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**Call for submissions: COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women**

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.**

The national lockdown was imposed to mitigate against the spread of coronavirus however as a result in heightened levels of stress and anxiety this period saw a substantial increase in incidents of gender based violence. During this time a lot of many countries relief strategies were primarily focused on helping to mitigate the spread of covid-19 however in hindsight government and policymakers were failing to adequately provide the necessary support to survivors of violence and abuse many of which in the township and informal communities were women and children. In South Africa a woman is killed every three hours in South Africa, according to police statistics a rate five times the world average. Half are murdered by men with whom they had a close relationship. Official statistics suggest that more than 110 rapes are reported to the police per day and unofficial figures suggests that the numbers are much higher. Violence against women and children in South Africa has always been at alarming rates however the covid-19 pandemic has revealed is the frequency at which incidents are taking place and the sheer brutality of incidents of violence against women and children.

1. **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 Minister of Police Bheki Cele stated that since the beginning of the national lockdown police stations nationwide have received over 120 000 gender based violence related phone calls. Since the re-introduction of the sale of alcohol under lockdown level 3 we have seen a dramatic spike in incidents of violence against women and children, introducing alcohol in a time of crisis has brought more harm as our society is dealing with heightened levels of stress and anxiety alcohol has increased levels of family violence and that the limited money and resources that a household is then used on alcohol.

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

Women who experienced abuse during the lockdown could not reach places of care due to the lockdown restrictions that limited their movement, these lockdown restrictions that limited the movement of people added to the entrapment of women and meant that they were kept in isolation within the same vicinity with their alleged perpetrator this led to the increase of incidents of domestic and abuse.

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

The national lockdown placed NGOs with a particular focus on addressing violence against women and children in a peculiar position because NGOs are the first line contact for survivors as we provide the specialized services required to assist survivors. Many shelters were closed as they did not have the necessary personal protection equipment for staff and for survivors, this meant that women and children who were in need of shelter during this period could not access places of safety placing them further in harm’s way.

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

The strict lockdown rules has given rise to many unforeseen challenges for many survivors of abuse. Since the beginning of the national lockdown it was well articulated by government that the courts and the legal systems are an essential service and should operate during the lockdown. However in reality this is not the case as many courts around the country were closed to mitigate against the spread of covid-19, this was particularly evident during the early stages of the lockdown. In addition to the above mentioned in some communities police stations close for the night, meaning many women survivors of abuse would then have to either report incidences in other polices stations or wait until the morning for the police station in their community to open to report incidences of violence and abuse this in many instances has proven fatal for women and children in abusive environments.

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

In the beginning stages of the lockdown courts were not open, and there have been many incidents where women survivors were turned back by the courts because they could only accommodate limited number of persons within allocated facilities. This meant that many women survivors could not access justice. Prior to the national lockdown access to justice for most women was limited and in other instances unavailable, the coronavirus pandemic has intensified the preexisting challenges that contributed to the lack of access to justice for women in South Africa and as a result we have witnessed enormous delays in court appearances. Within the judiciary some cases were classified as “urgent” and begs us to question which cases were classified as “non-urgent” cases, particularly with careful consideration to cases of domestic violence and violence against women and children. In other instances the lack of access to justice was impacted by investigative negligence by the social security cluster this having grave implications for women’s cases as investigating officers or police officers fail to adequately document cases of domestic violence and gender based violence. Access to justice for many women in a country like South Africa is a matter of life or death and this means that in spite of a global pandemic women’s access to justice cannot be put on hold.

1. **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**.

Local clinics during the early stages of the national lockdown had to adjust their operational strategies to limit the number of people who can physically visit the clinics, this vehemently affected many from receiving the adequate health care services they required. This meant that women and girls from poor and marginalized communities could not receive the free feminine care products that are offered at the clinics or access reproductive healthcare.

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

The covid-19 pandemic meant that NGOs like Ilitha Labantu had to implement new operational strategies to ensure that survivors can receive the psycho-social support they require. The Covid-19 pandemic regulations meant that organizations could not operate with the full complement of staff, having limited staff at hand to deal with the influx of domestic violence survivors created new challenges. Prior to the lockdown Ilitha Labantu provided a holistic approach to providing support to survivors of abuse and communities affected by violence in which Ilitha Labantu’s social workers would conduct home visitations to ensure that the home is a healthy and conducive environment free from violence and abuse. Another obstacle presented by the covid-19 national lockdown is that Ilitha Labantu’s community engagement programmes were drastically limited, the organization could no longer host community engagements with large numbers of people, nor could be host workshops and trainings to empower women, children and vulnerable persons.

1. **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.**

Since the beginning of the lockdown Ilitha Labantu has implemented new strategies to ensure that marginalized communities have access to the essential services that the organization provides. Ilitha Labantu embarked on a public awareness campaign which visits various communities in the Cape Flats region namely Philippi, Nyanga, Gugulethu, Langa, Khayelitsha, Elsies River, Delft, Mfulenii and Mitchells Plein. The abovementioned areas of the Cape Flats are notorious for having high levels of crime and violence and in conjunction to this are also notorious for having high incident rates of violence that is perpetrated on women and children. Through the use of a mobile van with a built-in a public announcement system Ilitha labantu can visit communities and spread an important message as to how to access our services, mitigate against the spread of covid-19 and promote the protection of the rights and dignity of women and children, all within a safe distance.

As part of Ilitha Labantu’s public awareness campaign the organization recorded an informative audio clips that informed the general public about where to access our services during the national lockdown. The one minute short clips were recorded in IsiXhosa and English seeks to entice the general public to think critically about the issue of domestic violence and encourages them to take action when confronted with abuse, the recordings which are aired on local radio stations provides clarity for listeners, that irrespective of the situation we find ourselves in with the lockdown no one should tolerate any form of abuse, the clips also provides information of where to access Ilitha labantu’s services during the covid-19 lockdown period. Ilitha Labantu shares an understanding that in order to adequately address the scourge of violence against women and children the culture of violence and discrimination that underpins the behaviour of people in a community needs to be challenged thus the public awareness campaign seeks to interrogate change negative mentality and attitudes about gender in our communities.

In addition to the abovementioned Ilitha Labantu provided 24 hour hotline where women and children who are experiencing abuse can contact our social workers directly. The hotline has WhatsApp capabilities and that survivors can simply sent a ‘please call me’ and our social workers will attend to them immediately. This hotline has proven to be very effective during the lockdown as women from all backgrounds have embraced it.

1. **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 covid-19 pandemic has challenged institutions to think beyond their limitations and introduce new strategies of how they can still provide essential services to survivors of abuse in the best way possible. Addressing violence against women is a collective responsibility and it requires the strengthening of the network of all parties involved (NGO sector, Police, and Judiciary) to play their role in ensuring that women’s rights and dignity are protected at all times. This network needs to be strengthened and clear lines of accountability ought to be opened so that the lives of women can be protected and perpetrators can be brought to book. Ilitha Labantu throughout the lockdown has played a significant role in helping to bring light on indiscretions committed by the South African Police Services and the National Prosecution Authority in addressing violence against women.

1. **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 lack of funding for NGOs addressing violence against women and children has always been an issue, even prior to the covid-19 pandemic governments and the profit sector alike have not played an adequate role in ensuring that there are mechanisms in place to ensure that there is sustainable funding for NGOs providing such an important service to society. We will not win this fight against the scourge unless proper funding and adequate resources are placed at the disposal of NGOs.

The prosecution rate of perpetrator of violence against women and children is an issue that impedes our progress towards the full realization of women’s rights and dignity. In South Africa we have progressive laws that seek to protect the rights of women and children however this is not reflected in reality, as perpetrators tend to receive light sentences for the rape and murder of women and children, this calls for a reform of our judicial system.

All submissions should be sent to vaw@ohchr.org as soon as possible, and will be received until **30 June 2020**. You are kindly requested to provide your submissions in English, French or Spanish. Kindly indicate if you DO NOT wish your submission to be made publicly available.