

Date: 2nd May, 2020

To,
Ms. Dubravka Šimonović,
Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women OHCHR-UNOG,

Dear Sir/Madam,

Please find our response towards your call to submit relevant information on the increase of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from civil society, States, National Human Rights Institutions, international organizations, academia and other stakeholders on the following issues:

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.

Nepal is known for its natural beauty, rich fauna and flora but also its ancestral heritage and diversity of its people, with 55.80% of the population belonging to women and girls in the rural areas of Terai region in Nepal. But this richness hides a more somber reality of poverty and social discrimination, with Nepal still on the way to graduate from the status of Least Developed Country and generally acknowledged issues of low representation and limited empowerment affecting many of the rural women and girls in Terai region of Nepal. Of particular concern are marginalized and under-privileged women and girls who, while playing a key role in providing for their families and communities, suffer a double discrimination of being marginalized and disempowered as women in a highly traditional patriarchal society.

All this means that there are human rights violation waiting around every corner, especially for women and girls. Their lives are at risk, not just when they are out in public, but at home as well, due to domestic violence and abuse. Sadly the legal system here offers less protection. Therefore, as being women based organization, we try to advance or protect women's rights by vowing to fight against the abusers by collective actions. We try to make legal authorities accountable to provide justice for the harm done mentally and physically to the rural women by the abusers. We try to raise the voices of the voiceless through various campaigns and advocacy with the agencies working for the women and girls. Over more than a decade, we have been fighting together for gender equality, women's political representation and ending gender-based violence in the rural women communities.

We women are brutalized in the house and we have no right to express ourselves. Even local authorities or media rarely try to understand us when we try to express ourselves. This is violence in everyday life. But we women want equality, equality in terms of education, income, health and freedom. Therefore, this organization (HIMAWANTI) Nepal was formed with a goal to work for promoting the equality of rural women and helping them to improve their quality of lives. And for now, the most prominent threat that we face as being marginalized and under-privileged rural women in the threat of abuse and domestic violence in forms of marital rapes and emotional abuse, such as coercion and abusive language.

Thus, the pandemic has also given rise to threats that extend beyond the risk of infection. Currently, marginalized and under-privileged women are facing significant barriers to health care due to lack of autonomy over their own sexual and reproductive health, inadequate access to health services, and insufficient financial resources.

<https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/03/28/for-many-domestic-violence-survivors-the-lockdown-means-being-locked-in-with-their-abusers>

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?

Ironically, there is no any helplines run by Government and/or civil society available to the victims of domestic violence during this unprecedented time of pandemic. Even if there is any such helplines, we are sure that most of the rural women and girls of the marginalized and under-privileged communities are aware of it.

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

Yes, they can be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence. They can be moved to temporary safe houses if they are convinced of the idea of remaining protected from their violators during this situation. We are planning to set-up such temporary safe houses which will be located close to local police and health posts.

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

As a matter of fact, there are no any permanent shelters within the locality to protect women and girls from any form of violence. Therefore, it is a concept we are trying to build upon by ourselves to set-up temporary safe houses for the relocation of those victims along with their children so that they remain safe from physical and mental violence. But, due to lack of sufficient support and aids we are also helpless and becoming another bystanders for them.

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

A limited number of protection orders can be made available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are trying to facilitate and coordinate with local government agencies like rural municipalities, district administration offices to help us protect all those domestic violence victims in best possible way. We are trying to get approval from those local government agencies to allow us to locate our temporary safe house close to the perimeter of police and health authorities.

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

At this particular time of COVID-19 pandemic, there is a negligible impact on women's access to justice. The courts are all closed and not being able to provide protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence.

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.

Due to restrictive measures and lockdowns, there is an adverse impact on women's access to health services. They are not being able to get the proper health services because of being unable to reach to those local health posts by themselves. Even the local health services are partially closed, particularly focusing on reproductive health due to lack of enough health personnel to operate it smoothly. Most of the time, the women and girls members of the communities are compelled to apply the traditional and unpopular methods like following the advice of some quack doctors available within the community. Due to lack of proper awareness about the importance of sanitation and hygiene, the traditional way of dealing with the health problems have invited many hazardous results to the health of rural women and their reproductive health.

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

The examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns are as follows:

- i. Threats of male counterparts to the rural women due to which they feel less safe to take any lawful actions against him.
 - ii. The psychological trauma never allows these domestic violence victims to cooperate with us or seek for the justice.
 - iii. The impunity, silence, stigma and shame surrounding the domestic violence is also one of the major obstacles to prevent and combat domestic violence.
 - iv. The limited and restrictive mobility has also been a obstacle encountered by us to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.
 - v. Lack of cooperation of local government agencies and media.
 - vi. Lack of adequate funds and resources to act to prevent and combat domestic violence.
 - vii. Lack of engagement of male members of the communities in some income generation and creative activities which has also increased their intake of alcohol and violating their wives and children under the influence of it.
 - viii. Lack of proper psycho-social counseling to the members of the communities.
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.

We believe there are very less of good practices adopted by the government to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, due to lack of authenticate data and information and less concern towards the seriousness of the issues of domestic violence and other gendered impacts, government fail to become accountable for the proper measures to be adopted by them for the safety and security of well-being of each and every member of the community.

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.

Our organization is proposing to carry out the following activities to set-up a safe house and provide adequate security and support in terms of foods, sanitation and health in the following ways:

- i. First location for the set-up of safe house will be identified. The identified location will be close to local police authorities and health posts & around 20km far from the community so that the male members cannot reach there easily.
- ii. Taking approval from the concerned authorities like local and rural municipalities & district administrative office, if some sort of approval from the local authorities is sought for the set-up of the temporary safe houses for the victims of domestic violence.
- iii. Renting a place to be used as temporary safe house with the help of local and Rural Municipalities.
- iv. Accommodate the victims of the gender- based violence inside the safe house after convincing them with the adequate facilities of foods, medicines, toiletries, sanitizers and sleeping materials and also safety from the threats.
- v. Conducting awareness and counseling sessions among the victims about the ways to fight against both violence and virus with the help of government health officials designated at the nearby health posts.

These activities can be few of the 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.

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.

Due to COVID 19 pandemic, the government of Nepal has started lockdown since March 24th, 2020 which has now been extended till May 7th, 2020. Besides the civilians, the month long lock down has hit the daily wage workers the most. Nobody is allowed to go outside of the home as a preventive measure initiated by the government to prevent the spreading of virus among the people. Therefore, most of the males of the rural community are compelled to stay at their homes doing nothing which has led to the increase in the intake of alcohol by them and abusing their wives and daughters being influenced by it. These types of rise in violence against women and girls is one of the most devastating human rights violations in our rural women communities which remains largely unreported due to impunity, silence, stigma and shame surrounding it. Therefore, in a situation like this we too felt to be proactive to ensure their well-being.

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Kanti Rajbhandari

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Chairperson

HIMAWANTI NEPAL

5/2/2020