



COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women: A submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences

*Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
June 2020*

Executive Summary

In this brief submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, we identify the nexus between domestic violence and online gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19 drawing on some issues to consider from country-led and regional case studies.

At the outset, we dive into provisions around women's right to live a life free of violence and discrimination to capitalise on narratives that address all forms of violence against women in their rooted sense of entitlement and power. There is a strong evidence to posit that technology-mediated environments are conducive to already existing gender-based violence against women in all spheres of human interaction. Hence, we put forward that the disclosure and the understanding of ICT-related implications is crucial to thwart potential risks of violence against women the internet might bring along and amplify in a fertile sphere of expansion, searchability and transmission.

Second, we conduct a review of what domestic violence stands for across jurisprudences. Although domestic violence legal definition does not entail a univocal meaning, it conversely embeds a ubiquitous technological dimension that should rather be treated as a serious offense. In this regard, we stress that practice, policy and actions should ensure that the same human rights of women offline are also guaranteed online, including all used, emerging and envisaged means of human interaction that prevent women from living in a society free of direct or low-key manifestations of gender-based violence.

Third, we foreground COVID-19 repercussions on the broader state of gender equality and social justice. We note with concern the uptick in domestic violence fueled in a context of online gender-based inequalities that cannot be overstated neither go unnoticed. We reaffirm how the pandemic is taking a disproportionate toll on women, particularly on those who are digitally disenfranchised.

Fourth, we highlight high-priority issues for the Special Rapporteur's consideration that requires an immediate action in light of the international pledge to dismantle the shadow pandemic against women.

Finally, we present recommendations for actions for governments, United Nations agencies, special procedures and civil society.

Throughout this submission, we recognise that in most jurisdictions both the existing legal frameworks and their practical implementation remain highly inadequate to properly investigate, address and mitigate the digital manifestations of gender-based violence, including domestic violence.

We hope these brief insights assist the Special Rapporteur in the preparation of her report to the General Assembly in October 2020.

About APC

The Association for Progressive Communications' Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) has worked to render visible the impact of online gender-based violence (GBV) on women's rights for more than a decade. We have worked with women's organisations and advocates to identify, monitor, analyse and combat uses of the internet and digital

technologies that are harmful to women and marginalised communities, and with individual internet users to assist them in using technology to document and combat online GBV and challenge harmful sexist online practices. We have also advocated for internet policy and regulation that enable the expression, protection and promotion of human rights, women's rights, and the rights of people of diverse sexualities to both states and private sector actors. Over the past few years particularly, we have seen how online GBV has moved from a peripheral discussion in both the women's rights and internet rights communities to occupying a central space in conversations about a free and open internet.

APC welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and its consequences during this extremely challenging time for feminists and women's rights movements. APC would like to note with concern the undermining of online gender-based violence in the COVID-19 gender response. This submission draws on APC's overall experience as well as that of working with partners in the global South to understand, respond to and prevent online GBV. It also ponders on the perspective that online GBV is part of the continuum of violence against women and as such occurs in all countries, contexts and settings. It is one of the most pervasive violations of human rights, and is a "manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women and systemic gender-based discrimination" that needs to be taken into consideration in ending all forms of violence against women.

The right to live a life free of violence and discrimination

Every woman has the right to live a life free of violence and discrimination.¹ This inherent human right does not only apply to physical spaces, but also extends to online spaces, rendering states accountable across boundaries.² According to the principles of due diligence,³ states have the obligation to take preventive and reasonable measures to ensure women are shielded against violence in all its forms regardless of the mediums and means of interactions, before it even occurs. States are also liable for effectively prosecuting and punishing perpetrators once it occurs, as well as providing redress and reparation to victims.⁴ This provision encompasses a set of fundamental rights with transformative potential that have a key role in the promotion and protection of women's rights, including freedom of expression, privacy, access to information and the right to education among, others. It further establishes how inadequate responses from non-state actors and intermediaries can have a serious chilling effect on cross-cutting women's rights and freedoms.

¹ https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/SRWomen/Pages/call_covid19.aspx

² https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf

³ Due diligence and accountability for online violence against women, <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/DueDiligenceAndAccountabilityForOnlineVAW.pdf>

⁴ Ibid

The core international human rights treaties and conventions have been steadily instrumental in narrowing down and documenting a misogynous society where women no longer feel safe, which shares its root causes with the continuum of historical gender-based inequalities that disproportionately limit women's ability to benefit from the same opportunities men frequently have access to. Although they pre-date the development of newer information and communications technologies (ICTs) and consequently the emerging forms of online gender-based violence, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action provide important normative frameworks to respond to domestic violence in the context of Covid-19. 25 years of normative and actionable progress and experience have culminated in the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) General Recommendation No. 35 (GR 35) which makes extensive reference to technology-mediated environments as conducive to already existing gender-based violence against women in all spheres of human interaction. GR 35 notes that insofar as gender-based violence affects women in different degrees and different ways, a wide range of legislative and policy responses should be devised accordingly. In her 2018 report on the theme of "online violence against women and girls",⁵ the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences mentioned the right to freedom of expression and access to information as well as the right to privacy and data protection under the section dealing with the right to live a life free of violence, thereby affirming the necessity to disclose and understand ICT-related implications in any form of violence and discrimination against women.

The normative relevance of human rights-based approaches in cyberspace remain complex given that digital spaces morph and develop. Nevertheless, the consideration of direct and indirect impacts of the internet on women's rights is crucial to thwart any sexual and gender-based risk against women the internet might bring along and amplify within a fertile sphere of expansion, searchability and transmission.

The nexus between domestic violence and online gender-based violence

In 2015, the Human Rights Council, in its resolution 29/14, recognised that domestic violence could include acts such as cyberbullying and cyberstalking, thereby reinforcing the framing of online gender-based violence as part of the continuum of violence against women, and reaffirming that states had a primary responsibility for preventing violations of the human rights of women faced with violence of any kind, including domestic violence.

Domestic violence does not entail a univocal meaning across jurisprudences, given that national definitions of domestic violence are deconstructed across various classifications, cultural norms and interpretations. As per the South African Domestic Violence Act,

⁵ Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective, 18 June 2010

domestic violence by definition includes:

- 1- Physical abuse
- 2- Sexual abuse
- 3- Emotional, verbal and psychological abuse
- 4- Economic abuse
- 5- Intimidation
- 6- Harassment
- 7- Stalking
- 8- Damage to property
- 9- Entry into the complainant's residence without consent, where these parties do not share the same residence
- 10- Any other controlling or abusive behaviour towards a complainant.

In comparison, the legal features of domestic violence in Jordan⁶ comprise:

- 1- Physical and sexual violence: narrow definition based on penal code.
- 2- Psychological violence: narrow definition based on penal code.

It should never be overstated that domestic violence always needs to be addressed in a sense of entitlement and power. Hence, any ICT-related nexus should be taken into account when tackling domestic violence against women as part of the international efforts to establishing and ensuring a life free of violence for women.

In this particular instance, the SmartSafe study conducted by the Domestic Violence Resource Center Victoria (DVRCV)⁷ focused upon the use of technology to facilitate stalking and other forms of abuse in the context of domestic violence. The SmartSafe study presented contextual findings based on surveys of 152 domestic violence advocates and 46 survivors, demonstrating that women are more likely to be stalked by intimate partners or ex-partners than strangers or acquaintances, both in Australia and globally, and women in these situations are also more likely to experience dread and fear due to stalking. The study contends that such repeated acts of stalking aim to control the victim: "Stalking is the most dramatic form of surveillance used in coercive control," the study notes, "and falls on a continuum with a range of surveillance tactics whose aim is to convey the abuser's omnipresence."⁸ The ubiquitous aspect of stalking isolates women from resuming their normal life and daily activities, thus empowering perpetrators to capitalise on their vulnerabilities and intimidate them. Compounded with the context of domestic violence, stalking has far-reaching and wide-ranging repercussions beyond isolating women from their support systems, to tormenting them in front of their community, and triggering a feeling of punishment and humiliation often in sexualised ways. As with domestic violence, the exact extent of technology and online gender-based violence is still overlooked and under-reported. The SmartSafe study is one among other research studies

⁶ UN Women: Gender Justice and Equality Before the Law in the Arab States Region, 2018 Report

⁷ Delanie Woodlock, *The Abuse of Technology in Domestic Violence and Stalking*, 2016

⁸ Stark (2007) excerpt from *The Abuse of Technology in Domestic Violence and Stalking*

that showcase and dismantle some popular misconceptions around the prevalent yet untold abuse of technology in domestic violence. The overall dimension of technology in domestic violence should be treated as a serious offence and practice, and policy and actions should include legally binding obligations to ensure that the same human rights of women offline are also guaranteed online, including all used, emerging and envisaged means of human interaction that prevent women from living in a society free of direct or low-key manifestations of gender-based violence.

COVID-19

Human rights are indivisible, therefore under normal circumstances, threats of violence against women endanger their full capacity to enjoy other rights, in particular those women's rights and freedoms that are already contested: the right to education, sexual health and reproductive rights, the right to work, the right to privacy, etc. COVID-19 has magnified existing inequalities in an uncharted territory⁹ where women are bearing the brunt of the worldwide pandemic-driven recession: the 2020 stock market crash, the suspension of tourism, creative and grassroots activities, and so on. Women are also strained by the strict and necessary preventive measures put in place by governments without further consideration of gender,¹⁰ such as the imposed lockdowns and stay-at-home orders in which an alarming number of women have found themselves trapped inside with their abusers/aggressors. The social distancing demands of COVID-19 turned people to the internet and online platforms en masse¹¹ to socialise, and shifted work modalities to remote work with the exception of frontline workers and essential care and service providers – of which women make up the vast majority.

In the midst of this health crisis, home can be a place of fear and abuse; similarly, when search engines are constantly invaded with uncertainty-ridden questions and extreme longing for health-related information and real-time updates and news, cyber violence thrives even more in a ground of fear and anxiety. A recent World Economic Forum (WEF) article¹² posits that spending more time online inadvertently leads to a riskier behaviour, pondering on how online violence attacks exploit human weaknesses through deploying social engineering methods to access passwords, networks and data. In a crisis situation, a simple click on the wrong link can become a costly mistake. And among the billions of internet users, women and women-led groups are most commonly subject to such attacks.

Additionally, while COVID-19 has seen an unprecedented spike in the rates of domestic violence, it has at the same time restricted access to justice, support systems and social services, leaving women who face domestic violence with no choice but the option of

⁹ World in uncharted territory with COVID-19: World Health Organisation

¹⁰ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-women-and-covid-19-governments-actions-by-ded-bhatia>

¹¹ Advox Global Voices: As COVID-19 accelerates digital transformation, is the internet safe for women in the Middle East?

¹² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-cybersecurity/>

helplines that provide them with online chats and mobile-mediated communications. However, helplines are largely unreachable for half of the world's population who are still offline or with limited broadband access.¹³ As with the other frailties exposed by COVID-19, the digital divide takes a toll on women, too.

The pandemic has accelerated decades-awaited actions around digital transformation of the public and private sector in few months,¹⁴ leading to a greater reliance than ever on ICTs, but in a context where meaningful connectivity for everyone, women and other vulnerable groups included, has yet to be ensured. Building a comprehensive gendered analysis of all power dynamics that prevent women from breaking free of this so-called shadow pandemic¹⁵ requires paying full attention to online behaviour and its consequences both online and offline. It goes without saying that for all the reasons mentioned above, domestic violence – particularly within this context – should not be unpacked without identifying the rights, practices and responses that would not have been otherwise undermined by the impact of online gender-based violence. In using this terminology, we would like to communicate our intersectional understanding of violence against women, which considers race, class, sexuality, age and other locations.¹⁶ In an attempt to facilitate and enrich the mandate's work with consolidated findings on the nexus between online gender-based violence and domestic violence, APC would like to present a set of issues we deem crucial for the mandate's consideration that are not meant to stand alone, but rather to provoke thoughts on scaling up cross-sectoral partnerships to tap into the broader linkages that the digital realm unveils and dismantle all forms of violence against women and their repercussions.

Issues to consider

Gender digital divides

In the context of COVID-19, gender digital divides become more stark. Whether in terms of access, affordability, meaningful connectivity or digital literacy, women's overall participation in the digital space remains disproportionately limited. This includes their participation in the digital economy, from which 1.7 billion people are excluded, and more than half of them are women.¹⁷ Amid a pandemic, the internet provides a lifeline to billions around the world. Aside from being a transformative political space of multiple forms of

¹³ <https://webfoundation.org/2019/02/half-of-the-worlds-people-are-still-offline-how-do-we-connect-them-as-quickly-as-possible/>

¹⁴ <https://www.pwc.ru/en/press-releases/2020/covid-19-uskoril-tsifrovuyu-transformatsiyu.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

¹⁶ https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_GBV_0_0.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/5/op-ed-ed-phumzile-covid-19-and-the-digital-gender-divide>

engagement, it also represents a key utility and public good.¹⁸ The internet is providing critical, real-time health information and lockdown measures updates, as well as hosting workspaces, and facilitating financial transactions in a period when the outer world has come to a standstill. However, nearly half of the world has no access to the internet,¹⁹ with 433 million women who are unconnected in low- and middle-income countries, and 165 million fewer women owning a mobile phone compared with men, who are 1.5 times likely to own a phone than women in many countries.²⁰ When lockdowns cut off avenues for support and escape, disparities in access magnify impunity and normalise the culture of violent behaviour and the culture that tolerates violence against women in both physical and virtual spaces. The economic cost associated with internet access strains women's financial capacity and infringes on their autonomy to self-determine their online presence. Consequently, women facing domestic violence who cannot afford internet access or simply buy credit for their mobile phones to call helplines or text family and relatives might end up sinking in total isolation and giving up on searching for ways to escape.

Impact of online gender-based violence

In May 2020, the Lebanese young feminist collective “Fe-Male”²¹ launched the “Screens Do Not Protect” national awareness-raising and preventive campaign on online gender-based violence.²² In the words of Fe-male's co-director Hayat Mirchad: “The Covid-19 ongoing crisis [has] left us with online platforms as the only escape to resume our professional and personal lives. Thereby, putting women at more risk of online gender-based violence that is currently taking various shapes and forms.” Mirchad explained that “Screens Do not Protect” aims at protecting women in the exercise of their right to access the internet and enjoy meaningful connectivity. As such, the campaign will provide Lebanese authorities as well as social workers and practitioners with insights on the threats and challenges that emerge. Further, the campaign strives to build the digital security capacity of women with techniques and tools they can use to ensure their safety online. According to Fe-Male's exclusive data from the Internal Security Forces Directorate in Lebanon,²³ during the national lockdown period alone, reported cases of cybercrimes in general increased by 184%, the percentage of cybercrimes committed against young women and girls aged 12 to 26 was 41%, while those against women aged 26 and above reached 27%. By the end of March 2020, there had been 315 reported cases of cybercrimes against women and girls.

18 Ibid

19 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/25/closing-digital-divide-critical-covid-19-response>

20 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/5/op-ed-ed-phumzile-covid-19-and-the-digital-gender-divide>

21 <https://www.fe-male.org>

22 <https://www.fe-male.org/archives/13108>

23 “Fe-male” Press Release, May 2020

In conservative societies where women bear the burden of the supposed “family honour”, the image of a woman made public can have devastating consequences. In Jordan, a man killed his teenage sister because she joined Facebook using his phone to make friends during the lockdown.²⁴ As young women start to use phones more intensely at home, seeing that these are often the only point of contact with the world, their use is also surveilled by the family and community even more intensely, with this use sometimes becoming an excuse for violence itself. According to the office of the eSafety Commissioner in Australia, online abuse that targeted women increased in March 2020 during confinement by 50%, similar to the surge in domestic violence.²⁵ Online gender-based violence restricts opportunities for women’s empowerment and gender equality. A key finding of APC’s research on online gender-based violence²⁶ is that it infringes on women’s bodily integrity and right to move freely, without fear of surveillance, and denies them the opportunity to form and engage in socially and politically meaningful interactions. Women victims of domestic violence subject to online harassment by their perpetrator shoulder a double emotional distress that can lead to social isolation, including loss of contact with family and friends, self-censorship and complete withdrawal from online activities. Removing oneself from the internet has further implications on access to information, e-services, and social or professional communication. The UN Human Rights Council identified widespread online violence against women as a significant reason for the global digital divide between men and women. In an Amnesty International study, a vast majority of women said that they were apprehensive about using the internet after being targeted.²⁷

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

According to the UN, three months of lockdown could lead to one million unintended pregnancies worldwide²⁸. The figure could rise to seven million given that extension of movement restrictions is likely²⁹. Beyond the global contraception shortage, infringement on women’s right to family planning, women’s ability to access information and support to exercise bodily and sexual autonomy severely limited during the pandemic. . Particular content related to women’s rights, sexuality and reproductive healthcare issues remains unavailable, censored or blocked in certain jurisdictions —China, Cuba, Indonesia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia — according to the Open Observatory of Network

²⁴ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/jordanians-outraged-by-murder-of-teen-girl-by-brother-for-joining-facebook-1.1019409>

²⁵ Advox Global Voices: As COVID-19 accelerates digital transformation, is the internet safe for women in the Middle East?

²⁶ https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_GBV_0_0.pdf

²⁷ Advox Global Voices: As COVID-19 accelerates digital transformation, is the internet safe for women in the Middle East?

²⁸ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-women-domestic-abuse/>

²⁹ Ibid

Interference (OONI)³⁰. Social and moral norms continue to infringe on women's choices, and restrict them from seeking advice, or safe abortion/post abortion care support through helplines fearing stigma, defamation and privacy breaches.

Women Human Rights Defenders

Women are at the forefront of the the COVID-19 response. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) endanger their lives to monitor and denounce state crackdown on human rights and freedoms during the outbreak³¹. Activists, feminists, journalists and whistle-blowers are targets of anti-rights groups, facing increased surveillance, and doxxing on grounds of unpopular opinions and gender-focused work³².

The latest International Women's Media Foundation survey³³ concluded that "physical, sexual and online abuse is a part of women journalists' daily work³⁴", and they are particularly targeted online to intimidate, sow disinformation and discredit their work. Trapped at home, WHRDs are likely to be under familial and social surveillance that can lead them to disengage from public discourse. Dawla, a Yemeni Human rights activist told Global Voices³⁵: "There is a strict segregation of sex and men should not see women's appearance. Women don't usually post their photos online. If a woman shares intimate photographs in a private conversation — which can be something as mild as a picture showing her face without the full traditional black cover — there is a risk that someone will use it to bully or blackmail her. If known it could ruin her reputation and bring shame to her entire family".

As access to justice is limited and public attention is shifted away, virtual environments become more hostile towards women on the frontline who are already at high risk injustice and discrimination. It is therefore critical that WHRDs are able to use digital technologies, including online spaces to advance their work in an environment that does not undermine their rights to freedom of expression, opinion, assembly and association. It is equally important that that the online culture that tolerates and reproduces violence, which is amplified by social media networks is challenged.

30 <https://ooni.org/post/2019-blocking-abortion-rights-websites-women-on-waves-web/>

31 <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/will-the-legacy-of-covid-19-include-increased-authoritarianism#>

32 <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/activists-call-un-wide-policy-support-and-protect-women-human-rights-defenders>

33 https://yoursosteam.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/attacks-and-harassment_fall-2018.pdf

34 Ibid

35 Advox Global Voices: As COVID-19 accelerates digital transformation, is the internet safe for women in the Middle East?

State/Police responses

Even as the international community calls on states to apply a gender lens to the COVID-19 pandemic to better inform responses, there is an adverse and disproportionate impact on women's lives³⁶. In the context of COVID-19, online gender-based violence poses a real threat to women's rights, and compounds existing forms of violence against women. States must show agility in enacting effective responses that comply with international human rights norms, and undertake a holistic response that foregrounds the root causes of online gender-based violence against women in ways that show that these expressions of violence are not distinct and separate from systemic gender-based discrimination³⁷. Such efforts must be consistent with and reflective of the Article 19 (3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that emphasises the importance to leverage preventive, reactive and redress mechanisms. It is important to note however, that on a global level, the UNODC thematic brief on gender-based violence against women and girls³⁸ has recognised that police and other law enforcement agencies have less time and human resources to respond.

Available makeshift solutions for domestic violence are digitally-enabled

A number of state- and community-led solutions have been put in place to respond to victims of domestic violence calls for help and support. These are primarily digitally-enabled and are grappling with the digital divide, threats of surveillance and socio-economic barriers and varying levels of women's agency which affects their ability to access them³⁹. In their latest brief, MADRE a global coalition on intersecting issues (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), drawing on the experiences of their grassroots women's organisations networks, presented a set of recommendations that focus on using ICT-enabled activities to mitigate the risks of domestic violence within social-distancing environments.⁴⁰ These include :

- 1, Using online platforms - social media networks - by feminist groups to campaign against domestic violence and create key spaces for women to connect and help one

³⁶ <https://deliverforgood.org/sign-on-to-this-open-letter-calling-on-governments-to-apply-a-gender-lens-to-covid-19-preparedness-response-and-recovery/>

³⁷ https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_GBV_0_0.pdf

³⁸ https://www.unodc.org/documents/Gender/Thematic_Gender_Briefs_English/GBVAW_and_UNODC_in_COVID19_final_7Apr2020.pdf

³⁹ <https://www.thequint.com/voices/blogs/coronavirus-lockdown-domestic-abuse-are-helpline-numbers-useful>

⁴⁰ <https://www.madre.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/From%20Global%20Coordination%20to%20Local%20Strategies.pdf>

another.

2. Providing supportive services through bluetooth sharing.
3. Redirecting psycho-social support services through online mechanisms.

While the emergency-driven practices are meant respond to the crisis, it is essential that the implications of these measures be considered in the long term, particularly insofar as they technology has the potential to reshapes the domestic violence response. For instance, providing supportive services through bluetooth sharing contends the fact that women who are offline and not necessarily ICTs users can also become victims of online gender-based violence through hacking, infringement on data and other harms⁴¹. They can also at risk of domestic violence if their abuser finds out about the support-related shared information. Feminist groups who are outspoken on such issues are also at risks of social media exposure and targeting by anti-rights movements.

People of diverse gender and sexualities

For people of diverse genders and sexualities COVID-19 stay-at-home orders and lockdown measures increased the risk of harm and violence⁴². Even as these communities revert to online platforms to connect and form networks and associations, in the context of COVID-19, prevalent forms of discrimination faced by LGBTQI people are heightened and exerted by state and non-state actors under the emergency situation cover to , clamp down on organising spaces, and limit expression online and offline⁴³. Home as well can become a place of insecurity and abuse which can lead to further social isolation and increased anxiety as avenues for escape are cut off and available support services — if at all — might lead to further stigmatisation, scapegoating, violence and danger.

Conflict-stricken countries

In conflict-affected countries, women are disproportionately affected by unequal power dynamics that amplify their vulnerabilities. They are likely to be on the brink of poverty, starvation and exploitation in all its forms. COVID-19 is worsening already moribund economies and weak infrastructures. War and infection freeze donation activities, slow down support services and drown conflict-affected countries in a complete media blackout as public attention is progressively paid to COVID-19 local news. Consequently women victims of domestic violence are desperately in need of particular contextual support. On April 17, 2020, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq led a two-days online capacity-building training on best practices to support women victims of domestic violence in war-torn. The workshop trained 75 women social workers from 15 municipalities on ICT-based tools and techniques. In the words of Rawaa, one of the participants: “ This was the first online session I attended to learn how to provide psychological support to women. The training helped me realise that there are new tools

41 https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_GBV_0_0.pdf

42 <https://outrightinternational.org/content/vulnerability-amplified-impact-covid-19-pandemic-lgbtqi-people>

43 Ibid

and skills that we should all learn because the work of social researchers is important in times of crisis. Training has taught us to be creative in communication to alleviate women's suffering”.

Recommendations for actions

Governments

1. Allocate resources and to address violence against women in COVID-19 national response plans.
2. Strengthen services for women who experience violence during COVID-19.
3. Enhance the capacity and skills of actors in the criminal justice system, including law enforcement and judges to properly investigate online.
4. Ensure gender-disaggregated data is collected to understand the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and inform the response
5. Build capacity of social workers and others providing psycho-social support on effective and contextual tools and techniques to provide remote support services.
6. Government bodies should learn from and support creative and innovative citizen-led solutions that are rooted in context.
7. Invest in resources, education and support for frontline anti-violence workers to develop greater technical literacy
8. Adopt legislative obligations for data collection and transparency reporting on violence against women.
9. Consider the role of women’s organizations in recovery plans and the longer-term solutions to address the increase of violence against women and girls during COVID-19.

UN agencies, special procedures and civil society

10. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women should collaborate with the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy when formulating policy responses
11. The Special Rapporteur should encourage actors in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector to take a leadership role in preventing online gender-based violence, and its repercussions.
12. The UN Women should elaborate on and further develop a comprehensive definition of online gender-based violence which reflects the continuum of violence

and the common root causes as well as the technology nexus in all forms of violence and discrimination against women that are made possible through the unique specificities of digital technologies.

13. UN agencies and special procedures should ensure responses to domestic violence in the context of Covid-19 consider the particular experiences of women in conflict-stricken countries, women human rights defenders and people of diverse gender and sexualities.
14. Strengthen advocacy and engagement of different actors to address violence against women and girls during COVID-19.
15. Ensure that legal frameworks adequately protect women's freedom from violence.
16. Responses to and prevention of gender-based violence against women should strive to create an enabling environment for women's access to and enjoyment of ICT in terms of quality infrastructure, training in highly technical skills, and meaningful participation in internet governance for women in an increasingly digital world.
17. The Special Rapporteur should account for internet access and digital agency of those most vulnerable to domestic violence to ensure that all exclusions are addressed.
18. Engage the private sector, and internet intermediaries on how to prevent and respond to violence against women.
19. Engage media outlets to proactively challenge gender stereotypes and harmful masculinities, accentuated under COVID-19.
20. Ensure any advocacy effort does not put women at greater risk of violence and distress.