

Disclaimer: *The Gender Section aimed to reflect the speaker's points as they were made. Inclusion of their points does not present any official endorsement of the OSCE Secretariat or participating States.*

Webinar on COVID-19 and gender-based violence

**Combating the pandemic within the COVID-19 pandemic:
violence against women and girls**

Summary

The OSCE Secretariat's Programme for Gender Issues and the OSCE Transnational Threat Department's Strategic Police Matters Unit, with the support of the Albanian OSCE Chair, organized a webinar to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls (VAWG), with a focus on the role of law enforcement and the justice sector.

The online event was moderated by Ambassador Neil Bush, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the OSCE, and attended by more than 120 participants, including representatives from 34 OSCE delegations, OSCE executive structures, international organizations and civil society organizations.

This document presents a summary of the main points raised by experts during the event and includes their recommendations for further action of OSCE participating States (pS) and Executive Structures.

Key message: *It is essential to make the prevention and address of violence against women and girls a key part of national COVID-19 response plans.*

Introductory remarks

Ambassador Alena Kupchyna, Co-ordinator of Activities to Address Transnational Threats

- Police services, as first responders to incidents of violence, have the responsibility to ensure the protection of and support to victims. Close co-operation between first-responders from police with social services and civil society organizations is key.

- It is important for the OSCE to support pS to ensure that all actors involved from law enforcement, judiciary, and civil society organizations are ready and well prepared to tailor their interventions to this challenging situation.

Key message: *Violence during health emergencies disproportionately affects women and girls. Addressing gender inequality is key to effectively respond to crises and its underlying factors.*

Main points raised by expert speakers

Iris Luarasi, Director of the Albanian National Counseling Line for Women and Girls, Counseling line for Men and Boys and First Vice-President of GREVIO at the Council of Europe

- The Albanian national helpline for victims of violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence (DV) continued to operate 24/7 and had a 60 % increase in calls.
- Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the most common types of violence that women and girls experience during the current quarantine. Shelters stopped admissions in some areas because they were unsure how to manage the infection risks. In Albania, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection developed a protocol for shelters so women could still get support.
- The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence (Istanbul Convention) continues to apply. The GREVIO Committee called on all parties to ensure continuous service provision and to keep on providing protection to women and girls at risk of experiencing violence, with the involvement of all relevant actors.
- In response to the COVID-19 crisis, some governments launched specific information campaigns about available services, introduced new methods of offering services to victims, introduced online applications for protection orders or included DV support services among essential services.
- Many support services are now offered online, including psychological services and counseling as well as psychosocial support.

Presentation available at: <https://prezi.com/view/WA7iOj77aAij03ODKhsX/>

Azamat Baialinov, Head of Office, United Nations Population Fund, Country office in Kyrgyzstan

- As part of the Disaster Response Co-ordination Unit (DRCA) UNFPA supported the government of Kyrgyzstan to strengthen the multi-sectoral co-ordination for the elimination of violence against women and girls, through the development of a so called 'coordinated algorithm' for response to GBV.
- Several trainings and workshops on how to use online tools were provided to different operators. UNFPA supported the development of procedural documents and operational materials (SOPs, leaflets) for psychologists to provide online services to women and girls.

- An alternative (safe) space was established in Bishkek to provide support to GBV survivors in line with COVID-19 prevention and protection measures.
- The Ministry of Labour and Social Development received support in mainstreaming gender into the governments COVID-19 response, and UNFPA and UN Women conducted a rapid assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on women and vulnerable groups.

Key message: *Data collection on cases of violence against women occurred during the lockdown remains challenging.*

- The UNiTE civil society movement implemented a joint media campaign to address violence against women in COVID-19 context.

Hillevi Johansson, Police Adviser, Criminal Investigation Department, EUPOL COPPS

- The Swedish National Police is launching an information campaign with the goal to inform citizens on how to contact the police if someone is experiencing domestic violence. The Swedish government has set up a committee, which analyses criminal procedures and the ability of courts and law enforcement representatives to respond to challenges that victims of violence face.
- Since the Swedish National Police has started providing additional funds for the investigations of domestic violence cases, the Domestic Violence Unit in Gothenburg has changed its working methods. Examples of these changes include: swift contacting of the victim after the crime has been reported; appointment of a victim counsel, who supports the victim throughout the whole process; setting up of briefing sessions with prosecutors to discuss the case; investing in the training of first responders within the police force in order to better secure initial evidence in cases of domestic violence.

Saša Gavrić, Senior Democratic Governance Officer, OSCE Mission to Skopje

- The OSCE Mission to Skopje started issuing awareness-raising messages early on through its social media channels and issued a joint media statement with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) calling on media and institutions to take the risk of VAW during the lockdown seriously.
- The Mission produced an outreach video to inform potential victims about available services during lockdown.
- The Mission was able to provide food packages to survivors of DV. The MSLP has established an exceptional call for CSO for the COVID-19 respond fund, which recognizes survivors of DV, VAW and THB as primary target group.
- The Civil Society Network is currently implementing an independent research on gender and diversity considerations in COVID-19 responses and decisions taken by the government.

Isabelle Rome, High Official for Gender Equality, Ministry of Justice, France

- During the lockdown, the Minister of Justice instructed all courts to consider domestic violence as an essential litigation, and to treat it as a priority.
- The French government launched a campaign focusing on sharing information about available hotlines, including special phone numbers for women victims of violence, violent persons and for children. There was an increase of 50% of calls received by the special number for women victims of violence and an increase of 30 to 40% in the number of home interventions conducted by the police.
- A system of reporting to pharmacies was put in place, to allow women at risk to report violence even if they are not in the position to go to the police station.
- Several types of protective measures were introduced. Protection orders which were about to expire during the lockdown were automatically extended, so that victims do not have to go to the court again. In order to make it possible to oust the violent spouse a platform was set up that makes it possible to quickly find accommodation for perpetrators.

Interactive discussion:

- Baroness Kennedy, Director of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI), informed about measures that were taken in the UK to respond to VAW during COVID-19 and highlighted the importance of including women in decision-making processes. Domestic violence cases were given priority and lawyers and judges dealing with such cases used phone and video connection to issue banning orders. She noted that training of police is important and the education about the nature of domestic violence crucial.
- Rita Columbia, Senior Programme Advisor of the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, highlighted the importance of co-operation when it comes to preventing and combatting GBV to address the issue at its roots. Joint data collection efforts, research activities and high-level advocacy is of utmost importance.
- Graziella Pavone, Human Rights Officer at ODIHR, informed that ODIHR has put in place a monitoring tool to track the impact of COVID-19 related emergency measures on human rights in all OSCE pS. A report, which includes information on gender-based violence, will be published in the coming weeks.
- Alicja Switon, WAVE Network, shared that the Network created an [online resource page](#), which serves as a knowledge base related to COVID-19. WAVE organized [a series of webinars](#) for its members and gathered information on COVID-19, which was included in [WAVE's policy statement on COVID-19 and VAW](#).

1. Concluding remarks

Amarsanaa Darisuren, Senior Adviser on Gender Issues

- The fact that the impact on emergency measures on women's security often was only considered at a late stage or not at all shows the importance of including the needs of women in crisis management.
- Gender Issues Programme is currently conducting a rapid assessment of emergency measures that were taken in the context of the COVID response and their consequences on gender equality.

2. Recommendations

Preparedness and national action plans

- GBV should be a central part of any post-response recovery plan that countries are implementing.
- Innovative solutions are crucial and should be part of concrete efforts of relevant ministries and women's organizations.
- Important to continue with the implementation of the Istanbul Convention as the crucial tools in preventing and combating violence against women.
- Need to collect sex-disaggregated data that will allow an understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on women and men.
- All action plans and standard operating procedures on VAW should include contingency planning and approaches to ensure continued access to essential services, including hotlines and shelters during pandemics. Funding for essential services is critical and should be increased in crisis situations.

Justice sector and access to justice

- Need to prioritize proceedings, to investigate and prosecute cases of domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence and provide appropriate remedies for cases.
- Need to thoroughly revise law enforcement and judicial protection mechanisms in those states where gaps have emerged.
- Need for law enforcement to pro-actively follow-up on cases of domestic violence and need to keep judicial proceedings available for survivors and continue to provide protection orders and emergency barring orders.

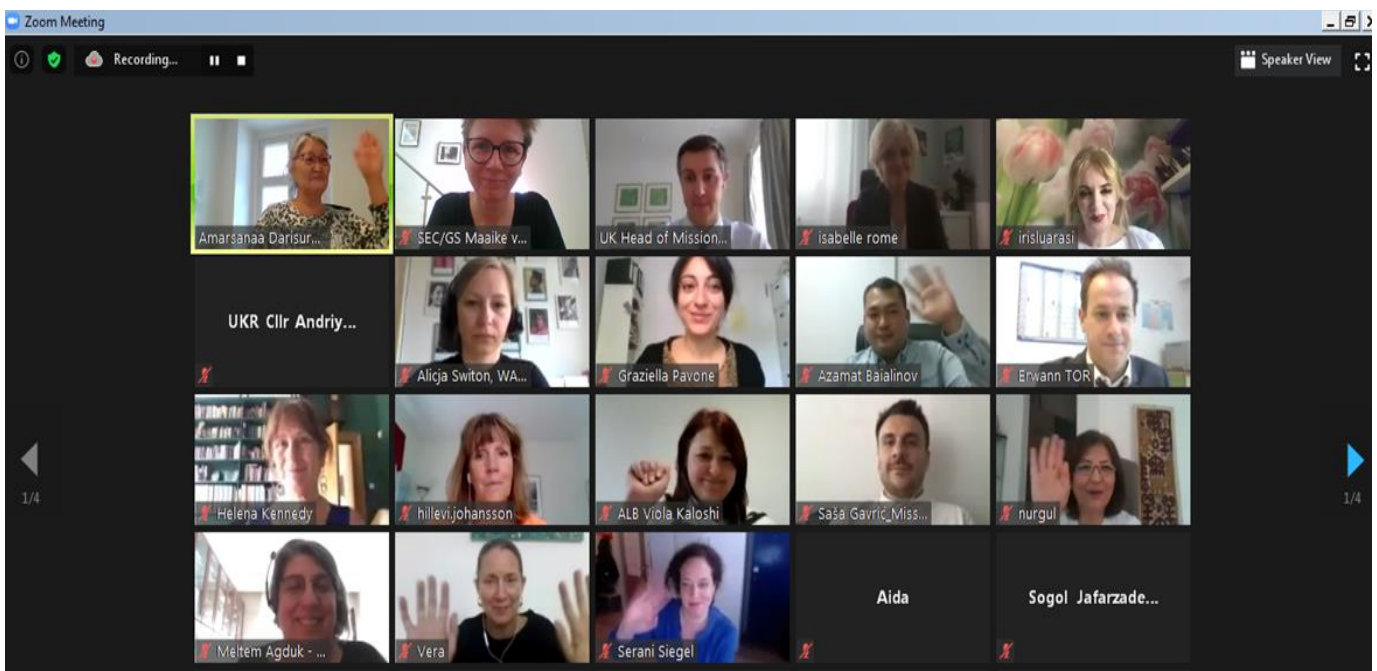
Targeted actions needed to protect and support women from disadvantaged groups

- Need to specifically pay attention to the impact of COVID-19 on marginalized groups, such as refugee women, women of colour and look at the crisis from an inter-sectional perspective.
- Particular attention also needs to be paid on elderly women, rural women and women that do not have access to digital means of communicating. Reach out and awareness raising about existing services needs to be tailored.

- Need for outreach information/dissemination campaigns to marginalized women and step up the accessibility of violence reporting mechanisms and protection measures.

Awareness raising

- Important to engage opinion makers and community leaders to provide correct information and messages to local communities and decision makers with regard to the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls.
- Need to ensure that multi-sectoral approach (health sector, police, judiciary, social services and specialized service providers) is operational also in times of crisis in order to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. A victim-centered approach is crucial in this regard.
- Prevention and awareness raising: need to invest serious resources to tackle the root causes of gender-based violence.



Picture of speakers and participants