



30 June 2020

COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women: Submission by AWARE Singapore

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.

A note on definitions: In Singapore, domestic violence is defined as “family violence” under the Women’s Charter, covering relationships between spouses and former spouses, children and parents, in-laws, and siblings. Notably, neither does this definition cover intimate partners¹, nor other people living the same households that do not share a familial relationship e.g. domestic workers. For the purposes of this submission, and in our understanding and definition of “domestic violence”, we take it to cover the groups of people not covered under Singapore’s definition of “family violence” i.e. intimate (ex)partners and domestic workers.

Since the introduction of lockdown (“circuit breaker”) measures in Singapore from 7 April 2020, there has been an increase in domestic violence.

Latest publicly available figures show that from April 7 to May 6, there were 476 police reports filed for offences commonly associated with domestic violence.² This was a 22 per cent increase compared with the monthly average of 389 for such cases before the circuit breaker period.³ As far as we know, no further data has been released.

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?

The Government launched a National Care Helpline on 10 April 2020. It is a 24-hour Helpline manned by over 300 psychologists, counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists and public officers from about 50 agencies.

¹ Intimate partners are covered under the recently amended Protection from Harassment Act

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<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/coronavirus-more-cases-of-family-violence-during-circuit-breaker-police-to>

³ Ibid.

The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), a non-profit gender equality advocacy group, has run a Women’s Helpline for women in distress since the early 1990s. Since March 2020, the Helpline has been receiving a significant increase in the number of calls relating to family violence (please refer to table below).

Table 1: Comparison of number of calls on family violence received by AWARE’s Helpline from March to May

	March	April	May
2019	66	59	76
2020	109	129	180
Change	65% increase	119% increase	137% increase

These numbers are likely to be higher if we take into account all the individuals who are not being able to reach out for help and support because they are isolated with their abusers and lack the privacy to call.

Selected May 2020 Helpline Calls

Farah* and her husband have been married for decades. Her husband belittles her frequently. He is financially abusive: He doesn’t give her any money, and has cancelled all her cards. He has also refused to let Farah work. As a result, Farah is totally dependent on her children for money, which makes her anxious and unhappy. She is looking for legal advice about her financial rights and divorce.

Mei* contacted AWARE for information about applying for a Personal Protection Order against her father, whom she lives with, and who has been physically abusive since her childhood. During a recent disagreement, he smashed an object against her head. Mei receives no emotional support from friends or other members of the family

Vani* was assaulted by her brother, whom she lives with, during a recent conversation. She had to seek medical help for the injuries she suffered. Although the assault was reported to the police, her mother convinced her not to pursue the case further in any official capacity. Vani is considering moving to a relative’s house to escape her brother’s abuse.

**Names changed to protect callers’ identities*

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

Crisis and transitional shelters, some funded by the government, are still in operation. Although absolute numbers of shelter vacancies are not available, the government said on 13 April that there was sufficient capacity available to house domestic violence victims.⁴ As far as we know, no further information was revealed after this initial statement.

According to information from HOME, an NGO that assists domestic workers who are in crisis, dedicated shelters for migrant domestic workers have reached capacity and have had to stop taking in new residents. Safe distancing measures cannot be effectively implemented if shelters are overcrowded. Remote helplines are operational and are available to direct domestic workers in distress to the relevant authorities or to their employment agencies.

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

Singapore provides Personal Protection Orders (PPOs), Expedited Protection Orders (EPO), and Domestic Exclusion Orders (DEO) for family violence victims under the Women's Charter. Intimate partners and others not covered under the Government's definition of family violence, can apply for a Protection Order under Protection from Harassment Act (POHA).

Both PPOs and POs are available during this period. Victims can apply for a PO online through the Integrated Family Application Management System (I-FAMS). Alternatively, they can approach a Family Service Centre or Family Violence Specialist Centre (FVSC) for assistance with application. These centres are still in operation.

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

Most court processes have been taken online. From 5 April to 1 June 2020 (the circuit breaker period), only "essential and urgent matters" were heard, most of which were conducted via Zoom. Hearing for all other matters was adjourned until the end of the relevant period. Matters which may be considered "essential and urgent" are generally those which are "time-sensitive, constitute a threat to life and liberty, and/or involve urgent needs of the family". Examples include cases of family violence with high risk of immediate danger and maintenance proceedings to meet immediate or urgent financial needs of the applicant and/or children of the

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<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/sufficient-crisis-shelter-space-to-house-family-violence-victims-msf>

marriage.⁵ Therefore, if a domestic violence claim does not reach this threshold, the victim's access to justice may be hindered.

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

Poor understanding of what constitutes domestic violence

Findings from a recent national survey show that there are gaps in Singaporeans' understanding of what domestic abuse is and the standard definition of domestic abuse. Other than physical violence, understanding of other forms of violence is poorer: Approximately 7 in 10 people consider forcing a spouse to engage in sexual intercourse against their will (78%), verbal threats (70%) and restraining or holding them against their will (69%) as abuse.⁶ About half of Singaporeans do not consider actions that cause a spouse to have lower self-esteem (44%), restricting a spouse's access to healthcare (45%) or financial freedom (52%) as domestic abuse.⁷

The government has done well to relaunch an old public campaign on domestic violence that provides information on domestic violence and avenues for help. However, this campaign can be more widely publicised and updated to reflect recent legislative changes. Certain types of violence—such as marital rape—were only recognised as offences earlier this year and may not have percolated societal consciousness yet. Intimate partner violence is also recently recognised under the amendments to the Protection from Harassment Act.

Furthermore, despite public statements affirming that everyone in Singapore enjoys protection from violence and harassment, Section 377A, which criminalises homosexuality, continues to be on the books. This Section is likely to deter sexual and gender minority groups from reaching out for help because of the environment of fear and stigma it creates. The public campaign should include a direct reference to the LGBTQIA community and the type of violence and abuse they might face.

Prevailing myths, and incomplete knowledge about how to safely intervene

Also of concern is the finding that 1 in 5 believe that domestic abuse should not be reported by others as it is more important to preserve the sanctity of marriage. The same survey also found that many (41%) are still unclear on what to do if they or someone close to them experience domestic abuse.

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https://www.familyjusticecourts.gov.sg/docs/default-source/legislation/registrar-circulars/rc_2020_2_updateonmeasuresrelatingtocov.pdf

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

By-standers are less likely to intervene or support victims when they do not believe or understand that what victims are experiencing is domestic violence, or if they are not sure how they can best support victims. Victims are also less likely to seek support for fear of being disbelieved.

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

1. In 2019, Singapore abstained from signing the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (Convention 190), citing concerns of “overreach” with measures such as including domestic violence in workplace risk assessments.⁸ By not signing the Convention, Singapore continues to not legislate employer obligation in addressing domestic violence and responding to the needs of workers who are also victims. These obligations are even more important in the present context of economic downturn. There is research to show the links between economic hardships and an increase in domestic violence. Poor financial health also makes it harder for victims to leave abusive relationships.

2. Migrant women, including domestic workers, and LGBTQ women are more vulnerable to domestic violence and may face more barriers accessing protection and justice.

Migrant spouses

The majority (70%) of these migrant spouses in Singapore are women, who tend to come from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, and have limited social capital and support systems in Singapore. As non-residents, they depend wholly on their citizen spouse for the right to reside in the country if they are not on a work visa. These factors all render migrant wives especially vulnerable to family violence. From 2016 to 2018, AWARE received family violence-related calls from migrant wives (27.5%) at twice the rate from local women (13%).

Since the introduction of strict social distancing measures and travel restrictions under the circuit breaker rules, migrants wives’ already small social support networks in Singapore are further limited, making it even more difficult for them to seek help. Travel restrictions limit the ability of family members from their home countries to come to support them. They also make it more difficult for migrant wives to return to their home countries. While some Singaporean violence victims may be able to temporarily seek refuge with friends and family, this option is often not available to migrant wives.

LBTQ+ women

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<https://medium.com/@antheaindraong/singapores-abstention-from-ilo-convention-on-workplace-harassment-and-violence-89b6fc5b60e7>

According to a survey conducted by Sayoni (an advocacy NGO for LGBTQ+ women) on the impact of COVID-19 LGBTQ+ persons in Singapore, one in five of the 500 respondents were living in family environments hostile towards their sexual orientations and/or gender identity. Due to movement restrictions, they are trapped in homes with families who are unaccepting of them, and isolated from support networks and resources. Their risk to domestic violence increases as unsupportive families may resort to violence and abuse to “correct” or punish them for their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.

Migrant domestic workers

HOME has seen a 25% increase to its helpline calls for domestic workers who are facing well-being issues at their employers’ houses. Such issues include increased overwork and disputes with their employers. Due to the circuit breaker measures, entire families are at home, and this adds to the workload and stress of domestic workers due to the existence of more household and caregiving duties. Domestic workers have also reported increased surveillance and restrictions of the mobile phones. Employers also use scare tactics to restrict domestic workers’ movement (“If you go out, the police might catch you because of the circuit breaker”) “If you go out, the police might catch you because of the circuit breaker.” Other forms of domestic violence they face include overwork, economic abuse (i.e. withholding and/or shortchanging wages), threats of repatriation and verbal/physical abuse.