SUBMISSION: Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences

Questions

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.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, reports from across the world have highlighted an increase in violence against women, especially domestic violence, as a result of pandemic-motivated lockdowns.

In Britain, like in much of the world, domestic violence rates have skyrocketed since the government enacted a quarantine policy. The charity Refuge, which fights against domestic violence, has seen a 700% increase in calls to its helpline. Counting Dead Women recorded 16 women and children killed by male abusers as part of domestic abuse in the three weeks between 23rd March and 12th April –double the 'normal' rate.

This is in part because even before Covid-19, three out of every five women who tried to access shelters in order to leave domestic violence were turned away because of lack of space, and the national government has not released funding for additional emergency accommodation.

Violence is not limited to domestic abuse. COVID-19 has increased the risk of online violence and abuse against women and girls. Prior to COVID-19, multiple reports shed light on the extent of online abuse in the UK and beyond. A 2018 report by Amnesty International analysing tweets sent to 778 UK and US female politicians and journalists found that 7.1% of tweets received by these women were abusive or problematic, with black women being 84% more likely to receive abuse or problematic tweets than white women. Research published by Girlguiding in 2019 showed that 33% of girls and young women aged 11-21 had received mean or abusive comments on social media.

Individuals disproportionately targeted with online abuse -- including women and marginalised communities -- face greater risks in the context of COVID-19. For example, cases of online abuse during the pandemic documented by the media and women's rights organisations include experiences of unsolicited pornographic videos being displayed while women participate in online social events, as well as violent threats and sexist and racist content directed at individuals from marginalised communities sharing their experiences about the virus.

On 12 June 2020, Glitch launched a survey to asses the scale of online abuse during COVID-19 in the UK, in partnership with End Violence Against Women (EVAW), a coalition of individuals and

organisations campaigning to end all forms of violence against women. Preliminary results based on 380 responses show that **41% of respondents experienced online abuse during COVID-19 in the UK and 28% of respondents who had experienced abuse in the preceding 12 months reported an increase in online abuse during COVID-19.**

New manifestations of online abuse have emerged as a result of COVID-19, putting women and girls at greater risk of violence. Platforms which have become popular since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic have seen a surge in online harms and news ways of communicating have inevitably led to new manifestations of abuse in online spaces. This has been most clearly demonstrated on the video-conferencing application Zoom which went from 1[0 million daily users to 300 million daily participants,](https://...) ultimately leading to a new phenomenon called 'zoombombing'. This term refers to perpetrators hacking into private Zoom video meetings and sharing anything from images of extreme violence to images of sexual child exploitation, racist and abusive comments as well as other shocking content.

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?

Since lockdown, the UK has registered a surge in reports of domestic violence with a [50% increase](https://...) in calls to the domestic violence helpline Refuge. Between 23 March and 12 April, the Counting Dead Women project in the UK [recorded](https://...) 16 domestic abuse killings in the country, more than double usual numbers.

The lockdown-related increase in domestic violence reports is putting pressure on support services, with reports in the UK showing that refuges for victims of domestic violence are [running out of space](https://...). Stalking support services and police in the UK have [reported a surge in cyberstalking](https://...) during the first four week of the UK's lockdown, including via social media, messaging applications and emails; the main stalking behaviours reported to the helpline during the lockdown was unwanted phone calls, emails, text messages and contact over Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram.

The UK has also seen an [increasing trend in the posting](https://...) [of intimate and private images without consent and sexploitation](https://...), with the number of visits to the Revenge Porn Helpline website doubling in the week beginning March 23, 2020.

The increase in calls to helplines and support services – which are often required to operate with limited staff and adapt to health-related guidelines – is raising concerns about their ability to cope with increased demand. In the UK, 25 organizations helping domestic violence victims [reported](https://...) not being able to effectively support women because of technical or resourcing issues.

Since the beginning of COVID-19, Glitch has had increased demand for advice and training on digital

safety to protect individuals from gender-based online violence. We have offered training on digital self-care, digital safety and digital defence. 400 people subscribed to these trainings, an 80% increase in demand.

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

Increased cases of domestic violence have raised legal issues as COVID-19 lockdown requires everyone to stay at home, with several exemptions listed by the government (visiting sick relatives, going to work for essential work…etc.). Exemptions for domestic abuse have not been codified into official government guidance, making domestic violence a grey area of governmental regulation and putting women and girls at risk. In this context, many support networks for victims of domestic violence continue to provide support online and offer counselling remotely.

In addition, despite at least one local government buying emergency accommodation, most women do not have a place to go to if they try to leave their abusers. Even before lockdown, three out of five women referred to shelters were turned away due to lack of space. It should also be noted that women will try to leave their abusers in increasing numbers when restrictions are somewhat lifted, and it is at this moment that they face the greatest risk.

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

Whilst shelters are open, many staff have been furloughed. Despite reports that government funding could be used for emergency beds, our initial research suggests that no new beds have been created. Refuges have been explicitly encouraged to use funding to cover gaps in an already threadbare system: the number of refuge spaces in the UK is already [30% below](#) the level recommended by the Council of Europe. In the UK, the Some Women Need to Walk campaign was [recently launched](#) to organise for emergency accommodation. Hotels and hostel chains have offered their accommodation at cost - but have not received any response from the national government.

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

Protection orders are very limited during lockdown. Without accommodation for women who run away from their abusers, social services have been encouraged to [create "safe zones"](#) for women in their homes, which do not offer adequate protection to victims. The UK government has also amended the process for protection orders [hearings](#) to take place via video or phone call.

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

As COVID-19 lockdowns have been imposed around the world, the issue of women's access to justice has come to the forefront. UK courts started using technology to hear cases remotely, which risks exacerbating existing inequalities in relation to access to justice. Lack of or inadequate access to technology due to lack of material resources may prevent many women from having their cases heard quickly and expose them to prolonged risks of violence at home.

Women's access to justice can be affected by decreased social media moderation in times of COVID-19. The pandemic has raised new challenges for social media moderation as tech giants have come to rely almost exclusively on Artificial Intelligence (AI) to moderate violent content.. As staffing resources are being reduced there are concerns about tech companies' ability to carry out their duty of care and the impact that reduced content moderation can have on vulnerable individuals, including women.

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.

Glitch does not have explicit expertise in this area.

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

COVID-19 has forced many support organisations to operate with reduced staff and resources while lockdown has created increased demand for help from victims of domestic abuse. Overstretching of and pressure on existing support services is one of the biggest challenges to combating domestic violence in lockdown. Lack of appropriate funding for domestic violence support services - which was already a problem pre-COVID-19 – has become even more acute. The shift to providing largely remote services has created unprecedented challenges and exacerbated socio-economic inequalities as women who have no access to a smartphone or a laptop are facing challenges to receive adequate information.

Domestic violence can take on many forms, both offline and online. There is still a lack of specific response to online gender-based and domestic violence and a lack of knowledge about the intersection between tech-enabled abuse and domestic violence, despite many charities raising the alarm. Refuge recently revealed that 72% of its services users experienced abuse through technology. Lack of reliable data on the scale of online abuse across different countries and who the perpetrators of online abuse are, is putting obstacles in the way of a comprehensive response to domestic violence. Glitch's survey about online abuse in the UK - whose full results will be released in July - aims to fill this data gap.

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.

Innovative measures harnessing technology to help victims of abuse have emerged. UK police have encouraged the use of the disguised free application 'Bright Sky,' which provides victims with contact information to domestic abuse support services. A 999 emergency button is included in the application, allowing women to call for help quickly.

However, what is most needed for those experiencing domestic violence is emergency accommodation, which is severely lacking. While phone emergency services and helplines can be sufficient to provide help to some women, a small - those most at risk of being injured or killed - need to leave their partners and receive emergency accommodation. .

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.

A number of organisations have published online resources to provide women with essential information on how to respond to domestic abuse and seek help. Women Against Violence in Europe (WAVE) for instance is [listing women's support services](#) on its website. Across the UK, women's support organisations have produced resources and toolkits. Examples include the [Welsh Women's Aid Toolkit](#), which provides safety information for victims, emergency numbers and advice on how to act safely as a bystander.

Since its creation in 2017, Glitch has developed an ambitious training programme, providing workshops to over 3,500 youths on digital citizenship and training in digital resilience to over 300 individuals in public life.. During COVID-19 we have delivered and will continue to deliver online training workshops to employers, industry bodies and professional organisations on how to stay safe online during COVID-19 and when working remotely to ensure that women and groups or individuals likely to be impacted by online abuse know how to respond.