

# COVID-19 AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: ADDRESSING THE SHADOW PANDEMIC



## Summary

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This brief presents emerging evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls (VAWG). The brief advocates for measures that prevent and respond to VAWG in the current circumstances of lockdown as well as for investments that ensure the safety of women and girls in longer-term recovery plans. It makes recommendations to be considered by all sectors of society, from governments and multilateral institutions to civil society organizations, private companies and donors, with examples of actions already taken. In addition to providing the latest research and data on VAWG in the context of the public health crisis, the brief considers the social and economic implications of this ‘shadow pandemic’, which at present are on track to endure long after the immediate health threat posed by COVID-19 has passed.

## How is the world changing due to COVID-19?

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has reached more than 9.4 million as of 26 June 2020, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>1</sup> The pandemic is straining health and care systems, widening socio-economic divides and changing policy priorities. In the short term, these dynamics challenge the equitable and effective distribution of health and social care, restrict mobility, deepen inequalities and shift the priorities of public, private and social sector institutions, including the allocation of funding. Women and girls are disproportionately affected, particularly those who also experience disadvantages on the basis of income level, age, race, geographic location, migration status, disability and health status. Feminist leadership is needed to ensure that the right of women and girls to a life free from violence is prioritized in the immediate response as well as in recovery and resilience measures.

UN Women has synthesized the latest research and data on the gender impacts of COVID-19, and formulated comprehensive

recommendations for 'building back better', in the following additional briefs:

- [Addressing the Economic Fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and Policy Options for a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and the Care Economy: Immediate Action for Structural Transformation and a Gender-Responsive Recovery](#)
- [COVID-19 and Women's Leadership: From an Effective Response to Building Back Better](#)
- [An Urgent COVID-19 Response: Women's Meaningful Participation in Ceasefires and Peace Processes \(forthcoming\)](#)

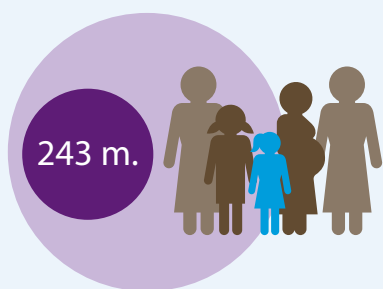
## Violence against women is a shadow pandemic

Violence against women is a human rights violation, with severe and long-term impacts on victims/survivors, their families and communities.<sup>2</sup> [It is also a universal problem](#): Nearly a fifth (18 per cent) of women and girls aged 15 to 49 who have ever been in a relationship have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months.<sup>3</sup> This figure rises to 30 per cent when considering violence by a partner experienced during women's lifetime.<sup>4</sup> More than a third of women who are intentionally killed are murdered by a current or former intimate partner.<sup>5</sup> Although violence by a partner is one of the most common and widespread forms of gender-based violence, women experience violence throughout the life course and in a variety of settings, including in the family,<sup>6</sup> the community and the broader society. In the current 'digital age,' cyberviolence is also all too common: Data from Europe

(2015) indicate that one in ten women over the age of 15 have experienced some form of violence online.<sup>7</sup>

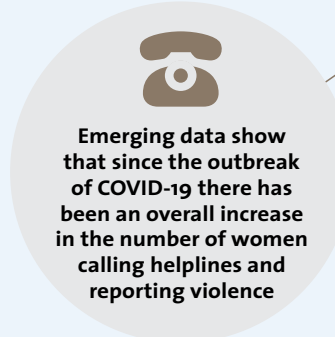
Emerging evidence shows that since the outbreak of COVID-19, reports of violence against women have increased in countries where 'stay at home' measures are in place to curb the spread of the virus.<sup>8</sup> Confined living conditions and tensions generated by significant security, health and money worries are exacerbating experiences of violence that already constituted a serious gendered social and public health problem.

With more than half of the world's population under lockdown, domestic violence reports in particular spiked during the first weeks of the pandemic outbreak.<sup>9</sup> In Argentina, for example, emergency calls for domestic violence cases have increased by 67



Globally 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months. **The number is likely to increase as security, health and money worries heighten tensions and are accentuated by cramped and confined living conditions.**

Source: UN Women 2020a.



- In **Tunisia**, calls to a helpline in the first days of confinement increased **fivefold**
- In the **UK**, there was a **25%** rise in phone calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline during the first week of lockdown, and visits to its website increased **150%**

Source: UN Women et al. 2020.

per cent since the lockdown started.<sup>10</sup> Helplines in Cyprus<sup>11</sup> and Singapore<sup>12</sup> have registered a 30 per cent and 33 per cent increase in calls, respectively. In Australia, a Women’s Safety New South Wales survey reveals that 40 per cent of frontline workers have reported an uptick in requests for help by survivors, and 70 per cent have reported that the cases received have increased in their level of complexity during the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>13</sup> Similar trends are found elsewhere: Government authorities, women’s rights activists and civil society organizations have indicated increasing reports of domestic violence during the

crisis and/or increased demand for emergency shelter in Brazil,<sup>14</sup> Canada, Chile, Germany, Lebanon,<sup>15</sup> Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom<sup>16</sup> and the United States.<sup>17</sup> Evidence shows that in some countries, reports continued to increase throughout the lockdown period,<sup>18</sup> as well as after lockdown measures began to lift.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, in some places formal reports of domestic violence to justice officials and social workers have decreased.<sup>20</sup> This does not mean that women are not experiencing violence but rather suggests that they are less able to report violence or seek help through the regular channels.

## The social and economic impacts of violence against women will likely endure

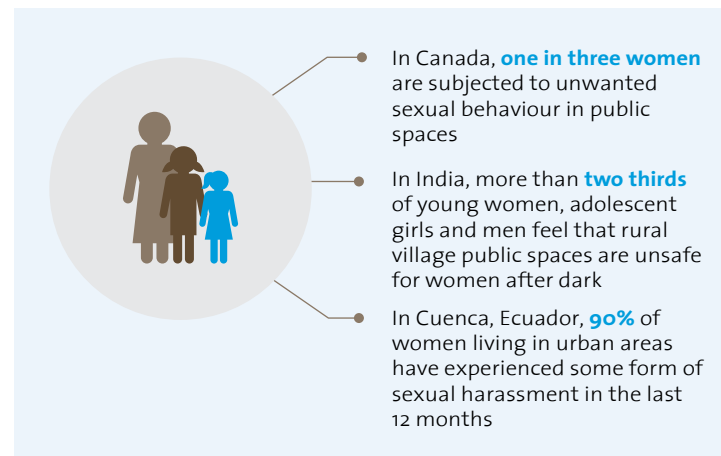
Evidence from previous health crises indicates that violence against women and girls is likely to be a lasting legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup> During the Ebola pandemic, for example, women and girls endured multiple forms of violence including trafficking, child marriage and sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>22</sup> All forms of violence against women and girls are a violation of their human rights and have high social and economic costs. Some of these costs are borne in the immediate context of locked-down households and communities, while others will play out in shifting priorities long after restrictions on mobility are lifted and countries struggle to recover.

### As long as isolation measures remain in place, women are at risk

Until a vaccine is developed, social distancing measures and restrictions on mobility are likely to remain in place, especially in urban centres where the virus spreads more quickly. Limiting women’s in-person contact with social networks (e.g., women’s rights groups, teachers, health workers, faith leaders) can mean reduced access to support: Available evidence from before the pandemic suggests that less than 40 per cent of women who experience violence seek help of any sort.<sup>23</sup> Travel restrictions can also mean empty streets and public transit, thus making public spaces less safe for women and girls when they are mobile, as indicated by recent violent attacks in India and the Philippines.<sup>24</sup>

In tandem with restrictions on mobility and in-person social contact, many governments and other service providers have reduced their offering of in-person support, including services that are vital for preventing and responding to VAWG. In some cases, services such as shelters for survivors of domestic violence have not been deemed ‘essential’. In others, health and social care systems that provide life-saving support to women who experience violence (i.e., clinical management of rape and mental health and psycho-social support) have been disrupted because health service providers are overburdened and focused on handling COVID-19 cases. Indeed, health-care workers themselves, 70 per cent of whom are female, are also vulnerable to violence as they

### Women and girls experience and fear various types of sexual violence in different public spaces



Source: UN Women 2020b.

carry out their essential labour: There have been increased reports of both physical and verbal attacks on such workers in China, Italy and Singapore.<sup>25</sup> Even where basic essential services are maintained, a collapse in a coordinated response between different sectors—i.e., health, police and justice and social services—and social distancing challenge efforts to provide meaningful support to women and girls who are experiencing violence.

Requests for help have been decreasing in some cases where movement is restricted and essential services are being administered differently, such as counselling services that have shifted from in-person attention to delivery via phone or email. A domestic violence helpline in Italy, for example, reported it received 55 per cent fewer calls in the first two weeks in March because many women found it difficult to ask for help while sheltered in place with the perpetrator. A similar drop in calls was reported by a women’s shelter network in the north of France.<sup>26</sup> In Kazakhstan, lockdown has caused cancellation of planned court sessions

and cases of violence are being adjourned.<sup>27</sup> These are worrying signs that women are without recourse. As long as public health measures promoting isolation and lockdown remain in place, and in the absence of effective and versatile health, social care and justice systems, women and girls will remain at heightened risk of violence.

### Digital solutions are increasingly available but cyberviolence must be curbed

In some places where essential services that prevent and respond to violence against women and girls are not accessible in person, digital solutions are providing some support. Yet pre-existing socio-economic inequalities limit the extent to which such solutions are accessible to all women and girls. The realities of the gender digital divide<sup>28</sup> mean that women and girls in many countries may not have access to a mobile phone, a computer or the Internet to access services, especially when they also contend with inequalities on account of where they live, their level of income or their age, race, ethnicity or caste. In the close confines of a home in lockdown, women may be unable to safely use a digital device due to being closely monitored by the perpetrator and/or other family members.

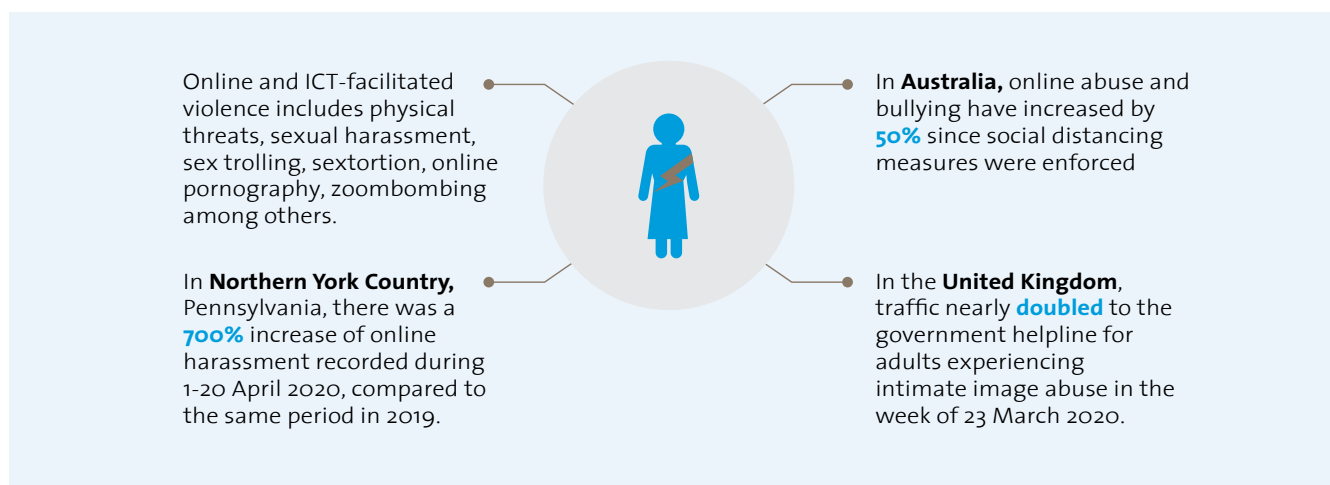
Where women have access to digital technology, their use of online platforms for a wide range of purposes has increased since isolation measures have been in place. Women are going online to provide care to family members living in other households, to connect with colleagues, friends and members of faith communities, to order food and medicines, to access digital social protection benefits and to seek information about the changing public health landscape. Girls who have access to

a digital device at home may also be online for virtual school instruction, for entertainment or to connect with friends. The dark side of online access, however, is a rise in cyberviolence against women and children. Children’s increased online presence has been used by some as an opportunity to groom young people into exploitative situations.<sup>29</sup> According to Europol, online activity by those seeking child abuse material is increasing.<sup>30</sup> Various forms of online violence, including stalking, bullying, sexual harassment and sex trolling, are being reported by a range of media outlets and women rights groups and on social media posts. Examples include receiving unsolicited pornographic videos while dialling into a virtual chat room for work or socializing.<sup>31</sup>

### Violence against women is costly—and investments to address it are limited

There are also steep economic costs associated with violence against women and girls, and these are borne by all of society. They include costs associated with delivering care services to victims as well as those related to the criminal justice response.<sup>32</sup> When the public, private and social costs of violence are tallied, the estimated total is a staggering 2 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), or US\$1.5 trillion.<sup>33</sup> That figure can only be rising in the current circumstances as governments and service providers scramble to find new ways to reach the elevated number of women and girls reporting violence during ‘stay at home’ orders. It is also likely to continue to rise in the aftermath of the pandemic as women and girls seek support in recovering and women’s rights organizations and justice institutions respond to the various manifestations of violence that endure beyond the crisis.

## During the pandemic, online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls are increasing



Source: UN Women 2020c.

Experience from the Ebola and Zika outbreaks shows that epidemics exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities, such as those related to gender, economic status, ability, age and migration status.<sup>34</sup> These inequalities will likely place the most vulnerable groups of women at an even higher risk of violence. If the global economy enters into a recession, as most economists predict, unemployment, financial strains and insecurity will increase, and it is likely that violence against women will too. Moreover, evidence shows that a loss of income for women in abusive situations makes it even harder for them to escape.<sup>35</sup>

Another likely impact of the pandemic is a shift in priorities among governments and multilateral institutions, philanthropists and

private companies, including in how they allocate resources. Women's rights organizations are already massively underfunded relative to the size of the population they serve and the scope of issues they address. It is estimated, for example, that investment in the prevention of VAWG totalled less than 0.002 per cent of annual official development assistance between 2014 and 2019.<sup>36</sup> As the world looks to recover from COVID-19, and prevent future pandemics, institutions and organizations that are focused on women's social and economic rights are at risk of further marginalization. Reduced funding will significantly affect the capacity of women's rights organizations to advocate for policy reforms on violence against women and to deliver service provision to survivors of violence over the long term.

### To gain a better understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls, and on prevention and response efforts:

**The UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund)** conducted a rapid assessment with 122 civil society organizations currently receiving grants from the Fund. These organizations reported an alarming increase in all forms of violence against women and girls globally, exacerbation of risk factors leading to violence and serious impacts on escape routes including essential services. Food shortages, unemployment, economic insecurity, school closures, public transport shutdowns and massive migration flows are compounding the crisis, especially for the most vulnerable including women and girls with disabilities. Civil society organizations and women's organizations are operating on the front line of community response, often with meagre resources, and need more sustained support and increased investment. Despite the pressure, organizations provided key insights on the programmatic adaptations needed in order to meet the immediate needs of survivors and at-risk women and girls.

**The UN Women Ending Violence against Women Section**, in partnership with regional and country offices, conducted a rapid assessment to gather information from partners—governments and civil society organizations—in 49 countries in five regions to understand the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls and service provision. Findings highlight that available data, media reports and anecdotal data all point towards the increase of vulnerability and risk factors of violence for women and girls during the pandemic. Current reports on violence against women and girls cases are most likely an underestimation of the real rates and magnitude of the problem, as the pandemic and its circumstances make it much harder for women to report or seek help. Limited awareness about available services, limited access to mobile technology, and movement restrictions hamper survivors' accessibility to services. All violence against women and girls service providers (governmental and non-governmental), particularly civil society organizations, have limited resources and capacity, and are over-stretched to meet the needs of survivors. Service providers divert their resources and efforts to provide immediate protection from the virus, and relief to beneficiaries such as distribution of personal protective equipment, food and/or cash. Immediate responses include advocating for the inclusion of violence against women and girls services in national responses and recovery plans; raising awareness and disseminating information about available services; and adapting services to be provided remotely using available technological platforms.

Sources: Majumdar and Wood 2020; UN Women 2020d.

## How to ensure women's safety during and after the pandemic

Governments, international and national civil society organizations and UN agencies all have a role to play in addressing violence against women and girls as part of the COVID-19 response and as part of concerted efforts to 'build back better'. Response and recovery plans should include evidence-based measures to address VAWG as well as adequate resources to ensure their full implementation.

### 1. Earmark funding for services that support women experiencing violence.

Governments should classify support services for women who have experienced violence, including shelters, as essential services and ensure they are sufficiently resourced. In Canada, domestic violence shelters have remained open during the lockdown, and the Government earmarked Can\$50 million to women's shelters and sexual assault centres.<sup>37</sup> Australia,<sup>38</sup> France<sup>39</sup> and the United Kingdom<sup>40</sup> have also dedicated funding to organizations that support women experiencing violence. Private companies have a role to play as well. In Antigua and Barbuda, telecommunications firms agreed to waive all airtime fees for calls made to helplines.<sup>41</sup>

### 2. Adapt and strengthen existing services to the current situation of restricted mobility.

Rapid assessments can be used to assess the capacity of existing services and determine the extent to which they are able to meet women's needs in light of lockdown and social distancing protocols. Risk assessments, safety planning and case management all need to be adapted to the crisis context (see UN Women et al. Issue Brief, "[COVID-19 and Essential Services Provision for Survivors of Violence against Women and Girls](#)"). Vacant hotels and educational institutions can be repurposed into shelters that also adhere to quarantine policies, as has been done in France<sup>42</sup> and some countries in the Caribbean.<sup>43</sup> Where possible and safe, digital technology can be used to reach women in need of social support and counselling. In Spain, an instant messaging service with a geolocation function offers an online chat room that provides immediate psychological support to survivors of violence.<sup>44</sup> In the United Kingdom, a popular app called 'Bright Sky' provides support and information to survivors but can be disguised for people worried about partners checking their phones.<sup>45</sup> In the Canary Islands, Spain, women can alert pharmacies about a domestic violence situation with a code message 'Mask 19' that brings the police in to support them.<sup>46</sup>

### 3. Build capacity to identify violence and prevent impunity.

Governments should raise awareness about VAWG among the police and judiciary during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide training on how to respond, protect and refer victims and survivors to appropriate services. In Italy, instead of the survivor having to leave the house of an abuser, prosecutors

have ruled that in situations of domestic violence the perpetrator must leave the family home.<sup>47</sup> First responders, including health workers and law enforcement officers, can be trained to offer psychosocial support to victims of violence. In Cumbria, United Kingdom, the police have enlisted postal workers and delivery drivers to look out for signs of abuse.<sup>48</sup> Teachers, childcare providers and child services staff can be trained to recognize and respond to cases where children may be experiencing abuse at home or are vulnerable to online predators.

Strategies and tools to address slowdowns in the justice system caused by institutional closures are important to avoid impunity. Argentina has taken steps to address delays in the judicial processes and has extended protection orders for survivors to 60 days.<sup>49</sup> In Colombia, the Government has issued a decree to guarantee continued access to services virtually, including legal advice, psychosocial advice and police and justice services including hearings.<sup>50</sup> Other countries are using virtual means to keep the justice system operating, for example by enabling domestic violence survivors to connect to court proceedings remotely.<sup>51</sup>

### 4. Provide support for women who may be experiencing violence while working remotely.

Work is often a safe space for women who experience violence in the home. Women's rights organizations, workers' representatives and the private and public sectors can work together to support female employees who are telecommuting. Employers can communicate zero-tolerance for violence of any kind; they can ensure financial/economic continuity for employees during this time by extending contracts and benefits; and they can also provide interim measures, if they do not have policies already in place, to support colleagues who disclose abuse by ensuring a list of functioning local services to refer employees to, as well as allow flexible working arrangements and special leave, so that women can prioritize their own safety and well-being and that of their children (see UN Women Issue Brief, "[The COVID-19 Shadow Pandemic: Domestic Violence in the World of Work: A Call to Action for the Private Sector](#)").

### 5. Collect and use sex-disaggregated data on the impact of COVID-19 on VAWG.

Sex-disaggregated data are critical for informing the design of effective policies, services and laws that prevent and respond to VAWG. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the use of conventional data collection methods (i.e. those requiring face-to-face contact and travel such as population-based surveys) may not be feasible, and the use of remote data collection methods can entail serious safety risks for women. The most appropriate data collection

method for the specific context and research objective should be selected, always ensuring the safety of respondents. Existing data can already provide strong evidence to inform the response to the pandemic. Methods and sources such as key informant interviews with service providers, media reports or service-based data can also be very useful to understand the impact of the pandemic on women and girls as well as on the capacity of services to respond to the increased demand and to identify both challenges and what works to reach women effectively (see UN Women and WHO Issue Brief, "[Violence against Women and Girls Data Collection during COVID-19](#)").

**6. Raise awareness about VAWG through social media, radio and advertisements.** Civil society organizations have played a vital role in breaking the silence around VAWG during the pandemic. In China, the hashtag #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic has taken off as a key advocacy tool. Not only has it helped expose violence as a risk during lockdown, it also serves as a vehicle for reaching women with vital information about how to access help through provision of links to online resources. In addition to using social media, women's rights organizations can

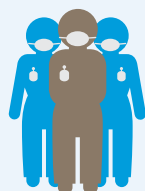
also draw attention to VAWG through print media and radio, thus ensuring that the gender digital divide is not a barrier to information. The media can also be used to proactively challenge gender stereotypes and promote positive masculinities through targeted messages for men that encourage healthy ways of coping with stressful situations (see UN Women Issue Brief, "[Prevention: Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19](#)").

**7. Put women at the centre of policy change, solutions and recovery.** Women's organizations are key resources for ensuring that recovery plans and longer-term solutions meet women's needs (see UN Women's policy brief, "[COVID-19 and Women's Leadership](#)"). Their participation should be sought in decision-making processes including but not limited to those related to VAWG prevention and response. Recognizing that these organizations are often under-resourced, governments, multilateral institutions and donors should ensure women's organizations receive adequate funding, including those at the grassroots that provide essential services to hard-to-reach, remote and vulnerable populations.

### National responses to COVID-19 must include:



**Services to address violence against women and girls,** including increased resources to support shelters, hotlines and online counselling. These essential services should be expanded and adapted to the crisis context to ensure survivors' access to support.



**A strong message from law enforcement that there must be no impunity.** Police and Justice actors must ensure that incidents of VAWG are given high priority, and care must be taken to address the manifestations of violence emerging in the context of COVID-19.



**Psychosocial support** for women and girls affected by the outbreak. Gender-based violence survivors and frontline health and social support workers must be prioritized.

Source: UN Women 2020a.

## UN Women's partnerships in action

UN Women is working with its partners to ensure that measures to address violence against women and girls are included in the COVID-19 response and recovery at country, regional and global levels, in line with the principle of leaving no one behind.

### Helping grantees adapt programming to the current circumstances

The UN Trust Fund is reviewing all current grants to identify prospective budget lines that could be quickly reallocated to provide immediate assistance to local women's organizations in these challenging times. Subject to donor contributions, the UN Trust Fund will also establish a COVID-19 funding window with two specific streams. The first is additional core funding for civil society organizations that are already grantees—with priority for small women's organizations—to help them adjust to challenges arising as a result of the current crisis and to ensure the stability of projects and the sustainability of the organization in the longer term. \$US9 million have already been allocated to this first stream by the UN Trust Fund in partnership with the Spotlight Initiative and the European Union (EU), for immediate support to all its existing grantees in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>52</sup> The second is a 'COVID-19 Response' targeted call for proposals that will fund new projects specifically designed to support women and girl survivors of violence in the contexts created by the pandemic.

### Creating safe public spaces for women and girls

Globally, through the UN Safe City and Safe Public Spaces initiative, UN Women is working with local governments, the justice, police and health sectors and grassroots women's organizations to ensure safe public spaces for women and girls during the crisis. This work involves partnerships that cut across municipal departments, including transportation, parks, public work spaces, sanitation and housing. In Fiji, Malawi, South Africa, Tonga and Vanuatu, UN Women country offices are monitoring and/or undertaking rapid assessments of violence against women in the current circumstances. They are also strengthening the capacity of service providers and support helplines and disseminating relevant guidelines. Assessments undertaken through the Safe and Fair programme in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region identified an increased risk of sexual exploitation and violence by border police and armed guards for women migrant workers who were returning home. The assessments

also identified an increased risk of psychological violence among women migrant workers who have lost their jobs and are no longer able to support their families.<sup>53</sup>

### Providing quality essential services adapted to the current context

In Kenya, UN Women is training and equipping frontline health providers with mental health and well-being programmes for families. In Sudan, Trinidad and Tobago and Vanuatu, it is supporting partners to update referral pathways and service delivery protocols. In Fiji, this includes guidance around online services provision for survivors of violence and the design of a code of conduct to 'do no harm' while working with community representatives and village leaders. As part of the European Union (EU)-UN Spotlight Initiative in Grenada and Jamaica, UN Women is supporting the Bureau of Gender Affairs, the law enforcement sector and the judiciary with technological capacity building to respond to VAWG during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Cameroon, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, as part of the Spotlight Initiative and other ending violence against women programmes, UN Women is providing protective equipment (masks, hydro alcoholic solution, soap, etc.) to survivors and women living with HIV.

### Increasing awareness and disseminating information about VAWG through community mobilization

In Antigua and Barbuda, Malawi, Morocco, Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania and Zimbabwe, UN Women is supporting its partners to undertake mass media and social media sensitization on COVID-19 and the related increase of violence against women, as well as how to prevent it. These efforts include a focus on positive masculinities, sharing of household responsibilities and supporting domestic and vulnerable workers. In Antigua and Barbuda and South Africa, UN Women is engaging with telecommunication companies to deliver messages and provide services. As part of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative in Guyana, it is working with civil society organizations to adapt interventions that promote positive masculinities and advocate for an end to VAWG, including through the innovative use of digital technologies. And recognizing a role for the private sector, UN Women has advocated for and provided guidance to companies in Georgia and Turkey to support their personnel, including survivors of domestic violence.

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This brief was written by the Ending Violence against Women (EVAW) Section of UN Women under the overall guidance of Kalliopi Mingeirou, with valuable inputs from UN Women country offices, EVAW Regional Advisors, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women and colleagues from UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC and WHO, and with support from Alison Rowe and Gaia Reyes (UN Women's Office of the Executive Director). Data and Statistics by Ginette Azcona (UN Women's Research and Data Section) and editing by Tara Patricia Cookson (Ladysmith).

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## Additional Resources

### Assessments of impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls

Majumdar, S. and G. Wood. 2020. "[UNTFEVAW Briefing Note on the Impact of COVID-19 on Violence against Women through the Lens of Civil Society and Women's Rights Organizations.](#)" UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, New York.

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