

EIGE-2021 Gender Equality Index 2021 Report: Health

Gender-based violence amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic

Social distancing and restrictions on movement to contain COVID-19 have trapped women and girls at home with their abusers. If victims of violence had legal and social support networks, these were shattered, making it almost impossible to seek immediate support or to escape their situation.

Anti-COVID-19 measures can compound and connect different intersecting forms of discrimination against women and heighten the risk of violence against women belonging to vulnerable and marginalised groups. This includes older women, women and girls with disabilities, migrant women, homeless women and victims of trafficking, among others.

For instance, lockdown and 'stay-at-home' orders exacerbate factors that put older women at particular risk of violence, for example loneliness, anxiety, depression, the financial dependency of caregivers and the dependency of older people on caregivers, as well as alcohol and substance use among caregivers.

The reduction of staff in long-term care facilities due to illness and self-isolation and the suspension of family visits have increased residents' isolation and the already high risk of violence, particularly against women (Šimonović, 2020).

The lack of comparable administrative or prevalence data on gender-based violence makes it difficult to capture the extent of any increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic. Since it began, media and women's organisations have reported a sharp increase in demand for services such as shelters or helplines for women victims of violence. For example, the 1522 helpline run by the Italian government received 5 031 telephone calls between 1 March and 16 April 2020, 73 % more than over the same period in 2019. In Spain, there was a 48 % increase in calls to helplines (Šimonović, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed and exacerbated serious pre-existing gaps in the prevention of violence against women and in adequate available victim support services. An EIGE (2021a) study revealed that counter-pandemic measures introduced from March to September 2020 led to many major challenges for service providers. These include ensuring continuity of service delivery, finding new ways to provide support, meeting a surge in service demand, dealing with the strain on service provider staff, reaching victims, identifying the risk level of victims, and insufficient funding (EIGE, 2021a).

The study highlighted an important gap in crisis preparedness and crisis management planning during the pandemic's first wave. No EU Member State had a gender-sensitive disaster plan in place to address possible surges in violence against women. The COVID-19 outbreak prompted 11 countries to develop a national policy or action plan to address issues arising from an increased level of intimate partner violence, but in only three countries did the plan or policy include specific measures to tackle the issues (EIGE, 2021a).

Nevertheless, some interesting practices to protect women victims of violence were identified in the EIGE study. Eight countries used national legislation to deem support services essential, two countries used digital technology to continue criminal proceedings, and four countries introduced helplines or email/instant messaging services for victims. In addition, 11 countries provided more sheltered accommodation in either public housing or private hotels, but measures focused on removing perpetrators from the home were far less common (EIGE, 2021a).

Many victim support service providers have struggled with insufficient funding and have been forced to adapt to new ways of working, for example offering services remotely. Continuing uncertainty and spikes in COVID-19 cases and reported domestic violence cases have caused further stress. This has made it particularly difficult for service providers to ensure work–life balance for their own employees, and their health and safety. The EIGE study interviews show that support to cope with these challenges came from non-government service providers rather than from governmental institutions (EIGE, 2021a).

For many women and their children, the lack of immediate, specialised and long-term response to gender-based and domestic violence will have longer-lasting consequences than the COVID-19 pandemic. As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women recognises, the pandemic of gender-based violence preceded COVID-19 and will most likely outlast it (Šimonović, 2020).