



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality


## Good Practices for tackling domestic violence in the context of COVID-19

Webinar, 19 May 2020

### Summary Report



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*This programme is implemented by the European Commission and shall contribute to the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons, as enshrined in the Treaty, the Charter and international human rights conventions, are promoted and protected.*

*For more information see: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/programmes-2014-2020/rec/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/programmes-2014-2020/rec/index_en.htm)*

## Introduction

Organised in the framework of the [EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality](#), the webinar explored challenges and lessons learned from tackling domestic violence in the context of COVID-19. Participants had the opportunity to examine and learn from good practice approaches from Spain, the Czech Republic and Slovenia.

The webinar took place on 19 May 2020 and was attended by officials from 23 Member States, European NGO networks, European Commission services, the cabinet of Vice President Jourova and of Commissioner Dalli, and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

It was the first of a series of three planned events on gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19, addressing the main pillars of the recently launched [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#) – FREE, THRIVE and LEAD.

## 1. Setting the scene

### 1.1 The European Commission's response to the increased risk of domestic violence in the context of COVID-19

Ingrid Bellander-Todino, Head of the Gender Equality Unit, DG Justice, European Commission, located the webinar in the context of the Commission's work on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In April, Commissioners Dalli, Kyriakides, and Schmit, sent a joint letter to the relevant Ministers in all Member States to urge them to ensure that their emergency response measures take account of the needs of groups in situations of vulnerability, including victims of domestic violence. The Commission called on Member States to provide sufficient prevention measures, support services and protection to victims of domestic violence and to continue implementing their obligations under EU law, in particular the [Victims' Rights Directive](#).

The Commission has proposed to put €3 billion into the Emergency Support Instrument for the healthcare sector, which can fund support for managing the threat to security, including domestic violence due to confinement. Funding is also available under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, and its successor, for projects to improve support services, including helplines, shelters and counselling services.

Ending gender-based violence, including domestic violence, is a key goal of the [EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#). The latter underlines the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention as a key priority and includes a commitment to launch a Victims' Rights Strategy that addresses the specific needs of victims of gender-based violence.

The Strategy also emphasises the need for comprehensive, updated and comparable data for policies on combating gender-based violence to be effective. The new EU survey on gender-based violence (EU-GBV) is expected to be the first wave of a new

era in comprehensive data collection on this topic in the EU. All Member States are encouraged to participate to ensure representative and meaningful results, and the final deadline to apply for a grant from Eurostat to cover 80% of the costs of implementing the survey is 8 July 2020.

## **1.2 Civil society organisations' response to the increased risk of domestic violence in the context of COVID-19**

Irene Rosales, Policy and Campaigns Officer at the European Women's Lobby (EWL) and Pille Tsopp-Pagan, Vice-President of the Women Against Violence Europe Network (WAVE) outlined the challenges in relation to domestic violence and the need for innovative responses in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Domestic violence is a long-term systemic issue that precedes the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the measures taken in response to the pandemic have increased women's exposure to domestic violence, in particular as a result of domiciliary confinement measures. Lockdown creates an enabling environment for the perpetrator and makes it harder for the victim to secure assistance.

EWL and WAVE stressed the importance for Member States to: enable women's support services to meet the demand for assistance and to adapt to operating remotely; recognise support services for victims of domestic violence as 'essential services' and maintain/reinforce their funding; reinforce cooperation between the state and civil society for effective responses to gender-based violence in the new context; ensure effective protection and prosecution procedures and quick access to restraining orders; actively raise awareness about available protection measures and support services; find new outreach channels and means of communication to ensure that these messages reach all women in diverse situations; and enable access for women and girls in all their diversity to support services and protection measures.

## **2. Good practices from Member States**

The webinar featured good practice examples from Spain, the Czech Republic and Slovenia addressing different aspects of tackling domestic violence in the context of COVID-19: the drafting of a comprehensive strategy; tools and actions facilitating victims seeking help and reporting violence and how to continue the work with perpetrators during a lockdown.

The good practices were selected based on the responses to a questionnaire that was sent by the European Commission to Member States. The questionnaire invited Member States to share information on how they are addressing different aspects of gender equality in the context of the current COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath.

## 2.1 Spain: Contingency plan to combat gender-based violence during the COVID-19 crisis

A contingency plan was published by Royal Decree in Spain, to address the increased risk for women and children to suffer gender-based violence in the context of the domiciliary confinement measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pilar Vilaplana, Senior Advisor to the Government Delegate against Gender-based Violence, Ministry of Equality, outlined the key measures to ensure continued protection of and assistance to victims of violence.

The services to protect and assist victims of gender-based violence and their children were declared essential services, including help lines, online services monitoring compliance with restraining orders and shelters. This guaranteed that these services could continue their work and that funding was available to adapt to the constraints imposed by the pandemic. A new messaging service for advice and emotional and psychological counselling was set up via WhatsApp. This was particularly important for women confined with their aggressor and there has been a wide take-up.

A prevention and awareness raising campaign<sup>1</sup> against gender-based violence was launched, targeting women victims of violence and the general public. The core message was 'We are with you: Together we will stop gender-based violence' and key points of contact for assistance were communicated. A [guide](#) for women suffering gender-based violence under domiciliary confinement was published and disseminated, providing information on protection measures and support services available as well as the exceptional measures put in place for the period of the pandemic. It also contains guidance on child visitation arrangements for children of victims of gender-based violence over this period. The guide furthermore includes information about the [ALERTCOPS app](#) for women in emergency situations who cannot call the police. This app sends an emergency signal to the police with the victim's location.

There were challenges in coordinating the different administrative levels and in getting information out to all women, particularly those in rural areas. The choice of channels of communication was important in seeking to reach all women. Innovative platforms and solutions were devised by local authorities, such as the involvement of pharmacies in referring women to support services. There will be a need for a post-COVID-19 action plan to assist victims after this period. The contingency plan has demonstrated the importance of reinforcing systems that guarantee and protect rights over this period, and the value of dialogue with specialised NGOs. The establishment of domestic violence services as essential services was the key step.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see:  
<https://violenciagenero.igualdad.gob.es/sensibilizacionConcienciacion/campannas/violenciaGobierno/todoSaldraBien/home.htm> and  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMXzkNaN1GD3n6rpPPhfF3f\\_U5iyWlktD](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMXzkNaN1GD3n6rpPPhfF3f_U5iyWlktD)

## 2.2 Czech Republic: Bright Sky app and training of delivery personnel in recognising signs of domestic violence

The adaptation and promotion of the Bright Sky app developed in the UK context for use in the Czech Republic was presented by Branislava Marvanova Vargova, from the NGO Rosa. This app is designed to assist victims of sexual and domestic violence, and those seeking to support someone experiencing such violence. The app includes a covert mode option to protect users. It has features for the user to assess risk, record evidence, and get information for seeking help.

The channels used to communicate about the app were key to its effectiveness. The best channels are those that women at risk of violence are already engaged with. Training was for instance provided to hairdressers and wellness personnel to point them towards such channels.

Good cooperation between NGOs, the police, the Ministry of Interior and the private sector (Vodafone Foundation) was key for ensuring the high quality and impact of the app. By May 2020, there were more than 1,000 downloads and it had been opened 3,592 times. There is an understanding that an app for children would also be needed.

Furthermore, delivery personnel from the Czech Post and six other delivery companies were trained online about the Bright Sky app, and on how to recognise and react to signs of domestic violence (e.g. by asking closed questions), as they were among the few people who might have contact with victims during the lockdown. This work with delivery service staff was a quick and positive response to the challenge of communication with victims of gender-based violence, given the context. Nonetheless, there is a need for more in-depth training for the staff and to address the risk that they might themselves be perpetrators.

## 2.3 Slovenia: Working with perpetrators of domestic violence in the context of COVID-19

Work with perpetrators had to be adapted<sup>2</sup> to ensure the continuation of these programmes during the COVID-19 lockdown and a good practice in this regard was presented by Katja Zabukovec Kerin, President of the Association for Non-violent Communication (DNK Association) in Slovenia. The safest way to progress with the programme was discussed with each perpetrator and individual plans were prepared. New referrals over this period were not introduced into existing groups, but received individual counselling. Some groups continued to operate via Zoom, with adapted approaches. Privacy concerns in contexts where conversations had the potential to

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, see: [https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/fileadmin/WWP\\_Network/redakteure/Resources/COVID\\_19/20200406\\_Guidelines\\_final.pdf](https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/fileadmin/WWP_Network/redakteure/Resources/COVID_19/20200406_Guidelines_final.pdf)

be overheard were dealt with by the perpetrator for instance receiving calls while going for a walk.

New goals had to be set, focusing on reducing the risk of violence, decreasing perpetrators' stress levels, increasing perpetrators' coping mechanisms, and mitigating risk factors for families in lockdown. Discussions were limited to catching up and making sure participants were well and healthy. This reflected the fact that change in long-term patterns of behaviour was not a realistic goal under the current constraints, and that the risks women and children were dealing with during the crisis were not necessarily the same as before. Some experts had expressed concerns about moving groups online.<sup>3</sup> If, at any point, the counsellor felt that something was wrong, one-to-one contact would be set up. Also in situations of higher risk, check-in calls and texts were exchanged with individual perpetrators. Individual counselling was provided by phone or video. It was important to set boundaries for counsellors and make sure there was no contact outside the programme process. The measures were effective in keeping contact with perpetrators and in diminishing the risks of violence during this period. Only 5% of perpetrators did not agree to continue with the programme. A strategy for the post-COVID-19 period will be important to ensure perpetrators complete their full programme.

### 3. Looking Forward

In the presentations and discussions, a number of ideas and suggestions were made that provide a perspective for future action on domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic recovery phase.

It is imperative to sustain a gender-sensitive approach in the responses to the pandemic and in the recovery phase, that includes a focus on eliminating domestic violence, protecting victims, and ensuring adequate and effective support services. Gender mainstreaming, involving women's organisations, offers a key tool to drive such an approach.

In particular, establishing domestic violence services as essential services provides an important foundation to ensure they are adequately resourced to support women and children, and to adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and the subsequent recovery phase. Awareness raising, communication and outreach initiatives, that engage women in all their diversity and ensure they are aware of the protection measures and support services in place, are another key element.

The post-COVID-19 period will require further planning and innovation in preventing and tackling domestic violence victims, drawing on an ongoing dialogue with women's organisations. The full and effective implementation of the [EU Gender Equality](#)

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<sup>3</sup> For further information see: <https://www.caringdads.org/news/2020/3/30/caring-dads-and-the-covid19-pandemic>

[Strategy 2020-2025](#), in particular its objective of ending gender-based violence, will be key for making progress in the recovery phase. This should include the ratification and effective implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. The EU survey on gender-based violence (EU-GBV) will provide foundations for evidence-based policy and programmes. It is important that as many Member States as possible participate in the survey.