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## *From Global Coordination to Local Strategies*

# **A Practical Approach to Prevent, Address and Document Domestic Violence under COVID-19**

## **Briefing Paper**

With 90 countries in lockdown and nearly four billion people sheltering at home from the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence has become an epidemic within an epidemic. In response, UN Secretary General Guterres called for a global “ceasefire” on domestic violence, lending high-level support to this long-standing demand. To have meaning, the Secretary General’s call must be coupled with action at the local level—where domestic violence actually occurs. This is where local women’s organizations play a crucial role. The international interventions that follow should look to women’s groups working on the frontlines of the crisis to lead.

Before COVID-19, domestic violence was already a global emergency. One out of every three women in the world will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, most at the hands of intimate partners. Nearly half of all women in the world have experienced psychological violence. Those who face gender violence as well as discrimination and persecution on the basis of race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics, age, ethnicity, economic status, caste, or class, are at further risk and often have access to far fewer resources.

The pandemic has exacerbated conditions that too often lead to violence. Stress and anxiety brought on by the outbreak can leave abusers feeling out of control, triggering violence that is rooted in a sense of entitlement and power. Measures to control the spread of coronavirus, while important for public health, can create more danger. Social distancing reinforces the isolation that abusers impose. Lockdown cuts off avenues of support and escape.

## *Taking Action*

The emergency responses we enact now will seed plans globally to address the rise in gender-based violence that crises invariably trigger, while strengthening mechanisms to change the attitudes and policies that have made domestic violence endemic in the lives of so many. Women's grassroots groups all over the world are seeing increasing domestic violence, and seeking ways to address it amidst new challenges. Some women's groups have experience addressing gender violence in the context of armed conflict or other disasters. A number have developed innovative adaptations to the COVID-19 environment. Others are searching for ways to respond.

Because the current crisis demands an intersectional approach, rapidly deployed across the globe, a coalition of leading international organizations who work in collaboration with local organizations globally on intersecting issues, including women's rights, disability justice, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, (LGBTIQ) rights and gender non-conforming persons, and men's allyship, have come together and formed a coalition on this issue (in alphabetical order): MADRE, Media Matters for Women, MenEngage Alliance, Nobel Women's Initiative, OutRight Action International, Women Enabled International, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Together we have analyzed successful interventions to make key programmatic recommendations for grassroots organizations working on the frontlines of gender and the COVID-19 crisis; as well as policy recommendations for the international community.

In the coming weeks we will release a toolkit that provides global strategies adaptable for local communities for effective grassroots responses, including social media content for violence prevention campaigns and tactics for addressing abuse in the current environment of physical distancing, isolation, lockdowns, and remote work of many organizations. Our hope is that organizations can adopt and tailor these responses to their own contexts. While not intended to be a stand-alone manual for stopping domestic violence, this briefing paper, its key recommendations, and the forthcoming toolkit are meant to spark action and serve as a practical initial guide. The toolkit will be translated from English into French, Spanish, Arabic, and Swahili and contain resources for three overarching strategies, described in detail below: preventing domestic violence; addressing domestic violence, and; documenting domestic violence in COVID-19 affected communities.

## **Programmatic Recommendations for Local and National Organizations**

Below is a brief compilation of recommended programmatic changes or inputs that draw from women's grassroots organizations' experiences and actions in settings of conflict or disaster throughout the globe. These activities can be adopted to prevent, address, and document domestic violence in various contexts in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. Local and national organizations should take advantage of a variety of forms of these communications, in order to reach the widest audience and ensure accessibility.

In social distancing environments, activities may be performed through various media, for example:

1. Bluetooth sharing. This method of viral mobile-to-mobile message transfers could be adopted on a larger scale, using short podcasts directly focused on domestic violence and COVID-19.
2. National and community radio and television. Feminist groups can provide tailored messaging, talk show content or public service announcements for local and national radio and television audiences, providing sign language interpretation to reach deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences.
3. Social media. Feminist groups can utilize online platforms as a space for key domestic violence prevention messages. They can also provide some supportive services through social networking websites such as Facebook and mobile applications such as WhatsApp, Signal, or Viber.
4. Community engagement. This may include spreading messages via word of mouth or loudspeaker, and group activities that can be performed at a safe distance.
5. Printed outreach materials. Organizations can distribute literature, such as flyers, brochures, or comic strips; or hang posters where community members frequent. Printed materials should take a range of formats, including Braille, and use simple language and pictures where possible.

## I. Preventing Domestic Violence

### 1. Engage community leaders to promote zero-tolerance for domestic violence.

**Why it helps:** Community leaders and other influencers can use their power and social standing to promote progressive gender norms, encourage healthy relationship behaviors and condemn domestic violence. They can help create a culture in which domestic abuse is unacceptable. Their examples can encourage family members, neighbors and bystanders to speak up when they learn about domestic violence. They can also use their platform to debunk harmful stereotypes about gender roles, including about household responsibilities, helping uproot patriarchal norms that undergird gender-based violence.

**How it works:** Discuss the crisis of domestic violence with community leaders, elders, politicians, sports heroes, celebrities, or other influential people, and ask them to make statements speaking out against abuse at home. Broadcast these messages through radio, television and social media platforms. Start hashtags and online campaigns that promote positive messages about women and girls and vulnerable groups. Message can also teach families how to be safe from coronavirus, declare that abuse is never acceptable, and that encourage community members to de-escalate and speak out against violence.

**Example:** In Myanmar, a women’s organization is creating podcast episodes to bring awareness about gender-based violence, hygiene, and human rights by interviewing young leaders who speak out on these topics. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a women’s organization is broadcasting radio messages by men who are community leaders on the importance of helping women with household chores.

## **2. Conduct online and shareable podcast programming for youth and young couples that teaches positive and healthy relationship skills.**

**Why it helps:** Research shows that awareness programs for youth and young couples can help them develop non-violent interpersonal conflict mitigation strategies that can prevent future domestic violence.i

**How it works:** Consider airing short online skits or audio podcasts that showcase examples of positive and healthy relationships where couples use constructive communication and peaceful conflict resolution techniques. Skits and drama series featuring fictional characters can capture audiences, encourage helpful parenting skills for all genders, and provide positive messaging around caregiver support in ways that can effectively overcome challenges or disagreements in the home.

**Example:** In Iraq, a youth organization is holding self-care calls with youth activists they work with, starting support groups for young women from displacement, refugee, and host communities, and providing secure chat access to counseling for LGBTIQ youth in quarantine. In Colombia, youth activists are performing online skits to teach non-violent ways to handle real-time frustrations and family conflicts during the pandemic.

## **3. Build men’s allies within families and the community and publicize their positive views.**

**Why it helps:** Building allies and broadcasting positive examples of gender roles and behavior contributes to an atmosphere of non-violence, and helps change patriarchal mindsets. Promoting feminist social norms not only works to deter violence, it can also encourage men, boys, and other allies to intervene and support those at risk before violence takes place.

**How it works:** Encourage men and other allies who condemn domestic violence to speak up and share their stories in ways that dismantle harmful stereotypes on gender roles and behaviors. Testimonies might include vignettes about men taking up their fair share of household chores and sharing responsibility for other domestic tasks with women in their families, especially during COVID-19 lock downs. They may also describe their role as fathers or caregivers who utilize peaceful alternatives to physical violence and promote gender-equality among their children.

**Example:** In Costa Rica, an organization initiated a campaign entitled, “Confronting the COVID-19 Crisis Together” that includes a series of videos and posters with suggestions on what men and boys can and should do during the period of lockdown, as well as raising awareness on psychosocial issues that men and boys may face during the COVID-

19 outbreak. From Sri Lanka to South Africa to Mexico organizations have initiated social media campaigns on the ‘roles and responsibilities of men and boys to advance gender equality and transform patriarchal masculinities’ especially during lockdowns.

#### **4. Integrate domestic violence prevention messaging into COVID-19 prevention materials for health care providers, humanitarian aid and outreach workers in war-torn countries.**

*Why it helps:* Outreach workers and the local journalists covering their work on the frontline of COVID-19 prevention are well positioned to reach hard-to-access communities. Equipped with the right prevention materials and referral resources, they can help prevent domestic violence and identify survivors who need services. Built-in feedback loops are important for sharing their insights and learning with a variety of media.

*How it works:* Equip humanitarian aid, health care providers, and local media with reader-friendly outreach materials on domestic violence prevention. These first responders often access hard-to-reach families. They can, for example, distribute brochures, both written and graphic, with information that deters violent behavior in the home and offers hotline numbers or other resources for survivors. Messaging should be included in larger COVID-19 prevention information materials so as to not draw attention to survivor resources.

*Example:* A Palestinian organization developed a women’s rap group in a refugee camp dance. After the COVID-19 outbreak, they are now starting awareness-raising about preventative care, mental health effects of the crisis and domestic violence awareness via video chat. In Sierra Leone, women’s organizations are looking to spread audio messages on COVID-19 and domestic violence prevention through Bluetooth sharing of short podcasts on mobile phones.

## **II. Addressing Domestic Violence**

### **1. Redirect psycho-social support services through online mechanisms.**

*Why it helps:* Direct service providers have long espoused the positive impacts of peer-to-peer and one-on-one counseling for domestic violence survivors. Having someone to talk to can help provide emotional support and survival strategies to survivors and their children who are isolated from other allies by mandatory physical distancing measures.

*How it works:* When face-to-face counseling is ill advised, emergency helplines for psychosocial support through phone lines, text messaging services, or online platforms can help domestic violence survivors access the help they need. For extreme cases in which survivors require in-person intervention, outreach workers or essential service providers can be trained on how to take necessary precautions against COVID-19.

**Example:** A women’s organization in Kenya is holding weekly awareness campaigns via SMS on COVID-19 prevention and weekly mental health education and counseling via phone/SMS, and advertising these campaigns at food and sanitation distribution centers.

## **2. Provide support to those living in social isolation.**

**Why it helps:** Survivors under the close watch of an abuser may only be able to reach out for support once. Shelters may be shuttered or far away. Service providers, including emergency helpline staff, should be trained to give quick advice on immediate coping mechanisms, such as a necessary escape from an active abuser. They may also make referrals to shelters or other support.

**How it works:** One way to support survivors and those at risk is to help them create their own personalized physical and emotional safety plan and share information on helpline numbers and at shelters if and when they decide to escape. Stay aware of helplines that may be available for support via text messaging or online platforms and which shelters are currently open, physically accessible and allow support animals such as guide dogs.

**Example:** An Indigenous women’s organization in Guatemala is producing radio broadcasts on domestic violence prevention and where services are available in Indigenous languages to help to reach survivors who do not speak Spanish.

## **3. Organize community responses during stay-at-home orders.**

**Why it helps:** Community members like family, friends and neighbors are more easily accessible and may be able to intervene faster than others. Survivors who may not be in a position to reach out for formal support services can depend on community members to reach out to emergency hotlines to report the danger that the survivor is facing. Letting the abuser know that people in the community are aware of what is happening and that they actively condemn domestic violence can help deter further abuse.

**How it works:** Survivors can use visual or audio signals outside their homes, or use code words on the phone or online to signal the need for help. Community members can respond to such signals including by calling emergency hotlines or through innovative peaceful action, such as organizing to alert abusers inside homes to their presence by intervening from outside the home. Local journalists can also be key to effectively spreading the word about community responses.

**Example:** One Indigenous organization in Nicaragua organizes its community members to surround the house of a survivor and her abuser, banging loudly on pots and pans (while at a safe distance from each other), when the survivor needs help. This is to alert and deter the abuser from using violence.

### III. Documenting Domestic Violence

#### 1. Create systems to track the quantity and nature of calls for help.

*Why it helps:* Domestic violence is underreported almost everywhere in the world, in part because stigma and lack of safety measures pose challenges for data gathering. Grassroots women’s organizations have developed mechanisms to track domestic violence, understand its nature, and describe its impacts. This type of documentation is more than a legal strategy, it’s key to changing social norms about domestic violence.

In many societies, people do not consider domestic violence a crime, and because of this, women are forced to endure physical and psychological trauma without access to medical, legal or social services. Documentation can help demonstrate the extent and gravity of domestic violence, and challenge harmful norms. In places where there is a normative rejection of domestic abuse, lack of documentation enables people to deny the scope of the problem, demonstrating that domestic violence occurs helps mobilize people to end it.

Right now, domestic violence is increasing along with the social and economic toll of the pandemic. Documenting this violence now will help communities and decision-makers understand the need to prioritize constructive responses to it.

*How it works:* Many grassroots organizations are receiving messages from domestic violence victims in search of services and safety. By creating a protected database that contains anonymized data about these calls for help, organizations can establish quantifiable evidence regarding the scale of the domestic violence crisis. Documenting domestic violence involves a number of inherent risks to both respondents and interviewers, and organizations should also consult local guidelines on working with survivors.

*Example:* The World Health Organization has developed a set of guidelines to minimize the risk of harm to researchers and participants. World Health Organization, “*Putting Women’s Safety First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women*” (2001).

#### 2. Document all forms of domestic violence to better address specific needs of marginalized persons and communities.

*Why it helps:* While prevention programs and direct services for domestic violence survivors have increased, few programs have been systematically evaluated to assess what works and for which survivors, including persons with disabilities, members of the LGBTIQ community or members of other marginalized groups.<sup>ii</sup> This is in part due to the dearth of disaggregated data available on domestic violence survivors and the range of abuses they suffer from. All forms of domestic violence dramatically increase during times of crisis. COVID-19 is no exception. Capturing all of its forms deepens our understanding of how violence works and helps identify where a more tailored response

is needed. This understanding helps to better channel resources and efforts where they are most likely to make a difference.

***How it works:*** Documenting domestic violence usually entails capturing reports made by survivors of physical or emotional abuse by intimate partners. In order to have a holistic understanding we also need to document cases of other forms of domestic violence, such as “honor” crimes, femicides, acid attacks, forced genital mutilation, early, forced or temporary marriage, economic violence, withholding of needed medications and assistive devices, forced institutionalization, reproductive violence and sexual violence, including marital rape. Documenters should identify when a survivor is a member of a vulnerable population, including persons with disabilities, children and youth, older persons, LGBTIQ and gender non-conforming persons. For persons with disabilities, those helping with documentation should make special efforts to reach these women or other family members and ensure that they can communicate with them. For example, documenters may need to have access to sign language interpreters or modify questions to make them understandable. Finally, documentation should track where responses and resources are focused to expose disparities in resource distribution, which can adversely impact ethnic and racial minorities, Indigenous communities, refugees, migrants, stateless people, people in war zones and other marginalized communities.

***Example:*** An Afro-Colombian organization is documenting domestic violence in their territories and recording it in an online database. In Iraq a women’s organization is documenting domestic violence from intake in their shelters and from survivors who call or contact them via social media. In Armenia, a local women’s disability rights organization is documenting challenges and successes by collecting images and stories of women and girls with disabilities.

## **Key Recommendations for Governments, UN Agencies, and International Organizations**

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolds, governments and multilateral institutions should maintain transparency, live up to their obligations, encourage civil society involvement, and ensure access to national, regional and international systems of accountability. Below are five practical recommendations for members of the international community.

**1. Integrate domestic violence prevention messaging into COVID-19 prevention materials for health care providers, humanitarian aid and outreach workers.** While separate programming for COVID-19 prevention and domestic violence prevention is appropriate in some situations, uniting the messages can help reduce duplicate outreach efforts in the same communities, and more effectively capitalize on the aid workers’ reach. Providing domestic violence prevention and outreach information together with COVID-19 prevention outreach materials also helps reduce the visibility of victim support information, making it less noticeable to abusers. Outreach workers on the



frontline of COVID-19 prevention are well positioned to reach hard-to-access communities. Equipped with the right prevention materials and referral resources, healthcare providers can help prevent domestic violence and identify survivors who need services.

**2. Fund services that are tailored to meet the needs of all persons vulnerable to domestic violence.** Vulnerable populations include for example, women, persons with disabilities, children and youth, older persons, and LGBTIQ and gender non-conforming persons. Outreach and prevention messaging should be suited to reach these populations, and services should be accessible for vulnerable survivors and tailored to meet their specific needs.

**3. Recognize and address all forms of domestic violence.** To comprehensively prevent and address domestic violence we must recognize all of its forms. Domestic violence includes intimate partner abuse as well as abuse of other family or household members including women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons, LGBTIQ and gender non-conforming persons. Domestic violence may also include for example “honor” crimes, femicides, acid attacks, forced genital mutilation, early, forced, and temporary marriage, physical violence, psychological and emotional violence, economic violence, withholding of medications and assistive devices, forced institutionalization, reproductive violence and sexual violence, including marital rape. All forms of domestic violence dramatically increase during crises including COVID-19. However, prevention methods will not deter increases in violence where there are inconsistencies in the way violence is conceptualized and measured.

**4. Implement policies and programs that address the root causes of domestic violence.** This requires the establishment of a comprehensive legal and policy framework to end domestic violence. At its root and like all gender-based violence, domestic violence is a tool to enforce oppressive gender norms and gender inequality. In all societies, cultural norms, laws, and policies can either promote or discourage domestic violence, determine the interpretation of specific acts of violence, and define whether they are prohibited. International law prohibits gender-based violence, including domestic violence, which at its root is committed against persons who deviate from the oppressive roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes assigned to them.<sup>iii</sup> Policies and programs should seek to address harmful norms while providing prevention measures, direct services and access to justice for survivors.

**5. Monitor resource distribution to marginalized communities.** Governments should also monitor and report on where responses are focused and ensure the equitable distribution of resources for ethnic and racial minorities, Indigenous communities, refugees, migrants, stateless people, people in war zones and other marginalized communities.

**6. Fund local organizations responding to domestic violence, including groups adapting their programming to address rising violence in the context of COVID-19.** Support local strategies to prevent violence, address the needs of survivors, and document

abuse. Organizations that have built strong and trusting relationships with their communities, have a better track records for effectively mobilizing local leaders and sharing accurate information and practices for preventing the spread of COVID-19 and domestic violence. They can also act as liaisons with regional and national coordinators and provide information to the health care workers and national agencies on the rise of outbreaks or violence. Local women’s organizations for example, often lead in providing shelter for the most vulnerable. They also act as first responders, providing much needed direct services, including counseling or peer-to-peer support. In war-torn countries, they often have better access across checkpoints and inside hot zones.

**7. Support grassroots feminist journalists and their professional associations.**

Local journalists can be key for enabling culturally sensitive women’s issues to emerge, leading the way to better-informed communities and improved quality of media coverage. For example, under Ebola conditions in Sierra Leone, women and girls facing domestic violence notably began decreasing their use of police, medical, and social services. In response, local journalists engaged with their audiences on the different kinds of domestic violence, gave voice to affected women, and identified the many issues that prevented women from seeking justice. Local professional women journalist associations were instrumental in helping freelance reporters continue working under emergency conditions.

**8. Incorporate a gender-based violence analysis into government and global health institutions’ responses to COVID-19, including in public policy, economic and health solutions.** One way to do this is by incorporating domestic violence prevention messaging, hotlines and other resources for survivors into outreach materials used to stop the spread of COVID-19. Governments should assess essential services and ensure they include shelters, emergency judicial responses, passage for survivors where movement is restricted, and other emergency responses survivors can access. Multi-sectoral and comprehensive response mechanisms should be instituted, or revived where they already exist, to provide holistic response to domestic violence. Domestic violence and sexual assault disproportionately impact women, and other vulnerable persons. Women are disproportionately overrepresented among low-wage, informal, and essential workers. Economic policy responses should protect survivors from economic peril, support women’s economic wellbeing and include resources for domestic violence survivors.

i Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, *Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Across the Lifespan: A Technical Package of Programs, Policies, and Practices*, 15-16 (2017), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-technicalpackages.pdf>.

ii World Health Organization, *Violence Against Women: Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Against Women: Evidence Brief*, 3 (2009), <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/329889/WHO-RHR-19.16-eng.pdf?ua=1>.

iii For a legal definition of gender-based violence under international law see, International Criminal Court, Office of the Prosecutor, *Policy Paper on Sexual and Gender-Based Crimes*, 3, 5, 12 (2014), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/iccdocs/otp/otp-policy-paper-on-sexual-and-gender-based-crimes--june-2014.pdf>.