

Mitigating Domestic Violence During COVID-19:

How Institutions Can Support First Responders

Called the “shadow pandemic”, domestic violence has increased globally since the emergence of COVID-19. From Argentina to Singapore, [reports](#) indicate a 25-33% increase in domestic violence evidenced by the number of cases, calls to hotlines, and demands for emergency shelter. Given that less than 40% of those who experience violence report crimes or seek support, the actual rate is likely much higher. The impact of physical distancing and lockdown measures on women and girls also includes restricted movement, increased isolation, online or cyber violence, and fewer options to access services.

The following recommendations to governments and the international community are developed from ICAN’s consultation with partners in the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) across 38 countries and a review of existing literature. We offer key steps based on existing good practices and recommendations for new initiatives and urgently needed reforms that can prevent and reduce domestic violence immediately and sustainably:

1. **Services are essential:** The prevalence of domestic violence and the lockdown measures have created additional pressure for hospitals, organizations, and shelters to respond to the needs of survivors. Recognizing domestic violence as an emergency public health issue, governments should:
 - Deem shelters and domestic violence organizations as essential services
 - Channel direct funding to civil society organizations to enable their work
 - Use hotels, schools, and other public spaces as shelters and safe spaces
 - Coordinate with civil society to update referral pathways and support community networks

2. **Increase awareness:** Given the stigma and taboo surrounding domestic violence in many cultures, many people may not recognize the extent of the problem or know how to seek support. Governments and the international community, with the support of civil society, should:
 - Scale up public awareness campaigns about domestic violence and where to seek help
 - Adapt messaging to target different community groups including men, youth, LGBT, and differently abled people
 - Collaborate with religious and community leaders to speak out against violence, including honor killings, FGM, and early marriage
 - Sensitize and collaborate with journalists and the media to increase awareness

3. **Judicial systems must function:** Preventing and responding to domestic violence requires a holistic, whole of society approach, including government policy, access to justice, and protection mechanisms. Despite physical distancing measures, government agencies including the courts must continue to function. COVID-19 presents an opportunity to strengthen and integrate processes concerning domestic violence into national response strategies. Specifically, governments should:

- Pass and enforce existing legislation prohibiting domestic violence and violence against women
 - Invest in national and community protection mechanisms like code “Mask 19” to facilitate access to police, hotlines, and other services
 - Increase access to justice through online services, the extension of protection orders, and ordering perpetrators to leave family homes
 - Training police on domestic violence and not tolerating impunity
 - Integrate mental health and domestic violence services into response strategies for COVID-19 at the national, regional, and local levels
 - Integrate social workers and counselors into health and emergency response teams
 - Increase access to technology and online services
4. **Engage and support men directly:** Men, women, boys and girls can all be victims of domestic violence; however, more men are at risk of perpetrating domestic violence. Governments and the international community can provide gender responsive services by:
- Communicating information about services available for men
 - Fostering men’s support networks online and in communities
 - Funding and supporting civil society organizations who can support men to manage stress and strengthen family relationships
 - Encouraging men to ask for help
 - Providing jobs and economic stimulus packages to alleviate economic burden

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