

## The Oxford Human Rights Hub

The Oxford Human Rights Hub (OxHRH) aims to bring together academics, practitioners, and policymakers from across the globe to advance the understanding and protection of human rights and equality. Through a vigorous exchange of ideas and resources, we strive to facilitate a better understanding of human rights principles, to develop new approaches to policy, and to influence the development of human rights law and practice.

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## Executive Summary

In this submission, we seek to provide relevant information on the increase of domestic violence against women in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from four jurisdictions: India, Canada, South Africa and United Kingdom. Our findings are summarized below and detailed in the following sections.

### **To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns?**

- 1) India, Canada and UK have witnessed a surge in the increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. In South Africa, despite a decrease in the violent crime rate, the number of complaints with respect to cases pertaining to gender-based violence remains high.

### **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?**

- 2) In all these four countries, there are helplines being run by the government and civil society to support and assist women facing gender-based violence and specifically domestic violence within the home. In each of these countries, there has been an increase in the number of calls received during the COVID-19 lockdown.

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

- 3) The Canadian, South African and UK governments specify that women victims of domestic violence can be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence.

- a. In South Africa, victims of domestic violence are in principle permitted to leave the home and seek help, including access to domestic violence shelters. However, incidents of excessive use of force by police and military,<sup>1</sup> against persons perceived to be breaching lockdown regulations, especially in poor low-income areas, likely dissuade many women from leaving the home and seeking help.
- b. Shelters are still an available option in Canada.
- c. In the UK, the regulations specify that victims of domestic violence can leave their home to seek support.
- d. No specific exemption from restrictive measures were announced by the Central government.

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

- 4) In South Africa, the lockdown regulations provide that all protection orders, including interim protection orders from harassment, domestic violence as well as other family matters such as child custody are classified as essential and urgent.

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

- 5) Various obstacles and challenges are being faced by civil society organisations who have been working to provide support to victims of gender-based domestic abuse.
  - a. A complete shift to counselling through phones and on online platforms, highlight the inequalities in access to channels of communication for women, as it leaves women from the underprivileged/vulnerable communities with no or limited means to reach out. Women on the wrong side of the “digital divide” can struggle to access digital resources on domestic violence.
  - b. In the UK, women’s frontline support is reporting a reduced service due to staff shortages and challenges in adapting to remote delivery.
  - c. In Canada, another challenge has been implementing social distancing measures within domestic violence shelters; in some parts of the country there is a significant shortage of beds in shelters.

**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, civil society organisations, NHRIS.**

- 6) Countries have been trying to grapple with this situation by putting in place accessible, varied and proactive systems to alert authorities and protect victims. Some of the examples of good practices that have emerged are:
  - a. financing hotels to act as shelters;
  - b. listing protection or assistance services to victims of gender-based violence as essential activities;

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<sup>1</sup> ‘SA needs to restrain use of force by police’ <<https://mg.co.za/analysis/2020-06-11-sa-needs-to-restrain-use-of-force-by-police/>> accessed 26 June 2020.

- c. using code words at pharmacies to seek rescue;
- d. proactively contacting every victim who had previously been in touch about domestic violence;
- e. partnering with Uber to provide free rides so women can leave dangerous situations quickly.

## COVID-19 and the Increase of Domestic Violence Against Women: Data from India, Canada, South Africa, UK

**To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns?**

### INDIA

In the first phase of the lockdown, the National Commission for Women (NCW) reported that the number of cases of domestic violence complaints it had received had more than doubled from 30 in the week starting March 2, 2020, to 69 for the period between March 23 and April 1.<sup>2</sup>

In April 2020, the NCW reported that 315 complaints were received online and on WhatsApp in the month of April. The NCW data showed that these complaints were highest since August last year.<sup>3</sup>

As per the most recent update, in the first four phases of lockdown (between March 25 and May 31 2020) 1,477 complaints of domestic violence were made by women.<sup>4</sup> This 68-day period recorded more complaints than those received between March and May in the previous 10 years.<sup>5</sup> However, reports indicate that this alarming rise is just the tip of the iceberg as '86% women who experience domestic violence do not usually seek help in India.'<sup>6</sup>

### CANADA

There is a similar situation in Canada. The federal government reports that there has been a 20 to 30 percent increase of gender-based violence. The police in Toronto report that the incidents of

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<sup>2</sup> Akshita Nagpal, 'Activists Urge Roping In ASHA Workers And Other Novel Approaches As Domestic Violence Rises During Lockdowns' *IndiaSpend* (New Delhi, 6 April 2020) <<https://www.indiaspend.com/activists-urge-roping-in-asha-workers-and-other-novel-approaches-as-domestic-violence-rises-during-lockdowns/>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Press Trust of India, 'Lockdown: NCW receives 315 domestic violence complaints in April.' *The Hindu* (New Delhi, 4 May 2020) <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/lockdown-ncw-receives-315-domestic-violence-complaints-in-april/article31497599.ece>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Vignesh Radhakrishnan, Sumant Sen, Naresh Singaravelu, 'Data | Domestic violence complaints at a 10-year high during COVID-19 lockdown' *The Hindu* (India, 22 June 2020) <<https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-domestic-violence-complaints-at-a-10-year-high-during-covid-19-lockdown/article31885001.ece>> accessed 23 June 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

domestic incidents have increased between 18 to 22 percent.<sup>7</sup> In other places within Canada, there are pockets of silence in reporting on violence, particularly in rural communities.<sup>8</sup> The government explained that any dips in reporting to sexual assault centres or crisis lines does not mean domestic violence isn't happening. Rather there is a recognition that it is not being reported. The associate executive director of Victim Services Toronto also reports an increase in the severity of violence.<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada reports that one in ten women in Canada are "very or extremely" concerned about the risks of violence within the home.<sup>10</sup>

The Native Women's Association of Canada conducted a nation-wide, grassroots consultation. It found that that one in five Indigenous women had been a victim of violence over the last three months of the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Indigenous women report being more concerned about the risks of domestic violence than of COVID-19.

## **SOUTH AFRICA**

On 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020, the Police Minister, General Bheki Cele, announced the general decrease in serious and violent crimes in South Africa, 'attributing this to amongst other factors, the prohibition of the sale and movement of liquor since the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown.'<sup>12</sup> However, with respect to cases pertaining to gender based violence, Minister Cele confirmed that the number of complaints remained high.<sup>13</sup> He confirmed that over 2300 calls/complaints have been registered since the beginning of the lockdown on 27 March 2020 until 31 March 2020.<sup>14</sup>

## **UNITED KINGDOM**

In UK, in the first four weeks of the lockdown, the number of domestic killings doubled - 13 women and 4 children.<sup>15</sup> London's Metropolitan Force reported that calls about domestic abuse had gone up by around a third and that its officers were making around 100 arrests a day for such

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<sup>7</sup> Alastair Sharp, 'A Spike in Domestic Violence Happening in Toronto Due to COVID-19 Experts Say (Canada's National Observer, 28 April 28) <<https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/04/28/news/spike-domestic-violence-happening-toronto-due-covid-19-experts-say>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Raisa Patel, 'Minister says COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence abusers as rates rise in parts of Canada' (CBC News, 27 April 2020) <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Sharp (n 7).

<sup>10</sup> Statistics Canada, 'Canadian Perspective Survey Series 1: Impacts of COVID-19' <<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200408/dq200408c-eng.htm>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Teresa Wright, 'Violence Against Indigenous Women During COVID-19 Sparks Calls for MMIWG Plan' (CBC, 10 May 2020) <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/violence-against-indigenous-women-action-plan-covid-19-mmiwg-1.5563528>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Statistics obtained from South African Government website <<https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-bheki-cele-welcomes-decrease-serious-and-violent-crimes-attributing-amongst-other>> accessed 28 June 2020.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Anna Moore, 'Every abuser is more volatile! the truth behind the shocking rise of domestic violence killings' *The Guardian* (London, 22 April 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/22/every-abuser-is-more-volatile-the-truth-behind-the-shocking-rise-of-domestic-violence-killings>> accessed 27 June 2020.

offences, in the six weeks of the lockdown leading up to April 19.<sup>16</sup> According to the force, more than 4,000 arrests have been made across London in the six weeks up to 19 April.<sup>17</sup> West Yorkshire Police reported that between the lockdown period - 17 March to 19 April - it had responded to 6,704 domestic abuse calls - a rise of 1.2% compared to the previous month.<sup>18</sup>

## **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?**

### **INDIA**

The NCW launched a specific helpline (a specific WhatsApp number) to provide support and assistance to women in distress or experiencing domestic violence during the period of COVID-19 Lockdown.<sup>19</sup> Apart from this initiative by the central government, various state governments launched their own helpline numbers as well. The NCW website mentions helplines run by Government and civil society which provide support to women in distress.<sup>20</sup>

However, it is to be noted that the NCW announced a specific WhatsApp helpline for complaints of domestic violence only on 10 April (although the lockdown was in force from March 25 2020) after noting a spike in the number of complaints via email.<sup>21</sup>

### **CANADA**

There are a range of government and civil society helplines.<sup>22</sup> Local agencies report that calls are down, but 'demand for online services is up' including online counselling.<sup>23</sup> At the initial outbreak of the pandemic and imposition of lockdown measures, there was a worrying dip in calls. Stakeholders theorise that this is because women are unable to find privacy within the home to make a phone call.

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<sup>16</sup> Vikram Dodd 24 April 2020 'Charges and cautions for domestic violence rise by 24% in London' *The Guardian* (London, 24 April 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/24/charges-and-cautions-for-domestic-violence-rise-by-24-in-london>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>17</sup> 'Coronavirus: Met Police making 100 domestic violence arrests a day' (BBC, 24 April 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-52418650>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>18</sup> 'Coronavirus: Partner's abuse 'out of control' in lockdown' (BBC, 23 April 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leeds-52383402>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Press Trust of India, 'NCW launches WhatsApp helpline to counter domestic violence cases during lockdown' *Deccan Chronicle* (India, 10 April 2020) <<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/100420/ncw-launches-whatsapp-helpline-to-counter-domestic-violence-cases-duri.html>> accessed 22 June 2020.

<sup>20</sup> The website of the National Commission of Women website <<http://www.ncw.nic.in/helplines>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Information available on the twitter website of the National Commission of Women - <<https://twitter.com/NCWIndia/status/1248582546306129925>>

<sup>22</sup> Government of Canada, 'Stop Family Violence' <<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/stop-family-violence.html>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Samantha Craggs, 'Domestic Violence Calls to Hamilton Police Have Increased During COVID-19' (CBC, 19 June 2020) <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/inasmuch-1.5613869>> accessed 24 June 2020.

Various civil society organisations such as Unsafe at Home Ottawa and Inasmuch House and Women’s Services started a texting programme. A third of the online texts and chats at Unsafe at Home are creating a safety plan for women and explore alternative living arrangements.<sup>24</sup>

## **SOUTH AFRICA**

There are a wide range of government and civil society run helplines focussed on gender-based violence. At the national level, there is a Gender-Based Violence Command Centre which operates under the Department of Social Development. The Centre operates a National, 24hr/7days-a-week Call Centre facility. ‘The Centre operates an Emergency Line number – 0800 428 428. This is supported by a USSD, “please call me” facility: \*120\*7867#. A Skype Line ‘Helpme GBV’ for members of the deaf community also exists. (Add ‘Helpme GBV’ to your Skype contacts). An SMS Based Line 31531 for persons with disabilities (SMS ‘help’ to 31531) also exists. The Centre is able to refer calls directly to SAPS (10111) and field Social Workers who respond to victims of GBV.<sup>25</sup>

Most helplines run by civil society and the government remain open. The National Gender Based Violence Command Centre’s calls tripled during the lockdown.<sup>26</sup>

## **UNITED KINGDOM**

There are a range of helplines run by the government and civil society.<sup>27</sup> The government advice provides that the police can be contacted on the number ‘999’ in cases of emergency.

Reports in April suggest that the number of calls to the ‘National Domestic Abuse helpline run by Refuge was 25% above average in the second week of lockdown and 49% higher than normal after three weeks.<sup>28</sup> In May, Refuge reported that calls to its helpline jumped up by 66% since stay-at-home measures were implemented in March and visits to its website were up by 950%.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Domestic Abuse Text Service Sees Surge in Demand’ (CBC, 22 May 2020)

<<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/unsafe-at-home-ottawa-1.5579673>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Gender-Based Violence Command Centre website <<http://gbv.org.za/about-us/>> accessed 26 June 2020

<sup>26</sup> ‘GBV Centre calls triple during lockdown, 1<sup>st</sup> for Women Steps up to help’ (IOL, April 2 2020)

<<https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/gbv-centre-calls-triple-during-lockdown-1st-for-women-steps-up-to-help-45995727>> accessed 26 June 2020

<sup>27</sup> Report Domestic Abuse (Government of UK) website <<https://www.gov.uk/report-domestic-abuse>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>28</sup> ‘UK lockdown: Calls to domestic abuse helpline jump by half 27 April 2020’ (BBC, 27 April 2020)

<<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52433520>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Haley Ott , ‘U.K. domestic violence charity says calls have surged 66% as coronavirus lockdown continues’ (CBS News, 27 May 2020) <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/uk-domestic-violence-charity-huge-spike-calls-for-help-as-coronavirus-lockdown-continues/>> accessed 27 June 2020

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

### INDIA

No specific exemption from restrictive measures were announced by the Central government.

### CANADA

Shelters are deemed essential services and are still an available option. Civil society reports the biggest challenge was in communicating to women the availability of shelters or the safety measures being undertaken in shelters to reduce the risk of COVID-19.<sup>30</sup> To stress the importance of safety from violence, The British Columbia Provincial Health Office said during a press conference: 'Your immediate safety is more important than physical distancing or self-isolation.'<sup>31</sup>

### SOUTH AFRICA

Under the lockdown regulations, persons are allowed to move in order to access essential services. The lockdown regulation define essential services to include social work, counselling services supporting gender based violence and care.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in theory, victims of domestic violence are permitted to leave the home and seek help, including access to domestic violence shelters. However, incidents of excessive use of force by police and military,<sup>33</sup> against persons perceived to be breaching lockdown regulations, especially in poor low-income areas, likely dissuade many women from leaving the home and seeking help.

### UNITED KINGDOM

The 'Guidance on domestic abuse to support the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020' clearly specifies that one can leave home to avoid or escape risk of injury or harm (this includes any form of domestic abuse).<sup>34</sup>

During the initial strict lockdown, UK's Home Secretary (Priti Patel) clarified that domestic abuse victims are allowed to leave home to seek help at refuges despite the strict rules to stop coronavirus spreading.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Raisa Patel (n 8).

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Regulations Issued in terms of section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 <<http://www.saflii.org/za/gaz/ZAGovGaz/2020/356.pdf>> accessed 26 June 2020.

<sup>33</sup> 'SA needs to restrain use of force by police' <<https://mg.co.za/analysis/2020-06-11-sa-needs-to-restrain-use-of-force-by-police/>> accessed 26 June 2020.

<sup>34</sup> 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on domestic abuse' Information available on Scottish Government website <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-domestic-abuse/>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>35</sup> 'Coronavirus: Domestic abuse victims 'still allowed to leave home' (BBC, 29 March 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52081280>> accessed 27 June 2020.

## **Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

### **SOUTH AFRICA**

The South African government has tried to keep all legal support structures for domestic violence open and available during the lockdown. In particular, the lockdown regulations provide that all protection orders, including interim protection orders from harassment, domestic violence as well as other family matters such as child custody are classified as essential and urgent.<sup>36</sup> To further support access, legal aid offered by the state remains available for urgent and essential cases.

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

### **INDIA**

In the initial phase of the lockdown imposed from March 25<sup>th</sup> 2020, the Indian judiciary limited its work to hearing urgent matters via video-conferencing. The major legislation dealing with domestic violence cases, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, is a civil legislation and cases pertaining to same were not being heard in court during this phase.

In mid-April, the Jammu and Kashmir High Court<sup>37</sup> took *suo motu* (on its own) cognisance of the rise in domestic violence cases and passed an order suggesting various directions, including increased tele/online counselling of women and girls; designated informal safe spaces for women where they can report domestic violence, like grocery shops; immediate designation of safe spaces and shelter homes in empty hostels, academic institutions, etc., for victims of domestic violence alongside an increased awareness campaign to spread awareness on the issues. This Court directed all courts in the Union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh to treat the cases of domestic abuse as urgent.

From April 27<sup>th</sup>, certain courts such as the Delhi High Court started hearing cases pertaining to domestic violence in suspended functioning.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Disaster Management Act, Directions: courts, court precincts and justice service points (26 March 2020) <<http://www.saflii.org/za/gaz/ZAGovGaz/2020/258.pdf>> accessed 26 June 2020.

<sup>37</sup> *In Re: Court on Its Own Motion versus Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh through Secretaries, Social Welfare Department* (Order dated 16 April 2020) <[http://jkhighcourt.nic.in/doc/upload/orders&cir/ordersuc\\_jmu/Suo%20Moto%20PIL\\_18042020.pdf](http://jkhighcourt.nic.in/doc/upload/orders&cir/ordersuc_jmu/Suo%20Moto%20PIL_18042020.pdf)> accessed 22 June 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Press Trust of India, 'HC to hear matrimonial disputes, child custody, criminal appeals in suspended functioning' *Outlook India* (New Delhi, 26 April 2020) <<https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/hc-to-hear-matrimonial-disputes-child-custody-criminal-appeals-in-suspended-functioning/1815430> 26 April 2020> accessed 23 June 2020.

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

### INDIA

In the absence of a comprehensive plan from the Indian government to assist women at risk of domestic violence, several non-governmental organisations faced their own sets of challenges due to the lockdown. Activists working in this field reported how in usual circumstances, in case of an urgent request for rescue from a victim of domestic violence, the police could be contacted to intervene immediately and bring the woman to the safety of a shelter home. However, given the police's focus on enforcing the lockdown, these cases were no longer a priority in the initial phase of the lockdown.<sup>39</sup> A complete lockdown (25 March – 31 May) also meant little or no individual access to any public transport facilities, which created further obstacles.

A complete shift to counselling through phones and on online platforms, highlighted the inequalities in access to channels of communication for women, as it left women from the underprivileged communities with no means to reach out.<sup>40</sup> Activists have pointed out that NCW has been receiving complaints through emails and WhatsApp only (and not through post anymore), and only women from certain strata of the society have access to such technology.<sup>41</sup> The NCW chief, also, noted that the commission (NCW) usually received most complaints not by email, but by post.<sup>42</sup>

### CANADA

There are a series of challenges in responding to the intersection of domestic violence and COVID in Canada. The federal government has earmarked \$30 million for the immediate needs of shelters and sexual assault centres and a further \$10 million for the funding of Women and Gender Equality in Canada. However, civil society is critical that the government's response fails to plan for women's long-term needs.<sup>43</sup>

Another challenge has been implementing social distancing measures within domestic violence shelters. In some parts of the country there is a significant shortage of beds. Shelters in New Brunswick report staffing issues as 'employees feel that health risks of working during the pandemic are too high for the wages they receive.'<sup>44</sup> The New Brunswick Coalition for Pay Equity recommends that domestic violence staff be paid \$24 per hour. Advocates have also called for increased hazard pay from employees in this field. Shelter staff have been scrambling to obtain

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<sup>39</sup>Aathira Konikkara, 'Lockdown and domestic violence: As NGOs struggle to support women at risk, government plays catch up' *The Caravan* (India, 15 April 2020) <<https://caravanmagazine.in/gender/lockdown-domestic-violence-ngo-struggle-government-catch-up>> accessed 22 June 2020.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Shemin Joy, 'Coronavirus Crisis: No lockdown for domestic violence' *Deccan Herald* (New Delhi, 26 April 2020) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/insight/coronavirus-crisis-no-lockdown-for-domestic-violence-829941.html>> accessed 22 June 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Press Trust of India, 'Spike in domestic violence cases amid lockdown: NCW' *The Telegraph* (New Delhi, 4 April 2020) <<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/spike-in-domestic-violence-cases-amid-lockdown-ncw/cid/1761424>> accessed 22 June 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Sharp (n 7).

<sup>44</sup> Bobbi-Jean MacKinnon, 'Domestic Violence Shelters in Financial Crisis Because of Covid-19 "pandemic within a pandemic"' (CBC News, 7 May 2020) <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>> accessed 24 June 2020.

PPE equipment and sanitation supplies to keep women and staff members safe. There are further concerns on the limited number of bathrooms in shelters; and loss in income due to the inability to hold fundraising events.<sup>45</sup>

Women and girls in isolated rural communities or on Indigenous reserves, or any women on the wrong side of the “digital divide” struggle to access digital resources on domestic violence.<sup>46</sup>

## UNITED KINGDOM

Representatives of organisations serving the BAME community report that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated a lack of access to services for this community due to the digital divide. “Twenty-five percent of the women we support don’t even have a phone, let alone a smart phone,” said Rosie Lewis of the Angelou Centre, a black feminist service provider in Newcastle. Language barriers can also exclude women from these communities in getting access to information.<sup>47</sup> For example, the campaign run by UK’s Home Secretary to raise public awareness, has messaging only in English.<sup>48</sup> Initial survey conducted by Women’s Aid revealed that while domestic abuse services in England were trying to adapt to the government guidelines and are continuing to offer vital support to domestic abuse survivors, ‘many have been forced to reduce or withdraw the support that they are able to offer women and children – largely due to staff shortages and challenges in adapting to remote delivery.’<sup>49</sup> 80% of women’s frontline support is reporting a reduced service – ‘because of less face-to-face contact, as well as staff sickness and technical issues, including a basic lack of laptops to enable working from home.’<sup>50</sup>

**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, civil society organisations, NHRIS.**

With cases of domestic abuse and demand for emergency shelters multiplying in countries during this pandemic, countries have been trying to grapple with this situation by putting in place accessible, varied and proactive systems to alert authorities and protect victims:-

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Victoria Gibson, ‘Domestic Violence Organisations Laud New Funding But Call for More Supports for COVID-19 Escalates Risk’ (iPolitics, 16 April 2020) <<https://ipolitics.ca/2020/04/16/domestic-violence-organizations-laud-new-funding-but-call-for-more-supports-as-covid-19-escalates-risk/>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘UK failing Domestic Abuse Victims in a Pandemic’ (HRW, June 8 2020) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/08/uk-failing-domestic-abuse-victims-pandemic>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Women’s Aid, ‘The impact of Covid-19 on domestic abuse support services: findings from an initial Women’s Aid survey’ <<https://1q7dqy2unor827bjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-impact-of-Covid-19-on-domestic-abuse-support-services-1.pdf>> accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Anna Moore (n 15).

(i) In Colombia, pharmacies and supermarkets have been declared safe spaces for victims of abuse to report.<sup>51</sup> In France, grocery stores are housing pop-up-counselling services. In countries such as France and Spain, women are using codewords at pharmacies to escape domestic violence during lockdown.<sup>52</sup>

(ii) French government announced that it had reserved 20,000 hotel rooms for victims of domestic violence<sup>53</sup> and that it would fund hotel rooms for such victims.<sup>54</sup> In Canada, to address the gap in beds in shelters due to social distancing, Regina Transition House anonymously arranged hotel rooms for women.<sup>55</sup>

(iii) In Spain, during the strict lockdown phase, the government announced that women will not be fined if they leave home to report abuse.<sup>56</sup>

(iv) In Italy, instead of the survivor having to leave the house of an abuser, prosecutors have ruled that in situations of domestic violence the perpetrator must leave the family home.<sup>57</sup>

(v) According to media reports, in Ireland, the police launched a service - Operation Faoisimh - to proactively contact every victim who had previously been in touch with them about domestic violence, with a pro-arrest intervention policy.<sup>58</sup> States in India, such as Tamil Nadu and Orissa, have adopted a similar strategy.<sup>59</sup>

(vi) In Uruguay, the Supreme Court agreed that the Specialized Court on gender-based violence could extend precautionary measures coming to an end by 60 days.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Anastasia Moloney, 'Bogota's supermarkets become safe spaces for women to report abuse' *Thomson Reuters* (Bogota, 23 April 2020) <<https://news.trust.org/item/20200423012221-ci2sy>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>52</sup>Ivana Kottasová and Valentina Di Donato, 'Women are using code words at pharmacies to escape domestic violence during lockdown' *CNN* (Europe, 6 April 2020) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/02/europe/domestic-violence-coronavirus-lockdown-intl/index.html>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>53</sup>United Nation Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'COVID-19 and Women's human Rights: Guidance' <[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/COVID-19\\_and\\_Womens\\_Human\\_Rights.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/COVID-19_and_Womens_Human_Rights.pdf)> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>54</sup>Elena Berton, 'France to put domestic abuse victims in hotels after jump in numbers' *Thomson Reuters* (Paris, 30 March 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-women-abuse-trfn/france-to-put-domestic-abuse-victims-in-hotels-after-jump-in-numbers-idUSKBN21H37P>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>55</sup>Nicole Bogart, 'Advocates Scramble for Help to Domestic Abuse Victims as Calls Skyrocket During COVID-19' (CTV News, 3 May 2020) <<https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/advocates-scramble-to-help-domestic-abuse-victims-as-calls-skyrocket-during-covid-19-1.4923109>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>56</sup>'Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence' *The Guardian* (28 March 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>57</sup>UN Women, 'COVID 19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' <<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>58</sup>United Nation Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'COVID-19 and Women's human Rights: Guidance' (n 53).

<sup>59</sup>Press Trust of India, 'Effective steps taken to curb domestic violence during lockdown, TN tells Madras HC' *The New Indian Express* (Chennai, 25 April 2020) <<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2020/apr/25/effective-steps-taken-to-curb-domestic-violence-during-lockdown-tn-tells-madras-hc-2135296.html>> accessed 21 June 2020; Editorial, 'Phone-up' to check domestic violence in Odisha' *The New Indian Express* (Bhubaneshwar, 18 April 2020) <<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2020/apr/18/phone-up-to-check-domestic-violence-in-odisha-2131790.html>> accessed 21 June 2020.

<sup>60</sup>United Nation Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'COVID-19 and Women's human Rights: Guidance' (n 53).

(vii) In Canada, the government announced that domestic violence shelters are to remain open during the lockdown. In Quebec and Ontario, domestic violence shelters have been deemed as essential services which must remain open during the lockdown.<sup>61</sup>

(viii) In an attempt to cater for situations wherein women will not be able to speak in privacy to the police, UK police provides for a Silent Solution system (Make Yourself Heard). Using this, one can call 999 using a mobile phone and then press 55 when prompted. If someone cannot use a voice phone, they can register with the police text service (text REGISTER to 999).<sup>62</sup>

(viii) In Canada, civil society organisations have partnered with Uber to provide free rides so women can leave dangerous situations quickly.<sup>63</sup>

(ix) In Yukon, Canada the government is providing phones to vulnerable women and provide four months of free service.<sup>64</sup>

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(xi) To ensure women's privacy as many abusers monitor women's phones, Unsafe at Home in Canada has encrypted chat and an "automatic conversation deletion" that deletes the chat when it is idle for a certain period of time.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> UN Women, 'COVID 19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' (n 57).

<sup>62</sup> Information provided by the UK police on their website - <[https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/research-learning/Silent\\_solution\\_guide.pdf](https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Documents/research-learning/Silent_solution_guide.pdf) accessed 28 June 2020. > accessed 27 June 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Meg Black, 'Uber Offers Free Rides for People Feeling Domestic Violence During Covid-19 Pandemic' (Global Citizen, 29 April 2020) <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/uber-offers-free-rides-for-people-fleeing-domestic/>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Leah Rodriguez, 'Vulnerable Women in the Yukon are Receiving Free Cell Phones to Stay Safe Amid COVID-19 Lockdown' (6 April 2020, Global Citizen) <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/yukon-women-free-cell-phones-covid-19/>> accessed 24 June 2020.

<sup>65</sup> 'Domestic Abuse Text Service Sees Surge in Demand' (n 24).