



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Transnational Threats Department
Strategic Police Matters Unit

Office of the Secretary General
Programme for Gender Issues

Domestic Violence and the COVID-19 Crisis

Trends, Measures Taken, Recommendations and Potential Areas of Assistance

I – Introduction

The OSCE recognizes violence against women and girls as a human rights violation and a threat to security. The Organization's Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality (MC.DEC 14/04) and other relevant commitments underline the importance of preventing and combating violence against women and urge participating States to include a gender perspective in every policy, programme and activity.

The COVID-19 crisis has heavily impacted the dynamics of gender-based violence. Violence against women and girls was already one of the greatest violations of human rights, and in some countries the number of cases reported has increased since the introduction of measures to contain the virus. In others there has been a decrease of reported cases, which should not be viewed as an indication of less violence but as a side-effect of lockdown measures.

This paper aims to highlight the effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic on gender-based violence, with a focus on domestic violence (DV). It furthermore outlines potential measures and recommendations on how to address the negative effects of the current crisis on the prevention of DV and the support to victims.

For the purpose of this document, DV refers to *all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim*¹. Domestic violence affects women and girls disproportionately². Men and boys can also be victims of DV.

¹ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), available at: <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>

² In 2018, the OSCE conducted a survey on the Well-being and Safety of Women to provide comparable data on different forms of violence women experience in their childhood and throughout the course of their lives. The research examined violence that women experience in conflict and non-conflict settings, as well as the impact violence has on women, including its lasting consequences. Questions on norms and attitudes connected to violence against women were asked to better understand the underlying causes of violence. The Main Results Report of the OSCE-led survey is available at: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/413237?download=true>

II – Situation

The COVID-19 crisis, and specifically the containment measures taken, such as social distancing and quarantine, have an exacerbating effect on the levels of DV. Moreover, factors such as growing economic uncertainty, potential job loss, higher levels of stress and alcohol consumption, influence the dynamics of violence. These circumstances add onto the deeply rooted causes of gender-based violence, such as unequal power relations between women and men and harmful social norms and attitudes.

Reports from international and regional organizations, as well as national authorities and civil society, show that while some countries in the OSCE region are facing an increased number of cases of DV, other countries seem to experience a decrease in cases reported³. The latter can be explained by the close proximity to the perpetrator or the lack of safe and confidential access to a phone or internet connection. Consequently, victims find it more difficult to reach out to specialized services, such as police authorities, health and social services, and women support organizations. The crisis also poses additional challenges to authorities and service providers to deliver timely and effective support to victims. Additionally, should they decide to take further action, victims face limited access to justice authorities; for example, trials can be cancelled or postponed without further notice and, in countries where protection orders are issued by courts, access to courts can be limited or delayed.

III – Measures taken in some OSCE participating States

The following list of measures to protect and provide support to victims of DV has been compiled to provide concrete examples of actions taken by various national authorities from the OSCE region. This set of measures is not exhaustive. While the issue is being addressed by some OSCE participating States, civil society organizations have also raised concern over the lack of special measures being implemented by others. Therefore, the overview of measures below aims to highlight some measures that are being implemented in several participating States.

General measures

- Ensuring that all procedures and services providing support to victims of DV remain in place and functioning as efficiently as possible;
- Collaborating with NGOs and international organizations to provide information and support to DV victims;
- Creating a specialized governmental task force aimed at monitoring the availability of shelters and assistance infrastructures, and identifying needs of victims that arise over time;

Awareness raising

- Implementing TV, radio and social media campaigns, as well as distributing posters and information brochures, in order to raise awareness on all services available during the pandemic for victims of DV;

³ TNTD/SPMU information results from a wide range of open sources made available by international and regional organizations, such as WHO, UNESCO, UNHCR, Council of Europe, as well as national authorities and media.

Access to justice

- Ensuring that emergency barring orders, and protection or restraining orders are issued and enforced. Examples include measures such as electronic restraining orders filing, prioritizing court proceedings aimed at issuing such orders and enforcing the eviction of violent partners despite containment measures;
- Moving court services online, prioritizing DV cases and conducting hearings online;

Access to emergency hotlines and shelters

- Setting up and/or strengthening national helplines which are available 24/7, are free of charge and guarantee complete anonymity;
- Monitoring and strengthening the capacities of help centers and shelters, by providing additional funding and increasing capacity, and working on finding practical ways to ensure work continuity while complying with infection protection measures; some countries are using hotel rooms and vacant apartments to temporarily house domestic victims during periods of mandatory quarantine;
- Ensuring that victims can leave their homes to reach the nearest support centres or shelters, without having to fear being sanctioned by police authorities for violating confinement measures;
- Setting up emergency accommodation provided by the government to ensure emergency shelter for victims, as well as for perpetrators evicted from their homes.
- Establishing hotlines and/or facilities designed to provide support and counselling to aggressors seeking help to address their violent behaviour;

Reporting mechanisms

- Setting up online information pages with up to date information on accessibility of support services and a list of women centers (eg. shelters), and emergency contacts on official government websites;
- Setting up designated websites and police emergency numbers that victims can contact, such as DV reporting platforms that provide assistance, advice and the opportunity to interact with law enforcement officials;
- Adapting methods to report violence in order to allow victims to report discreetly, such as setting up emergency WhatsApp chats, codewords that can be texted to designated numbers or allowing victims to call authorities without having to speak;
- Setting up and/or strengthening national helplines which are available 24/7, are free of charge and guarantee complete anonymity;
- Setting up specific locations where victims can report DV incidents, such as designated shops or pharmacies. Moreover, in some countries a codeword has also been established in order to allow victims to seek help even if they are accompanied by their abuser;

Prevention

- Ensure police proactively follow-up on closed DV cases to inquire about the safety of the victims and provide advice;
- Establish and promote online and telephone services where male aggressors can get advice and psychological support.

Several OSCE executive structures are supporting their host countries in preventing and combating DV. Examples include a rapid assessment of gendered implications of COVID-19 measures conducted by the OSCE Mission to Serbia and an awareness raising video for the public on availability of services, developed by the OSCE Mission to Skopje. The Secretariat's Gender Section is conducting a comprehensive mapping exercise to get a rapid overview of emerging good practices, gaps and challenges in participating States. In lieu of onsite awareness-raising events, the Programme Office in Dushanbe is planning to provide alternative support, such as distribution of informational materials through the network of 14 Women Resource Centres in their local communities. In Uzbekistan, the OSCE Project Co-ordinator enhanced the creation of referral mechanisms for victims of domestic violence that adheres to the COVID-19 quarantine regime.

V – Recommendations and potential areas of assistance

The OSCE commitments task executive structures to support participating States in preventing and combating violence against women and girls (MC.DEC 5/15, 7/14 and 4/18). Based on their respective mandates, OSCE executive structures can assist participating States, upon their request, in the implementation of the following recommendations:

General recommendation

- Participating States are encouraged to share with SPMU and Gender Issues Programme successful practices and special measures taken to address DV in emergency settings, so they can be made available to all participating States. .

Awareness raising

- Create strategies and campaigns aimed at raising awareness on the increased risk of gender-based violence, more specifically DV, during lockdown measures, as well as informing victims and bystanders on how to report cases of violence and the support available to them.

Data collection

- Ensure availability of data on cases and improve its quality and reliability by systematically collecting, recording and centralizing data. Consider the need of collection and analysis of sex disaggregated data regarding victim and perpetrator, the type of violence, and the relationship between victim and perpetrator and include the same standards for recording cases of femicide. Collect data to monitor case progress and outcomes, and to identify good practices and lessons learned.

Law enforcement

- Promote a proactive approach to case follow-up, in close co-operation with protection services and social services, to ensure a victim-centred approach.

Justice

- Ensure all judicial proceedings are available for victims who request protection, especially those measures that allow victims to be separated from the perpetrator, such as protection and emergency barring orders.

- Support and facilitate access to victim-centered alternative dispute resolution mechanisms where, due to restricted operability of courts as a result to emergency COVID-19 measures, hearings cannot take place in the short term.
- Promote the use of virtual instruments as means to ensure access to justice services such as free legal aid, psychological advice, police and justice systems and hearings; promote capacity strengthening e-learning for police, public prosecution, judiciary and prison officers.

Access to emergency hotlines and shelters

- Develop and update inter-agency Standard Operating Procedures for multi-sectoral support mechanisms that include measures to contain the spread of the virus (such as online or telephone reporting, protection measures in shelters, etc.).

Reporting Mechanisms

- Provide expertise to ensure and facilitate reporting of cases through mechanisms such as open points of contact, namely pharmacies and local stores, ‘silent reporting mechanisms’, for example code words or silent alerts, and strengthening the capacity of business employees in noting and reporting possible cases to the police.
- Support the reinforcement of existing referral mechanisms to support victims in reaching out to service providers while ensuring their protection from exposure to the virus as well as further violence.

Prevention

- Initiate and make available sufficient resources for prevention activities that aim to address the root causes of gender-based violence.