].**

Women and girls experience and fear various types of sexual violence in public spaces ranging from unwanted sexual remarks and touching, to rape and gender-related killing. It happens on streets, buses and trains, near schools and hospitals, in parks, public toilets, and markets and water and food distribution sites in diverse settings (urban, rural, conflict, post conflict).

It reduces women and girls' ability to participate in work, at school, and in public life, and limits their access to essential services and enjoyment of cultural and recreational opportunities. It is persistent and negatively impacts their health and well-being, with many other costs to communities[3].

Women and girls living in poverty, including those from socially excluded and stigmatized groups (indigenous, migrants, those living with disability, displaced women and girls, etc.) are at greater risk of sexual violence, and more vulnerable to its negative effects, especially because of experiences of discrimination and inequality, and limited access to information, services, resources and justice.

Many women and girls do not report their experiences of sexual violence for fear of reprisal, lack of confidence in authorities, lack of legislation on sexual harassment in public spaces[4], or its implementation, but also because of stigma or having further restrictions placed on their mobility.

The increased momentum gained through the #Metoo movement, #NiUnaMenos, and safe city free of violence against women and girls networks to break this vicious cycle require even more support, **as sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women during the pandemic continues to occur on streets, in parks, on transport, and online, with increased calls to domestic violence helplines, police and shelters in some cities[5].**

Current measures to respond to COVID-19 such as social distancing and curfews have decreased the number of people on the street, resulting in a heightened risk of sexual violence and other forms of violence that women regularly experience when exercising outdoors[6], working in public work settings[7], living on the street[8], traveling to and from home and work (for example those performing essential services, or those working in the informal sector).

Photo: UN Women/Johis Alarcón

Emerging data including from police, media and human rights organizations reveal that **sexual violence against women and girls in public spaces** continues to occur since the outbreak of COVID 19 in urban,[9] rural[10] and online settings. In Valparaiso, Chile, London, Canada[11], Nigeria[12], the Philippines, Kenya, India, and the US, government authorities and/or civil society partners have indicated cases of sexual violence against women in public spaces during the crisis, including some incidences where substance abuse is a facilitating factor[13].

Several women workers have reported increased sexual harassment as the price they pay for choosing to walk or cycle to work in order to avoid public transport during the pandemic. Women doctors and nurses have also received verbal attacks while in transit in India[14] and Mexico[15].

Where women have access to technology, **online violence** is also increasing[16]. Before COVID-19, one in 10 women in the European Union reported having experienced cyber-harassment since the age of 15 (including having received unwanted, offensive and sexually explicit emails or SMS messages, or offensive, inappropriate advances on social networking sites)[17].

Diverse media outlets and women's rights experts reveal that different forms of online violence are on the rise including stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, and sex trolling. Examples include unsolicited pornographic videos while women are dialing into a social event via a virtual chat room[18] or unwelcome sexual remarks made in the chat box during online work meetings or online classrooms.

The office of the eSafety Commissioner in Australia reports that online abuse and bullying have increased in the past month by 50 per cent and that bullying of children has increased by 21 per cent via video chat platforms. According to Europol, online activity by those seeking child abuse material is increasing during the pandemic[19].

Some reports indicate that calls to domestic violence helplines, police and shelters are increasing during the COVID-19 outbreak[20].

A Vancouver-based helpline for women experiencing domestic violence, received a 300 percent increase in calls in the past three weeks.[21] There has been a surge in the number of visits made to New York City's domestic violence resource website, NYC Hope in recent weeks, as the city attempts to curb the spread of the coronavirus by enforcing strict stay-at-home measures. Website visits more than doubled -- going from about 45 visits per day to 115 visits per day from the period of March 18th, 2020 to April 5th, 2020.

In other cases, reporting or calls for assistance or services are decreasing, as women find themselves unable to leave the house, access help online or via telephone, or may be afraid of using shelters during this time.

In Manitoba, Canada shelters/helplines have experienced a decline in calls for shelter. Calls to the provincial crisis line are also down since the lockdown. In Ecuador, the National Police and ECU 911 received 400 calls daily related to domestic violence at the beginning of March. Following the lockdown, these calls decreased

to an average of 235 calls per day at the national level.

While the risk of social disorder is low in some of the cities during the lockdown period, these may increase during the recovery period with increased risks of violence against women in public spaces**.** Evidence suggests that marginalized women are at higher risk of sexual violence and authoritarian abuse (i.e. those with disabilities, unstable housing, LGBTQI and migrants).[22] During COVID-19, as economic and social conditions deteriorate, particularly in situations where social relationships are already strained by persisting income inequality[23] public disorder and militarization of public spaces may increase[24]. This reality may increase the risk of sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women and girls in public spaces perpetrated by law enforcement agents[25].

The impact of violence on women and girls is severe in emergency settings, especially in contexts with poor functioning health systems, weak rule of law, high levels of violence against women and gender inequality.

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN'S RIGHT TO THE CITY

| Freedom of Movement | Freedom of Violence | Livelihoods | Access to Services |
|---|---|---|---|
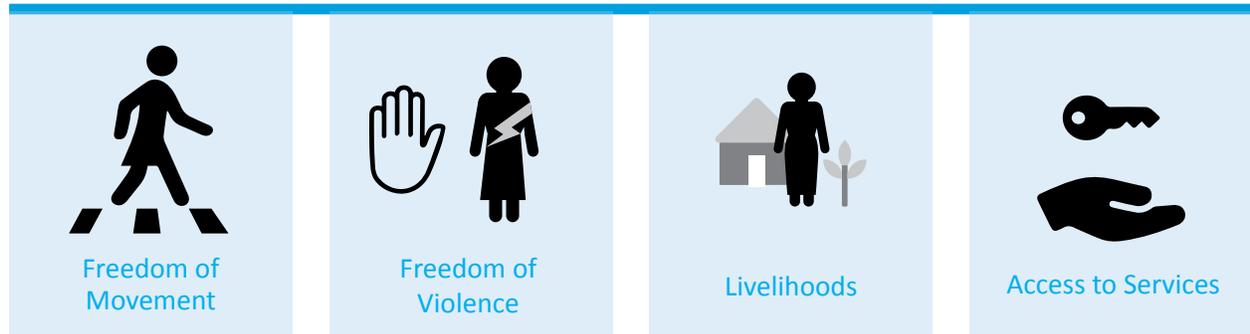
Fear and experience of sexual violence and crime in public spaces is highly gendered and racialized impacting women's **freedom of movement**, and denying them the same opportunity and right to the city as men enjoy.[26] Many cities have implemented strict quarantine conditions, with restrictions in movement, and in some cases mobility limitations by sex[27]. These measures may further shape women's perceptions of safety in public spaces and reduce their freedom of movement when restrictions are gradually lifted. Some cities, particularly in the United States, Canada, Germany and New Zealand[28] have seen an increase in the use of public spaces (i.e. neighborhood parks, streets, footpaths and bike lanes) while respecting social distancing measures in place which can help to foster women's appropriation of public spaces if their safety is ensured.

Before COVID-19, in many cities across the world women's perception of safety in public transport was much lower than men's perceptions. During the lockdown, public transport has also been severely reduced. There has been a decline in ridership as much as 80 to 90 per cent of some services[29] with lost revenue to cities, and a severe strain on budgets. With less bystanders in public transport and reduced last-mile connectivity, this reality may further affect **women's autonomous mobility and access to employment and essential services** during the lockdown. On the other hand, some cities like Bogota and New York have experienced a surge in alternative safe, affordable, and autonomous transport options during the pandemic for women and men, including cycling.

As health care workers become overburdened and prioritize COVID-19 cases, urgent support e.g., clinical management of rape, mental health assessment and care, including psycho-social counselling for survivors of violence, may be disrupted. **Access to critical sexual and reproductive health services**, including for women who have experienced violence, will likely become more limited[30].



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

The pandemic could also greatly affect **women's livelihoods, including in the informal sector.** The informal sector accounts for well over half of all urban employment, and largely dominated by women workers (i.e. women informal vendors, domestic workers, and women in tourism)[31].

In this context, COVID-`19 restrictions may have potential negative impacts on women participating in the informal economy including on their safety, livelihoods, and **food security**. For example, as street road traffic decreases and public markets continue to close, anecdotal evidence in Kampala, Uganda, El Alto, Bolivia and Quito, Ecuador suggest that women vendors are losing their produce and forced to sell their produce on empty and unsafe streets.

There is limited access to critical services, including **sanitation and safe housing** and an increase in unpaid care work across the globe during COVID-19. Stay-at-home orders and frequent hygiene practices are essential to cope with the health pandemic. However, in low- and middle-income countries, women are overrepresented in urban slums and they carry the burden of



Photo: © UN Women

water collection in 80 per cent of water deprived households[32]. For millions of women and girls, this reality increases the risk to sexual violence due to poor WASH access[33] and also makes social distancing next to impossible with cramped living conditions. COVID-19 restrictions implemented in deprived urban areas, will further affect time poverty and increase unpaid care work of women with children out-of-school, and the care provided for older persons[34].



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

# PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

Local governments can take action to respond to the public health crisis, and mitigate the social and economic impacts of COVID 19 on women and girls and communities in partnership with state/provincial and national governments, women's rights organizations, other civil society groups, UN Agencies, and the private sector, including through safe city free of violence against women and girls' policy and programme action.

## DELIVERING SERVICES AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH TO VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

- The City of Kigali, Rwanda has recently installed portable hand-washing stations in public spaces including at bus stops, taxi queues, car parks, and restaurants[35].
- The cities of Toronto, Canada, and San Francisco, United States are re-purposing public spaces (e.g. libraries, parks) to food banks to help those who are vulnerable during the pandemic.
- The city of Montreal, Canada is working to improve shelter services for the homeless, including new overflow shelters, and day centres providing assistance.
- In Ethiopia, the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth (MoWCY) in collaboration with UN Women are providing support to homeless women, youth and children including shelter, food and sanitary products during the emergency. In Hawassa City, safe city messages on prevention and response to domestic violence and sexual violence have been shared with religious authorities for community outreach.
- In Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, the National Capital District Commission (NCDC) and UN Women are providing soap, water, masks and other protective equipment to vendors, the majority of whom are women, as part of the Safe City Free of Violence against Women Initiative.
- The city of Valparaiso, Chile, as part of the Safe City and Safe Public Spaces Initiative is promoting bystander interventions around empty buildings to prevent violence against women in public spaces during COVID 19 in collaboration with the Mayor's office and UN Women.
- In Spain, a national law decree was endorsed to increase access to essential services during COVID-19 including shelters and emergency centers for survivors, and available rooms at hotels.

## ENSURING WOMEN'S SAFETY AND WELLBEING

- In the Brussels Region, Belgium a hotel has been fully requisitioned to accommodate women who have to flee their homes in case of violence.
- In New York, a new text programme and confidential online service for survivors to report instances of domestic violence or fears of being attacked was launched by the state Office to Combat Domestic Violence[36].
- In London, Canada, community partner to the London Safe City for Women and Girls Initiative, Anova has transitioned operations due to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation and to social distancing, while continuing to provide support for women survivors of domestic violence, and sexual violence and their children
- In Bolivia, the national government with support of UN Women, has provided guidance to the police, shelters, and the justice sector on how to improve reporting of violence during the emergency. A guide for survivors of violence on how to report and access services during the emergency was widely disseminated through social networks.

- In Cuenca, Ecuador, the Department for Women in coordination with other departments and civil society organizations is setting up a mechanism to support women survivors with information on how to report cases of violence and how to access services by telephone.

- In Bogota and Cali, Colombia and Mexico City, Mexico, safe city with women an girls' partners are working to strengthen apps and mobile technology to offer services to women survivors of violence during the quarantine.

- In Brasilia, Brazil the Secretariat for Women's Policies of the Federal District has launched a campaign to assist, welcome and protect women under threat of violence as a result of social isolation measures due to the COVID-19[37]

- In Colombia, authorities[38] have increased access to support services for survivors 24 hours 7 days a week, and Sisma Mujer, a woman's rights organization has enabled free access to psychosocial and justice support by email and telephone.

- UN Women is providing technical support and recommendations to national and local governments on COVID-19 gender, and ending violence against women, based on good practices from other cities.

- The cities of Boston, Oakland, and New York, United States, Calgary and Winnipeg Canada, and Bogota, Colombia are providing more space for pedestrians and cyclists by closing down streets to traffic, so they can maintain a safe distance, and enables safe mobility, increased health and wellness.

## INCREASING ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

- The city of New York has developed partnerships with IBM, Google and Apple to help address inequality by providing internet access and tools to support children living in underserved communities in distance learning.

- The city of Barcelona has established, through its local development agency services to inform and support domestic workers via email and telephone during COVID–19[39]

- In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil with support of the Ministry of Education, specific content for Microsoft Teams digital classroom platform and printed materials are being prepared for students.

- In Lima, Peru mobile markets have been set up to support families in disconnected neighborhoods and producers from peri-urban areas[40].

- In Madrid, Spain, city council has approved €63 million tax breaks on receipts from the Economic Activities Tax and the taxes for leisure, hospitality, commercial establishments, travel agencies and department stores, on the condition that they keep workers jobs until the end of year[41].

- As part of Canada's COVID-19 Response, support is being provided to connect students to meaningful employment and service opportunities, including students and recent graduates who are affected by the economic impacts of the pandemic[42].

# RECOMMENDATIONS

This uncertain time requires more than ever leaders within and across countries, cities and communities to draw their strengths and expertise across different sectors (public health, transportation, education, employment, law enforcement, etc.), different levels of government and in partnership with international and national civil society organizations and UN agencies to ensure safe, healthy and sustainable cities and public spaces with women throughout all phases of the pandemic. The needs and concerns of women who face multiple forms of discrimination and violence need to be prioritized.

Cities, regardless of their level of decentralization are critical in both informing and implementing National, regional and local COVID-19 plans, getting the message out on health and women and girls' safety, and sharing their good practices and lessons learned from action with cities within and across countries.

The policy and programme recommendations below take account of the different stages of COVID-19 with short, medium and long term action, and build on the recent **Global Commitment to Action**, launched during UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces Global Leaders' Forum, in Rabat, Morocco, adopted by over 30 cities on February 28th, 2020.

## LOCAL, STATE AND PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS, WITH SUPPORT OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT, UNITED NATIONS, AND DONOR PARTNERS

### DATA PARTNERSHIPS & COORDINATION

**Gender-responsive and locally relevant solutions to COVID-19 and violence against women and girls, with women in key decision-making roles**

- Conduct gender rapid assessment including sex-disaggregated data on the incidence of domestic violence, sexual violence and other forms violence against women and girls, by place of occurrence, in line with the guiding principles for data collection (See: Violence Against Women and Girls Data Collection during COVID-19).

- Identify capacity gaps on the COVID-19 response, and support capacity building of local governments and women's rights organizations in critical areas.

- Develop a coordination mechanism starting with public health, transportation, economic development, education, and law enforcement and develop a plan for re-entry/reopening of spaces with a focus on women's safety.

- Strengthen multi-sectoral partnerships, for example by including other experts (food security, digital economy, contact tracing approaches, etc.) which may be needed during the emergency and recovery stage.

- Create and expand spaces for women leaders and women's organizations to continue to participate in the decision-making processes in safe public spaces policy and programme action to help foster a deep understanding of the needs and concerns of their communities.

## LAWS, POLICY AND SERVICES

**Ensure COVID-19 policy and other related policy frameworks include women's safety approaches**

- Develop a strategy for outreach and support of those are more vulnerable during the crisis, including those experiencing violence, those living on the street and in shelters, children in care, persons living with disabilities, people being cared for at home by family members and in institutional settings. Increase and expand services to address violence against women, including through shelters, helplines and online counselling. This work should incorporate technology-based solutions such as SMS, online tools and networks for social support with close attention to issues of connectivity, digital literacy, etc. (See Essential Services and Online and ICT-facilitated Violence against Women and Girls Policy Briefs)

- Raise awareness that, to the extent possible, shelters and crisis centres operated by State and civil society organizations should remain open during the COVID-19 crisis, while adhering to necessary safety precautions.

- Ensure that increased incidents of violence against women and girls is given high priority by police and judicial institutions in the context of COVID-19.

- Consider the use of integrated mobile justice units, adapted to the social-distancing measures, to support holistic responses in cases involving violence against women and girls to reach those in more remote areas.

- Strengthen awareness raising efforts and capacity of police and military officers on sexual and gender-based violence, LGBTQI rights in private and public spaces during the lockdown and slowdown phases of the epidemic.

- Provide budgets, resources, tactical and long-term approaches to address violence against women (home, work, in public spaces on and offline) in local policy frameworks (local economic development, health, housing, recreation, sanitation, environment, management of safe public spaces, innovation, etc.)

- Inform Internet users about the protocols, where to report cases of online and ICT facilitated VAWG, and how to access essential services online during COVID-19.

## GENDER RESPONSIVE PLANNING OF CITIES AND PUBLIC SPACES

**Strengthen investments in the safety and economic viability of public spaces, including public infrastructure/economic development**

- Build in **drinking water and hand washing facilities** in safe and accessible places in informal settlements, public spaces, and high-traffic areas and engage women in **water management** plans.

- Adapt **women's safety principles in the re-purposing public spaces** for health and food security and temporary shelter (i.e. parking lots, libraries, parks, etc.) to guarantee women's safety during the emergency period, and in the revitalization of urban and rural spaces that form part of stimulus packages in the medium and long term to prevent VAWG in public spaces.

- Ensure **safe mobility** measures for women are considered during COVID-19 including for health workers and first responders- the majority of whom are women, by providing accessible, illuminated and safe alternative routes.

- Revise existing or develop protocols to ensure women's safety in **public transportation** during the period of restrictions an easing of restrictions of transport during the pandemic.

- Consider prioritizing and investing more on improving **housing** conditions where it is needed the most given that the conditions in rural, peri-urban and urban settlements (and in some instances public housing and other institutional settings in cities) may be difficult for social distancing, and particularly prone for spreading the virus.

- Consider the role of women's organizations in recovery plans and the longer-term solutions to address violence against women and girls during lockdown, slowdown and recovery phases of COVID-19 in urban, rural, and online settings.

- Allocate resources for the ongoing work of women's movements and implement and support the creation of flexible funding to cover the time of women's rights groups when other services may be temporarily suspended.

- Adapt response, mitigation and recovery approaches at the local level in relation to safe spaces to the realities of women and men in conditions of informality.

- Ensure women's economic empowerment plans form part of the requests for stimulus packages advocated by local government in diverse sectors

- Build partnerships with the private sector to address the digital divide, and to provide access to women, youth and children to support the continuance and advancement of distance learning.

- Support soft skills, vocational skills and digital literacy among youth at risk of violence, adolescent girls and boys to protect against the risk of victimization.

## WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS, GRASSROOTS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS- UN AGENCIES

### COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND ADVOCACY

**Attitudes and behavior related to women's and girls' rights to enjoy public spaces free from sexual violence**

- Contribute to support the implementation of training on key principles of strategic and effective women's safety approaches during the pandemic. Use of radio and other media to connect with grassroots women and communities will be even more important when in-person training cannot take place.

- Share knowledge and expertise on the prevention and response to violence against women and taking into account the specific needs of marginalized women at risk of sexual violence during the pandemic.

- Engage the media, private sector, and schools to raise the visibility of increased violence against women and girls along the continuum of violence in private and public spaces, demonstrating how the risk factors that drive sexual violence are exacerbated in the context of COVID-19.

- Strengthen and enhance partnerships at local, national and international levels to promote women's and girls' empowerment and leadership through: knowledge production and exchange, community mobilization, and advocacy about women and girls who are at risk of online and offline gender-based violence during COVID-19, and how and where to report and seek assistance.
- Foster community and bystander approaches among neighbors in and around neighborhoods, streets and public spaces to prevent violence against women and girls and contribute to changing social norms (See forthcoming Prevention and COVID 19, Policy Brief).

## PRIVATE SECTOR

- Support action implemented by women's rights and other civil society organizations in collaboration with local governments and UN Agencies to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, drawing on available global frameworks and accompanying practical guidance.
- Provide leave to employees to volunteer in food banks, and to respond to other critical needs during COVID-19 identified by volunteer community organizations and local governments.
- Support online vocational skills training, and other employment training and mentoring programmes for youth at risk of victimization and perpetration of violence.
- Continue to invest and collaborate with feminist tech companies and civil society organizations in the development of women's safety online and offline solutions in the short, medium, and long- term.
- Allocate resources to information and education campaigns on preventing violence against women and girls, combined with on the ground community mobilization activities following social distancing guidelines.

# ENDNOTES

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2   The continuum of violence against women is a term coined by Liz Kelly in 1988 in *Surviving Sexual Violence*. It recognizes that forms of violence against women are complex and linked, including some of the more well-known violations of women's rights to also the subtle or distorted forms of control over women's lives, bodies, and sexuality

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