



Effects of the COVID-19 crisis on violence against women

Submission by the Government of Finland

26 June 2020

The Government of Finland welcomes this opportunity to submit information on the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on violence against women as well as good practices to mitigate such effects and wishes to submit the following information to the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences.

General background

As general background information, the Government wishes, first, to submit the following information concerning the emergency conditions in Finland.

In March 2020, Finland faced an exceptional situation due to the COVID-19 infectious disease pandemic. After preparatory consideration of the situation and grounds for declaring a state of emergency by the President of the Republic and the Government, the Government plenary session announced on 16 March 2020 that the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland constituted a state of emergency. The Government was entitled to exercise powers under the Emergency Powers Act (1552/2011). The purpose of the Act is to protect the population, to secure its livelihood and the national economy, to maintain legal order and fundamental and human rights, and to safeguard the territorial integrity and independence of the state in emergency conditions.

The use of powers laid down in the Emergency Powers Act during the COVID-19 pandemic has been based on the assessment that these powers are necessary to protect the population from the consequences of a highly widespread infectious disease and to safeguard fundamental rights and human rights under exceptional circumstances. In particular, the aim has been to ensure the adequacy of healthcare and social welfare services and to safeguard the carrying capacity of intensive care during the crisis.

The coronavirus pandemic has been managed largely through the Communicable Diseases Act (1227/2016), by means of restrictive recommendations issued by the Government and

by amending a number of laws, regulations and decisions. However, it has also been necessary to resort to the powers provided for in the Emergency Powers Act.

The Government has issued 14 decrees on the use and continuation of powers under the Emergency Powers Act. The use of powers under the Emergency Powers Act has concerned early childhood education and care, primary and lower secondary education, upper secondary education, vocational education institutions, higher education institutions and liberal education, the administrative branch of healthcare and social welfare, working life and restrictions on movement to and from the densely populated Uusimaa County.

Since 17 March 2020, the Government has also made decisions under the Border Guard Act (578/2005) on the temporary reintroduction of border controls at internal borders and, at the same time, on the restriction of external border traffic due to the serious threat to Finland's internal security caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent decisions in this respect were made by the Government on 12 June 2020 and will remain in force until 14 July 2020.

Various recommendations and guidelines have been issued concerning older people and other risk groups, restrictions on gatherings, public events, youth and club facilities, recreational facilities, sports competitions and series, borrowing items from libraries, public premises, remote work, activities of food and beverage service businesses, commuting, visits to care institutions and hospitals, and leisure travel in Finland and abroad.

Based on the situational assessment received on 15 June 2020, the Government has determined that the COVID-19 pandemic can be managed using the regular powers of the authorities. In its plenary session on 15 June 2020, the Government issued decrees repealing the use of powers under the Emergency Powers Act and announced that the current situation in the country no longer constitutes a state of emergency as referred to in section 3 of the Emergency Powers Act. The decrees repealing the use of powers under the Act and the end of the state of emergency entered into force on 16 June 2020.

1. To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered during the COVID-19 crisis.

The number of police alert duty due to domestic violence has remained broadly at the same level for the early part of the year 2020 and is in line with 2019 levels (in Finnish: The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Finnish society: https://thl.fi/fi/web/hyvinvoinnin-ja-terveyden-edistamisen-johtaminen/ajankohtaista/koronan-vaikutukset-yhteiskuntaan-ja-palveluihin?fbclid=IwAR0yqZE6-Z2dxX5bNemo_7y4wfw80Dh9rGFDVSPGD2DJ6VUaqHQvgFTntSM#Turvakotiin_hakeutu

[neiden perheiden m%C3%A4%C3%A4r%C3%A4 v%C3%A4hentyntyt](#); and in English: The coronavirus epidemic has reduced social interaction and the use of services – impact on lifestyles as well: <https://thl.fi/en/web/thlfi-en/-/the-coronavirus-epidemic-has-reduced-social-interaction-and-the-use-of-services-impact-on-lifestyles-as-well?redirect=%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fhealth-promotion>).

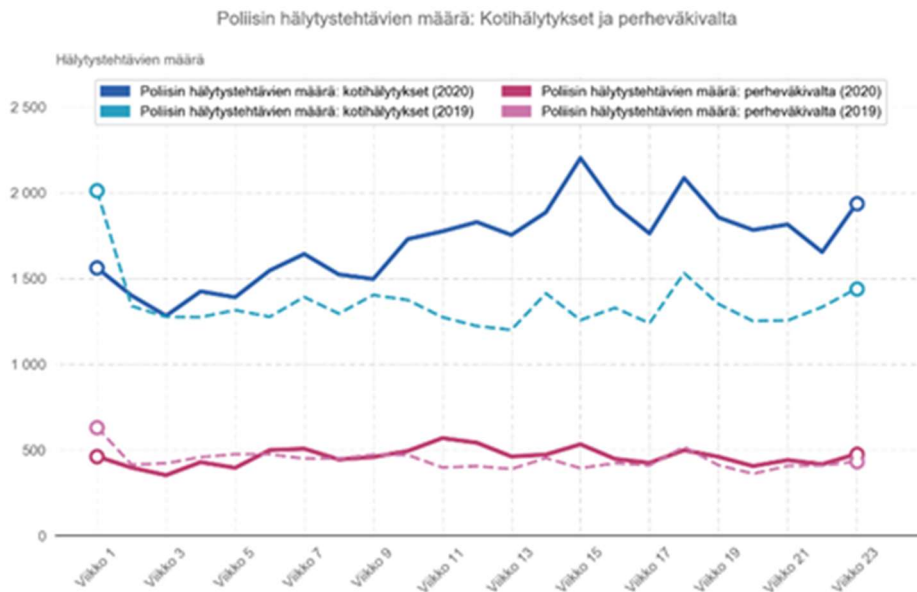
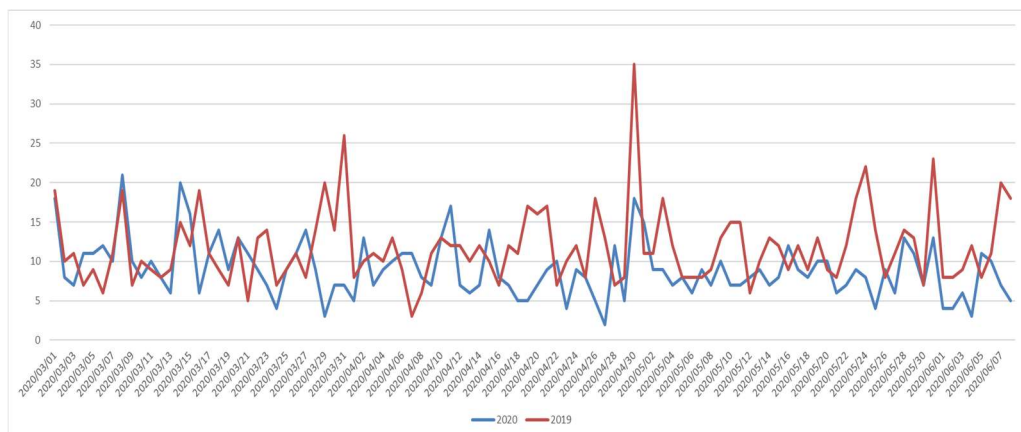


Figure: Dark blue - alerts to the police in 2020; light blue - alerts to the police in 2019; dark pink - domestic violence alerts in 2020; and light pink - domestic violence alerts in 2019.

Some resources of the police have been transferred from traffic control to ensure a prompt response to home calls such as cases of domestic violence as it was foreseen that long time of social distancing and quarantine may increase domestic tension. As the chart below shows calls due to domestic violence have not increased but in contrary. There is no data available on cases disaggregated by relationship status.



Statistics Finland cannot produce statistics on intimate partner and family violence for the spring 2020 until next year, since the statistics are based on registers that are mainly produced at the end of year. However, reported assaults, homicides and sexual offences happened in private residences can be used as an estimate on intimate partner and family violence. This data from January to March was released on 17 April 2020. The data from April to June is planned to be released in July 2020.

Yearly statistics on intimate and partner violence for the year 2019 can be found here: http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/rpk/2019/15/rpk_2019_15_2020-06-02_tie_001_en.html. The publication and the statistics table of the statistics for the first quarter of 2020 concerning recorded number of offences can be found here: http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/rpk/2020/01/rpk_2020_01_2020-04-17_tie_001_en.html and http://pxnet2.stat.fi/PXWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin_oik_rpk_tiet/statfin_rpk_pxt_117t.px/.

The Association of Finnish Municipalities report that there are indications of an increase in domestic violence.

Some CSOs (such as Victim Support Finland (RIKU) as well as Miesjärjestöjen keskusliitto (Central Union for Men's Organisations), Miessakit Association and Girls' House Helsinki, Girls' House Espoo and Boys' House Helsinki) report that there has been no particular signs of increased or decreased domestic violence against men or women during the COVID-19 pandemic. This observation may partly be explained by the fact that, e.g. one on one work had began and/or the customers had experienced violence already before the pandemic.

At the same time, RIKU, however, reports that it is still too early to make an overall conclusion of the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic since the data is from a rather short period. Many observations in RIKU's services indicate that there could very well have been a rise in domestic violence even if this is not recorded in the statistics. Victims have, for example, reported that it is more difficult for them to speak on the phone at home or that it has been more difficult to flee from home to another location, e.g. to friends or relatives. It might thus be that obstacles to seek for help and assistance have been higher during the pandemic, which results in more hidden criminality. The fear of contacting services also applies to experiences in RIKU's special service for victims of human trafficking.

2. Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

National helpline Nollalinja (funded and organised by the Government) is available 24/7 (Nollalinja.fi/in-english/). The number of calls has remained in typical level also in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nollalinja Helpline has ensured staff adequacy also during the pandemic.

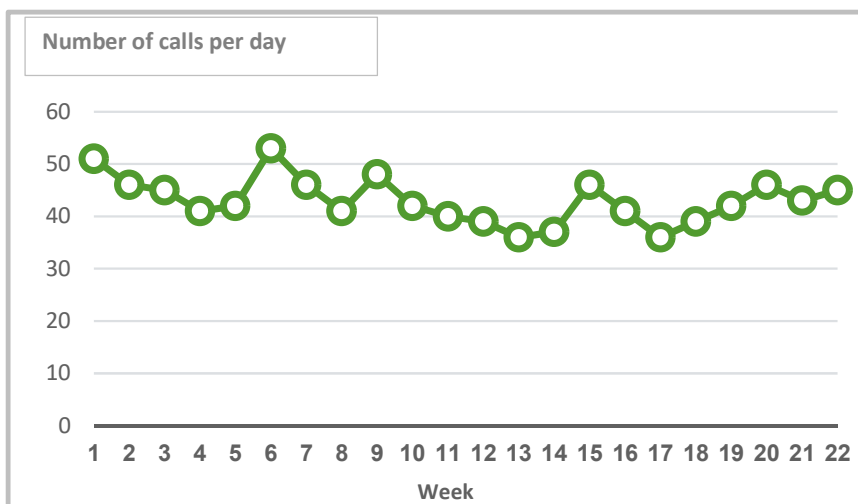


Figure: Number of calls to Nollalinja in 2020.

The Association of Finnish Municipalities report that in addition to Nollalinja, many municipalities have opened helplines and chat services during the pandemic. These services have drawn attention also in the media e.g. in the news of Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), which is a public service broadcasting company. A website “Declaration of Family Peace” <https://www.perherauhanjulistus.fi/> brings together many actors and service providers that can be approached on a low threshold. The website illustrates that help is available in maintaining family peace, crisis prevention and aftercare.

Dozens of municipalities have opened new websites to provide information on services, including 24/7 services in the case of domestic violence (e.g. City of Tampere at <https://www.tampere.fi/en/social-and-health-services/coronavirus.html>). Municipalities have published multilingual information on coronavirus, e.g. the City of Helsinki at www.hel.fi/helsinki/coronavirus-en/information/services and the City of Espoo at [www.espoo.fi/en-US/City_of_Espoo/Coronavirus_advice_for_Espoo_residents\(174305\)](http://www.espoo.fi/en-US/City_of_Espoo/Coronavirus_advice_for_Espoo_residents(174305)). Municipalities have increased resources in family services also in the evenings and weekends. All the emergency calls by the families will be followed by intensified family services.

CSOs report that helplines have been available during the pandemic. For example RIKU reports that its 116 006 helpline has been running normally throughout the pandemic with expanded opening hours, which led to an increase of calls, doubling the numbers. Because of the expansion of opening hours it is not possible to know if the reason for an increased number of calls is due to the opening hours or due to the pandemic. It should be noted that the 116 006 helpline is meant for all victims of crime. Of the 772 discussions during the months of April and May, 251 concerned domestic violence (incl. protection orders) and sexual crimes. Of these clients 200 were women (75 sexual crimes, 106 domestic violence, 19 protection orders), 41 men (13 sexual crimes, 21 domestic violence, 7 protection orders)

and 10 gender unknown. Out of all the clients of RIKU's services during the first four months of 2020 (11 162) 8 072 are women, 2 131 men, 8 other gender and 951 unknown.

Also other CSOs (e.g. Rape Crises Centre Tukinainen and Exit Prostitution Association/Youth Exit) report of extended service hours as well as increased contacts (also e.g. Maria Academy).

RIKU reports also that to raise awareness of the 116 006 helpline, RIKU started in May a digital campaign, in which one focus is women victims of domestic violence (in Finnish and Swedish: <https://www.riku.fi/rikosuhripaivystys-116-006-palveluun-soitetaan-yhdenenemman-aukioloa-on-laajennettu/>)

Some CSOs report also that they have not been able to work in public environments or do school visits (e.g. Youth Exit) but instead been concentrating on providing support online, in private anonymous online chat, where support is given in written conversation.

3. Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?

There has not been a curfew in Finland, and therefore no one has been forced to stay home. However, in practice, getting help/access to services has been more difficult than normally.

4. Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?

All the shelters in Finland (funded and organized by the Government) have been open and available during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shelters are prepared to be in function and to face different situations (clients in quarantine, clients belonging to a risk group, clients having the virus) during the pandemic. Many of the shelters are capable of taking victims that might have coronavirus or belong to a risk group. In addition, there is a plan how to use the network of shelters if a victim must find another shelter. Occupancy rate of shelter network has been little lower during the months of April and May 2020 than at the same time in 2019.

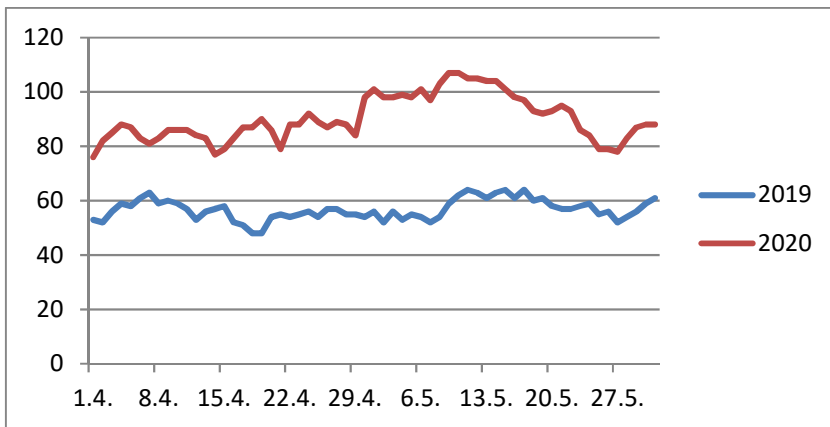


Figure: Free family places in the shelter network in April and May 2019 and 2020. The entire shelter network had in April and May 2020 211 family places. At the end of April 2019 and through May 2019, the network had 187 family places.

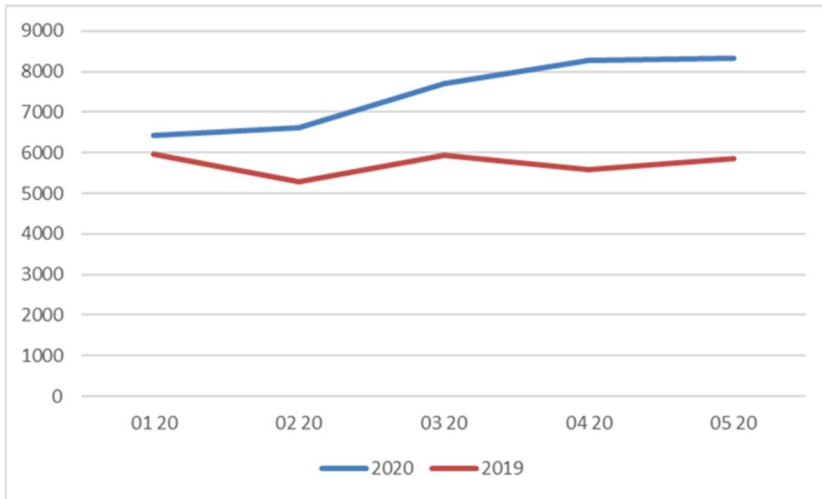
5. Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Protection orders are available in Finland.

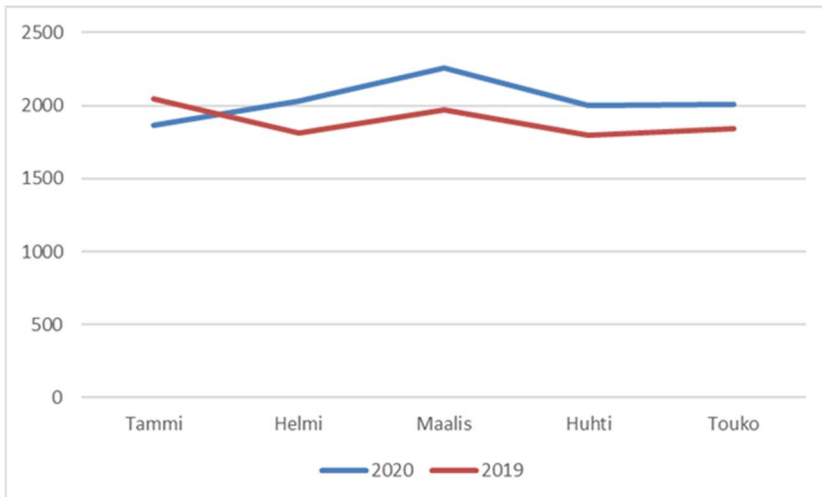
6. What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?

The police activities have continued more or less intact during the pandemic. Some resources have been transferred from traffic control to ensure a prompt response to home calls such as cases of domestic violence. The three-week-long restrictions of movement between the metropolitan area and the rest of the country was resource consuming, but the police was able to carry out all its normal duties. Special instructions of handling the pandemic has been issued by the National Police Board and have included precaution measures in order to avoid the spread of the virus. Distance work amongst office workers have been recommended.

Alarm calls to homes have increased compared with the same period last year:



However, the increase of alarm calls due to domestic violence has not increased in the same proportion:



The prosecuting authority has so far been able to carry out its own tasks normally. Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the Prosecution Service has remained operational and is able to carry out its duties in cases where the police conduct a preliminary investigation. This also applies to various violent crimes against women. The capacity of the Prosecution Service has been maintained through many general measures to prevent the spread of the virus to employees and citizens. The prosecutors have also been instructed to propose to the courts the organisation of proceeding remotely if anti-virus measures prevent personal presence and the case is appropriate for such a proceeding.

Courts have remained open and court proceedings continue. Urgent matters have been dealt with in the courts without being adjourned within the limits of COVID-19 pandemic related instructions concerning health and safety. Court proceedings can also utilise remote access. However, the pandemic has caused delays in criminal proceedings.

7. What are the impacts of the current restrictive measures and lockdowns on women's access to health services? Please specify whether services are closed or suspended, particularly those focusing on reproductive health.

Most of the services are not closed, however, some of the non-urgent healthcare services may have been reduced and this may have had effects on the access to non-urgent healthcare services.

Client contacts in school health care clinics, in maternity clinics and child health and welfare clinics decreased significantly during COVID-19 pandemic. The decrease was 60-80 % in school health care services, 20-40 % in child health care services and slightly less than 20-40% in maternity clinics.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has instructed municipalities regarding how to secure the provision of services during the state of emergency. Although the situation is exceptional, municipalities must safeguard clients' right to receive social welfare and healthcare services that meet their individual needs, apart from certain exceptional arrangements required by the situation. In emergency conditions, attention must be paid especially to vulnerable clients and those in need of special support. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has published guidelines *Taking into account the state of emergency caused by Covid-19* in the operation of basic social and health care services. In addition to the guidelines, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) has provided detailed operational guidelines and considerations during the coronavirus pandemic in various situations.

The Association of Finnish Municipalities report also that in primary health care regular appointments were run down and were also cancelled by customers themselves and the care of chronic diseases may have been endangered. In maternity clinics, health checks of pregnant women have been organised but there has been variations in the access to health services all over the country because the health care personnel (nurses and doctors) has been transferred to other services, e.g. corona virus advise services. The use of e-services has been developed.

8. Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

There can be a risk that the victims have not been able to call help if the perpetrator has been in the same room. The on-line services & chats are available and have been used actively. In addition, for example, restrictions in public transport, lack of possibilities to leave home, fear of coronavirus might have made it more difficult to access services.

The Association of Finnish Municipalities report that as people have been at home and not in public places, it has been very difficult to detect domestic violence and signs of violence.

CSOs report also that reaching help by telephone calls or visiting help centers or flee home has been difficult when people have to stay at home, often with the perpetrator present all the time, or while children are around. RIKU reports, in particular, that few clients have chosen to use email to be able to choose when to communicate. Moreover, it is also clear that to some people, such as the elderly, using technical equipment can be a challenge and this can also affect their possibilities for seeking help. In addition, e.g. young people who contacted Youth Exit were also unsure if it is appropriate to seek help when the health care services are busy focusing on the coronavirus.

9. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.

The Association of Finnish Municipalities report that municipalities have provided a lot of e-services in social and health care in order to provide easier access to public services. Many municipalities have also strengthened cooperation with non-governmental services.

CSOs (e.g. Miessakit Association) report that the City of Helsinki has launched a large campaign (in all main media) against domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic including also the element of getting help for both the victims and the perpetrators.

10. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies.

CSOs (e.g. RIKU) submit that it is very important that easy access NGO services are available. This means, for example, that there are several ways, in which people can access services, and that they can communicate anonymously. Also, the staff sometimes needs to work at flexible times. RIKU and Rape Crises Centre Tukinainen submit also that it must

also be taken into account that some clients are in a very vulnerable situation, such as victims of human trafficking.

11. Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.

Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) is responsible for organising shelter services and Nollalinja Helpline services for the victims of domestic violence. The services have ongoing national data gathering (quantitative and qualitative) in shelters and Nollalinja Helpline. Other good practices in Finland can be found from here: https://e-justice.europa.eu/content_impact_of_the_covid19_virus_on_the_justice_field-37147-en.do?clang=en.

Statistics Finland is applying for the EU Grant to conduct the European survey on gender-based violence (EU-GBV) in Finland. The survey is planned to be conducted from 2020 to 2022.

CSOs report that online chat service seems to be a useful and accessible tool to provide support and help in the circumstances where people have to stay at home, and visiting help centers or making phone calls is difficult. Especially for young people chat or other forms of written conversations are also in general popular ways to keep contact and access the services. Some CSOs (such as Rape Crises Centre Tukinainen and Maria Academy) report also that one to one -meetings and group meetings have been arranged online.

At the same time, CSOs report also that some clients have told that they have not gone to see a doctor after a crime has occurred. This has also included victims of sexual violence. This could affect the eventual court proceedings and, e.g. the possibility to obtain compensation for crime damage.

CSOs (namely the Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations NYTKIS) report also of a concern that the pandemic affects the funding of organisations that provide services for victims of domestic violence.

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