

COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women - SOLWODI Deutschland e.V.

SOLWODI Deutschland e.V. is a registered association in Germany. Purpose of the association is to support migrant women in distress through psycho-social counselling. Our clients are migrant women victims of human trafficking, forced marriage, domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence. We have 19 help centres throughout Germany and have seven sheltered housings.

Based on SOLWODI Deutschland e.V.'s target group, the below contributions will focus on the situation of female victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

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.

Official federal statistics e.g. by the Federal Ministry for Families, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) or the German Federal Police Office (BKA) so far are lacking. Police agencies however have noted an increase of domestic violence:

- in Berlin, the police witnessed a 10% increase¹
- the city of Essen (federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)), even experienced a 100% increase

The BKA expects an increase in its annual crime statistics on domestic violence, whereas some police crime statistics are so far not reflecting this trend². The Federal Ministry of Interior in NRW however stated that the decline in number of domestic violence cases needs to be cautiously examined, as it is common that cases of domestic violence are first categorised as cases of (serious) bodily injury before they are later classified as cases of domestic violence³.

Study results by Prof. Steinert from the Technical University of Munich and Dr. Ebert from the RWI – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research scientifically proved an increase in domestic violence. In an online survey, 3,800 women aged 18-65 reported on the violent crimes they encountered in their home in the time period 22nd April to 08th May 2020. Around 3% fell victim of physical violence, whereas further 3.6% experienced sexual violence by their partners. 3.8% were threatened by their partners. 2.2% were not allowed to leave the house without his permission. Only a small number of women sought support from help services⁴.

¹ <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/panorama/coronavirus-kriminalitaet-polizei-100.html>

² <https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/niedersachsen/Tatort-Wohnzimmer-Corona-und-haesusliche-Gewalt,haeuslichegewalt110.html>

³ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/corona-haesusliche-gewalt-hilfe-1.4862320>

⁴ https://www.kriminalpraevention.de/files/DFK/Praevention%20haeuslicher%20Gewalt/2020_Studienergebnisse%20Covid%2019%20HGEW.pdf

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?

Germany has a national helpline in place run by the Federal Office for Family and Civic Tasks since March 2013⁵, which is available in 17 languages⁶. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the request increased by 17.5%⁷.

There are also other telephone hotlines in place⁸ run by the government, NGOs and associations that support female victims of domestic during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- *Schwangere in Not* (pregnant women in distress) (government-run)⁹
- *Nummer gegen Kummer*¹⁰
- Federal Association Mediation e.V. (BM)¹¹
- *Weißer Ring* (White Ring)¹²

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

Due to quarantine measures and restrictions on the freedom of movement, victims of domestic violence hardly have options to exit the violent situation: they cannot find safety with friends or acquaintances, cannot pick up their children from kindergarten or go shopping or even visit a help centre in order to seek for help. They are under constant control of their husband / partner / father / brother and are not able to leave the flat/house.

For some migrant women "home" means living in refugee shelters together with their husband/partner, where they are obliged to live according to the *Wohnsitzauflage* and *Residenzpflicht* (residence obligation) and cannot escape male violence.

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

In general, it proved to be difficult to access women shelters and receive a prompt counselling during the height of the COVID-pandemic. Women shelters were forced to stop taking in new women due to increasing numbers of women seeking safety. The women shelters and counselling centres are lacking personnel staff for the counselling and support of women and their children¹³.

There are around 350 women shelters in Germany, which have proven to be too scarce prior to the COVID-pandemic¹⁴. Germany has not followed-up on requirements of the Istanbul Convention (Art. 23) to provide sufficient fundings for more women sheltered housings to be opened up. 14,000 more spaces in women shelters are needed¹⁵.

One shelter in the federal state of Saxony in Bautzen even had to close due to a Corona case¹⁶.

⁵ <https://www.hilfetelefon.de/das-hilfetelefon/organisation.html>

⁶ <https://www.hilfetelefon.de/das-hilfetelefon/angebot-im-ueberblick.html>

⁷ <https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/themen/coronavirus/haeusliche-gewalt-hilfetelefon-100.html>

⁸ <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/themen/corona-pandemie/familiaere-belastungssituationen>

⁹ <https://schwanger-und-viele-fragen.de/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nummergegenkummer.de/>

¹¹ https://www.bmev.de/aktuelles/aktuelles-im-bm.html?tx_news_pi1%5Bnews%5D=306&cHash=86da37e5fe7c8fc7db7471698ffc4456

¹² <https://weisser-ring.de/hilfe-fuer-opfer/opfer-telefon>

¹³ https://www.big-berlin.info/sites/default/files/uploads/2003_2020-03-18_PM_Corona_Gewalt_gegen_Frauen_final.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/corona-haesusliche-gewalt-hilfe-1.4862320-2>

¹⁵ https://www.big-berlin.info/sites/default/files/uploads/2003_2020-03-18_PM_Corona_Gewalt_gegen_Frauen_final.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/corona-haesusliche-gewalt-hilfe-1.4862320-2>

In particular, asylum seeking women faced the problem that they cannot access women shelters as their refugee shelter has been quarantined. Although health authorities warned that the accommodation should be rectified so that the virus would not spread further, nothing was done in Bavaria¹⁷.

Renting hotel rooms, flats etc. were taken as alternative measure to protect affected women. But these solutions need the approval by the given municipality or federal state¹⁸.

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

Protection orders are been in place in Germany through the so-called *Gewaltschutzgesetz*. In a meeting between the Federal Minister for Women's Rights together with her colleagues in the 16 Federal states, it was stressed that the police can still use all legal resources available to evict the perpetrator from the flat in order to secure the safety of the woman (and children)¹⁹.

In practice, it was difficult to implement protection orders. SOLWODI e.g. supported a client, who is an asylum seeker, and has been living in a refugee shelter together with her violent husband. She wanted to flee from him and filed a police file together with SOLWODI. Due to the Corona crisis, fast relocations are impossible. Responsible immigration authorities need various documentations (e.g. police report, evidence etc.) and then needs to receive an approval by the relevant Ministry. These are long and unpredictable procedures in urgent cases of violence.

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

Court appointments have been re-scheduled and court rulings remain open.

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.

It generally became difficult for our SOLWODI clients to have access to health care during the COVID pandemic, as doctors are not able to access refugee shelters due to the quarantines or doctor offices also had to close because of Corona cases.

Some therapists tried to offer therapy via video, which proved difficult, as e.g. in refugee shelters the internet connection is bad, translators were absent, they are sceptical talking about their feelings on the internet etc.

One case of a SOLWODI client showcases the implications of lacking access to health care services. She was pregnant and wanted an abortion. As her refugee shelter was put into quarantine, she almost did not manage to meet the deadline to have a legal abortion in Germany (up to 12th pregnancy week, a legal abortion is allowed in Germany).

¹⁷ based on the experience of SOLWODI counsellors.

¹⁸ <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/aktuelles/alle-meldungen/konkrete-hilfsmassnahmen-mit-den-bundeslaendern-verabredet/154102>

¹⁹ Ibid.

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

Most affected women do not know about available help services and the minority actually seek help from support services²⁰.

The most vulnerable group of female victims of domestic violence (migrant women), especially illiterate women, had no help and could not understand papers/leaflets/flyers with phone numbers. Many only have limited knowledge of German, hardly have access to the internet and often do not know about helplines. Oral information e.g. in refugee shelters could not be provided as external counsellors were not allowed to enter the refugee shelters.

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 Federal Minister for Women's Rights together with her colleagues in the 16 federal states agreed upon a package of 10 immediate measures to increase the protection from men's violence against women and girls. These include: access to help lines, financing construction measures for women shelters, providing for a protective umbrella for the infrastructure of women shelters and help centres, aiding prostitutes, etc²¹.

Further, the BMFSFJ called the online initiative *Stärker als Gewalt* (stronger than violence) into being. The website informs e.g. about available support services. Within the *Stärker als Gewalt* initiative, the BMFSFJ started a campaign in 26,000 supermarkets advertising for the campaign under the slogan *Zuhause nicht sicher?* (Not safe at home?) at counters²². At this point, it must be stressed that both the initiative and campaign do not target illiterate women or women that lack German language skills. Further, to visit the *Stärker als Gewalt* Homepage anonymously seems a bit vary, considering that many of our clients that are victims of domestic violence are under constant control of their partner/husband/brother etc. and will not easily be able to access the laptop/computer/mobile and calling-up the webpage without him noticing it²³. Both campaigns therefore seem to target national women and migrant and asylum seeking women are left behind.

For our counselling services using WhatsApp, taking and sending pictures through voicemail proved to be a good tool to overcome the hindrances of counselling during lockdown and providing counselling in a easy accessible language to all women, no matter what German language proficiency and literacy rate.

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.

The Association of Women's Shelters (Frauenhauskoordinierung / FHK)²⁴ and the central bureau of autonomous women's shelters (Zentrale Informationsstelle Autonomer

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https://www.kriminalpraevention.de/files/DFK/Praevention%20haeuslicher%20Gewalt/2020_Studienergebnisse%20Covid%2019%20HGE_W.pdf

²¹ <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/aktuelles/alle-meldungen/konkrete-hilfsmassnahmen-mit-den-bundeslaendern-verabredet/154102>

²² <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/aktuelles/alle-meldungen/supermarkt-aktion-gegen-haeusliche-gewalt-gestartet/155054>

²³ <https://staerker-als-gewalt.de/meta-bottom/seite-anonym-besuchen>

²⁴ <https://www.frauenhauskoordinierung.de/aktuelles/detail/sonderinformation-2-umgang-mit-coronavirus-sars-cov-2-covid-19-in-frauenhausern/>

Frauenhäuser /ZIF)²⁵ have issued several special information and tips for their associated shelters. The national association for perpetrator work (BAG-Täterarbeit) also has prepared a leaflet on preventing partners/husbands/etc. becoming violent during the Corona-Pandemic²⁶.

The victim support NGO Weißer Ring (*White Ring*), called a campaign on domestic violence into being under the slogan "*Schweigen macht schutzlos, mach dich laut*" (Silence makes you vulnerable; make yourself heard), whereby prominent German women speak out against domestic violence and inform about the White Ring's helpline.

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.

The report by Prof. Steinert and Dr. Ebert show that victims of domestic violence have not only experienced an increase in physical violence, but also that emotional and sexual violence is on the rise.

The best prevention would be financial help in the first instance and safety of residence. This has not been happening so far.

²⁵ <https://www.autonome-frauenhaeuser-zif.de/de/aktuelles/>

²⁶ <https://www.bag-taeterarbeit.de/>