

Submission of Evidence on COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence  
against women  
to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and  
Consequences, Dr Dubravka Šimonović

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## 1. Overview

The focus of our remarks falls on specific areas of VAWG during the COVID-19 pandemic from across the UK, and Europe.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent periods of lockdown – and the easing of such measures – across Europe have highlighted the fragility of women’s rights protection and, in many cases, insufficient responses at a state level to tackle peaking violence against women amid the global pandemic. This has significant ramifications for women’s (human) rights as well as for ensuring their safety, dignity, and equal treatment at all times.

The emphasis below falls, first, on how laws and regulations have been used to restrict women’s rights in times of pandemic; second the manner in which domestic violence – and its technological forms – have been impacted upon during the lockdown period. Moreover, the pandemic lockdown periods have resulted in – not only – heightened instances of VAW and TFVAW, but where coverage of this has been reported, it has resulted in a backlash against women, which in itself is a form of VAW which is not always readily captured. Finally, the impact upon reproductive rights during the pandemic and restrictions on access to reproductive health care is also considered.

What all of these remarks highlight is the continued precarity of women in advocating for their rights, and in seeking to ensure equality, particularly in times of crisis where their rights are curtailed, but most especially where advances in equality and human rights are prejudiced in favour of other interests. The pandemic has not caused VAW, but it has exacerbated its impact, and has put at stake some of the mechanisms by which it is addressed.

## 2. Violence against women (VAW), and technology-facilitated violence against women (TFVAW)

Domestic violence reports have risen dramatically during the COVID-19 lockdown, not just in the UK where reports of increases of 25% in calls for support have been seen in early lockdown periods<sup>1</sup> but across Europe, and further afield.<sup>2</sup> The most stark statistic is the 700% increase in calls to domestic abuse charity Refuge in a single day.<sup>3</sup> The increases in the need for support arise at exactly the same time as a drop-off in services has been witnessed,<sup>4</sup> due in significant part to the physical lockdowns and restrictions on movement imposed in the UK. Crimestoppers reported a 49% increase in the information passed on to law enforcement, and the police between the start of the lockdown period in

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<sup>1</sup> June Kelly & Tomos Morgan, ‘Coronavirus: Domestic Abuse calls up 25% since lockdown, charity says’ *BBC News* (6 April 2020) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52157620>.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, Angela Giuffrida, Helena Smith & Liz Ford, ‘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?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Townsend, ‘Revealed: surge in domestic violence during Covid-19 crisis’ *The Guardian* (12 April 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/12/domestic-violence-surges-seven-hundred-per-cent-uk-coronavirus>.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, ‘Coronavirus: ‘Worrying’ drop in calls for domestic violence support’ (1 April 2020) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tees-52119770>.

the UK, and the 17 April 2020 – a significant rise.<sup>5</sup> Technologically facilitated violence against women (TFVAW) is a phenomenon that was growing in scale and severity prior to the global crisis brought about by national and regional lockdown mechanisms in light of COVID-19. TFVAW – including death and rape threats, stalking, harassment,<sup>6</sup> and hostile, often misogynistic,<sup>7</sup> violence has seen heightened levels pre-pandemic, which has manifested itself in a backlash against those women campaigning for women’s rights during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly damaging to women’s rights, especially because of the gender divide when it comes to experiencing violence online,<sup>9</sup> but more so because it is apparent that women will be more likely to disengage with online platforms – effectively being silenced – once they have experienced online violence.<sup>10</sup> In times of pandemic, this impact is much more damaging, especially because women – especially those experiencing TFVAW or VAW – have had reduced means of accessing resources providing support and help that are not purely online.<sup>11</sup> TFVAW witnessed during the pandemic has not just impacted upon women through their subjectification to such violence but has been exacerbated by the dependency on internet access,<sup>12</sup> and the use of smart devices.

Suggested routes of support during physical lockdown are almost exclusively dependent on some form of communication technology, largely smartphones,<sup>13</sup> which in turn has led to an even greater demand being placed on a reduced level of services – something which has been prominently considered in parliamentary committees, and which in the UK resulted in oral evidence on the subject of the preparedness of the Government for COVID-19 in the context of domestic abuse being given to the

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<sup>5</sup> House of Commons Home Affairs Committee: ‘Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home’ HC 232, 15 April 2020, para. 35. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/321/32105.htm#footnote-101>.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Barker & Olga Jurasz, ‘Text-based (sexual) abuse and online violence against women: towards law reform?’ in J Bailey, A Flynn, and N Henry, *Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse – International Perspectives and Experiences* (Emerald, forthcoming 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Kim Barker & Olga Jurasz, *Online Misogyny as a Challenge for Legal Regulation?* Routledge, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Jess Phillips, ‘A man has been sentenced for threatening to kill me – abuse of MPs is getting worse but I don’t want to shy away from my job’ *The Independent* (22 June 2020) <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/death-threats-mps-abuse-democracy-coronavirus-prison-a9579571.html>.

<sup>9</sup> OECD, ‘Bridging the digital gender divide.’ (2018) <https://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Online violence against women (OVAW) takes various forms of abuse and includes, but is not limited to, online misogyny, text-based abuse (e.g. on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook), upskirting, image-based sexual abuse (also referred to as “revenge pornography”), rape pornography, doxing, cyberstalking, and cyber-harassment. See further: Kim Barker & Olga Jurasz, *Online Misogyny as a Hate Crime: A Challenge for Legal Regulation?* Routledge, 2019, xiii; Kim Barker & Olga Jurasz, ‘Online Misogyny: A Challenge for Digital Feminism?’ *Journal of International Affairs*. Spring/Summer 2019, 72(2), 95.

<sup>11</sup> Though this is not Covid-19 specific, and other difficulties in accessing support services have been reported in times of natural disaster as well as pandemic. See: Megan O’Donnell, Amber Peterman, and Alina Potts, ‘A Gender Lens on COVID-19: Pandemics and Violence Against Women and Children.’ *Center for Global Development* (3 April 2020) <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/gender-lens-covid-19-pandemics-and-violence-against-women-and-children>.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Beech, ‘COVID-19 pushes Internet use up 70% and streaming more than 12%, first figures reveal’ *Forbes* (25 March 2020) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markbeech/2020/03/25/covid-19-pushes-up-internet-use-70-streaming-more-than-12-first-figures-reveal/>.

<sup>13</sup> Apps such as SmartSafe+ for example are widely hailed in Australia.

Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee throughout April 2020.<sup>14</sup> This followed an open letter<sup>15</sup> calling on the UK Government to do more to address VAWG during the COVID-19 lockdown period. The overwhelming consensus from the 22 signatory organisations, as well as the evidence to the committee is that the Government was ill-prepared to support women experiencing domestic violence during the pandemic, and that support mechanisms to address the upsurges in reporting volumes was too late in arriving for some.<sup>16</sup>

Online chat services, domestic violence hotlines, and domestic violence apps all, by their very nature, require access to a phone – smart or not. In most instances given the lockdown, support services have also shifted the ways in which they provide some of their support – specifically including online provisions,<sup>17</sup> making situations where there are digital transgressions – including those of digital coercion and control – even more difficult to address – something that is not UK nor Europe exclusive, and which has been widely witnessed elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Where behaviours of control and power have been deployed against technology during the pandemic lockdown, this has had the very real effect of cutting off digital support services for victims of domestic violence, and meaning that the technology once relied upon as a means of support in turn becomes a further tool of the violence.

That said, the outbreak of the pandemic and the rise in reported incidents of violence against women have prompted alternative ways of thinking about reporting mechanisms and remedies available to the victims. For instance, France introduced temporary emergency lines in pharmacies and supermarkets (as very few places which can be visited during lockdown)<sup>19</sup> where women can alert staff to the incidence of domestic violence and need for help by using a codeword. Similar approaches have been introduced in Spain, Germany, Italy and Norway.

### 3. Reproductive rights

Women's reproductive choices during the COVID-19 pandemic have been disrupted on an unprecedented scale, with changes in the access to, and provision of, health care. Whilst media reports have largely highlighted the increase in domestic forms of violence – including domestic abuse killings

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<sup>14</sup> See: House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 'Home Office Preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus): domestic abuse and risks of harm within the home' HC 232, 15 April 2020.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/correspondence/HASC-transcript-15-April.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> An Open Letter to the Prime Minister from 22 organisations working to address violence against women and girls (3 April 2020). <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/An-open-letter-to-the-prime-minister.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> The organisation Counting Dead Women indicates that there have been 14 domestic abuse killings of women between 23 March and 12 April 2020 alone, and suggests that there is a spike in the escalation of instances of domestic abuse: Karen Ingala-Smith, 'Coronavirus doesn't cause men's violence against women' Counting Dead Women (15 April 2020) <https://kareningalasmith.com/2020/04/15/coronavirus-doesnt-cause-mens-violence-against-women/>.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Women's Aid is using online chat options. See: Women's Aid, 'Covid-19: Safety advice for survivors' (24 March 2020). <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-coronavirus-safety-advice-for-survivors/>.

<sup>18</sup> Alison J Marganski & Lisa Melander, 'Domestic abusers use tech that connects as a weapon during coronavirus lockdowns' *The Conversation* (18 June 2020) <https://theconversation.com/domestic-abusers-use-tech-that-connects-as-a-weapon-during-coronavirus-lockdowns-139834>.

<sup>19</sup> 'The measures to help domestic violence victims trapped by France's lockdown' (The Local, 1 April 2020) <<https://www.thelocal.fr/20200401/the-measures-to-help-domestic-violence-victims-trapped-by-frances-lockdown>>

of women more than doubling in England and Wales<sup>20</sup> – the issue of reproductive rights in time of pandemic, as well as provision of access to reproductive health has gained significantly less coverage in the mainstream media.

Nevertheless, several reports have highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on women's access to reproductive healthcare and their ability to exercise their reproductive rights. For instance, despite the access to abortion being legalised in Northern Ireland from 31 March 2020, the impact of the pandemic meant that effective access to abortion for women in Northern Ireland has been further delayed, as confirmed by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland:

*The timescale for addressing the necessary administrative and funding approvals required to introduce this service has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the urgent need to focus resources on preparing the health and social care system for the surge in cases.*<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, in countries such as Malta, where abortion is illegal, travel restrictions caused by COVID-19 further exacerbated the existing barriers to women exercising their reproductive rights and being able to travel abroad for abortion. In March and April 2020 alone, the UK-based charity Abortion Support Network, noted 2.3 times increase in number of requests for help from women in Malta, with Women on Web (a Dutch charity providing abortion pills) reporting that at least 63 women from Malta have contacted the organisation to seek help in the same time period.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, in England & Wales, the outbreak of the pandemic prompted considerations of how to provide easy and safe access to abortion for women, resulting in a change of regulations allowing women to receive abortion pills via the post for terminations up to 10 weeks of gestation.<sup>23</sup> The decision of the Department of Health and Social Care was welcomed with enthusiasm by the leading human rights organisations<sup>24</sup> and further

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<sup>20</sup> J Grierson, 'Domestic abuse killings 'more than double' amid Covid-19 lockdown' *The Guardian* (15 April 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/domestic-abuse-killings-more-than-doubleamid-covid-19-lockdown>>

<sup>21</sup> E McGovern, 'Abortion services to be provided in Northern Ireland after health department legal advice' *Belfast Telegraph* (9 April 2020) <<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/abortion-services-to-be-provided-in-northern-ireland-after-health-department-legal-advice-39116885.html>>

Following this decision, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service launched 'Emergency Abortion Pills by Post' to assist women in Northern Ireland with abortion services for up to 10 weeks gestation: BPAS, 'BPAS launches Emergency Abortion Pills by Post for women in Northern Ireland amid shameful political gameplay with women's health during the Covid-19 pandemic' (9 April 2020) <<https://www.bpas.org/about-our-charity/press-office/press-releases/bpas-launches-emergency-abortion-pills-by-post-for-women-in-northern-ireland-amid-shameful-political-gameplay-with-women-s-health-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>>

<sup>22</sup> Doctors for Choice, 'Requests for abortion help from Maltese women surge during pandemic', 11 May 2020, available at: <<https://www.doctorsforchoice.mt/post/exclusive-requests-for-abortion-help-from-maltese-women-surge-during-pandemic>>

<sup>23</sup> Department of Health and Social Care, 'Temporary approval of home use for both stages of early medical abortion' (30 March 2020) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/temporary-approval-of-home-use-for-both-stages-of-early-medical-abortion--2>>

<sup>24</sup> H Margolis, 'England Leads Way in UK after U-Turn on COVID-19 Abortion Access' *Human Rights Watch* (31 March 2020) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/england-leads-way-uk-after-u-turn-covid-19-abortionaccess>>

endorsed<sup>25</sup> by the leading expert bodies such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Faculty of Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH).

#### 4. States' Perspective

The approach towards protecting women's rights in times of pandemic has not been uniform across European countries, drastically emphasizing the disparity and fragility of women's rights across Europe, as well as the alarming deficiencies in states' responses to all forms of violence against women, their commitment to securing and delivering women's rights, and delivering on the positive obligations enshrined in European (e.g. the Istanbul Convention) and international law (e.g. CEDAW).

For instance, the far-right populist government in Poland has been attempting to use COVID-19 situation to not only force through new laws severely restricting women's access to abortion,<sup>26</sup> despite calls from UN experts,<sup>27</sup> as well as public protests not to do so. Furthermore, the time of pandemic has also prompted calls from certain fractions within the Polish government to withdraw from the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention – a leading treaty on violence against women which Poland ratified in 2015 and which deputy Justice Minister, Marcin Romanowski, called in May 2020 a 'neomarxist propaganda' and 'gender gibberish'.<sup>28</sup> Earlier the same month, governments in Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Latvia blocked ratification of the Istanbul Convention.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, the outbreak of pandemic resulted in many women in Poland advocating against the change of laws, being hassled by pro-life activists - both online and offline.<sup>30</sup> Despite the pandemic and restrictions on protesting in the streets, many feminist activists mobilised online to express their resistance to the proposed changes that further curtail women's rights – especially where reproductive health and choices are concerned.<sup>31</sup> For instance, women in Poland protested online using hashtags #StrajkKobiet (Women's Strike), #PiekloKobiet (Women's Hell) and #OdrzucProjektGodek (reject Godek's project), exercising their political rights and actively participating online.

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<sup>25</sup> FSRH, 'RCOG and FSRH press statement on Government's decision to reinstate telemedicine for abortion care' (30 March 2020) <<https://www.fsrh.org/news/rcog-fsrh-press-statement-telemedicine-abortion-covid19/>>

<sup>26</sup> FEDERA, 'Poland uses COVID-19 pandemic to push for further restrictions in women's access to sexual and reproductive rights' [https://en.federa.org.pl/poland\\_srh\\_r\\_bills/](https://en.federa.org.pl/poland_srh_r_bills/)

<sup>27</sup> UNOHCHR, 'Poland urged not to criminalise sex education or tighten access to abortion' (16 April 2020) <<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25796&LangID=E>>

<sup>28</sup> <https://twitter.com/MarRomanowski/status/1260469909189988353?s=20>

<sup>29</sup> H Margolis, 'Hungary Rejects Opportunity to Protect Women from Violence. Government Blocks Key Treaty as Covid-19 Exposes Scale of Domestic Abuse' (Human Rights Watch, 8 May 2020) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/08/hungary-rejects-opportunity-protect-women-violence>>

<sup>30</sup> For instance, in May 2020, 17-year-old woman seeking abortion was harassed and reported by a pro-life activist (Zuzanna Wiewiórka), forcing the woman to continue with pregnancy against her will. Wiewiórka has later received an award from the Polish Ministry of Justice for her 'contributions to the justice system'. "Krwawe zdjęcia" i "szantaże emocjonalne". Ministerstwo Sprawiedliwości uhonorowało działaczkę pro-life' (Gazeta Wyborcza, 15 May 2020) <<https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114883,25949128,krwawe-zdjecia-i-szantaze-emocjonalne-ministerstwo-sprawiedliwosci.html>>

<sup>31</sup> M Wilczek, 'As abortion ban returns to parliament, Polish women find ways to protest amid lockdown' (Notes from Poland, 14 April 2020) <<https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/04/14/as-abortion-ban-returns-to-parliament-polish-women-find-ways-to-protest-amid-lockdown/>>

## 5. Conclusion – Same challenge, new era?

The COVID-19 pandemic has not created a new crisis for women’s rights, and for the eradication of all forms of VAW, but has instead, exacerbated an already difficult situation in which incidences of VAW – off and online were increasing.

The challenges posed by lockdown, by a closing of face-to-face resources and support mechanisms, and by the increased dependency on internet enabled devices have compounded situations that were – perhaps – not as widely acknowledged nor reported previously. The media coverage of different areas of ‘life under lockdown’ has – in the absence of global reporting and live broadcasts from around the world – allowed a different narrative to emerge in the mass media, and some of that has fallen on women’s rights. That said, where women speak out for women’s rights, and for addressing all forms of VAW, there is still a significant backlash which follows. This is a very direct form of VAW – one that significantly affects women’s right to equal participation in political and public life – and it too must be eradicated – but the narrative surrounding this form of violence has been much less addressed.

More generally, the striking differences in states’ approaches to women’s rights and tackling VAW in times of pandemic, highlights the gendered dimensions of law (and politics), and the power of the law in curtailing women’s rights. What is stark, is the scale of the challenge that remains, and the damage that pandemic imposed restrictions have caused to efforts to eradicate all forms of VAW. Finally, the unprecedented times of COVID-19 have highlighted the amount of work and interventions – at an international, regional, state and local levels – that still needs to be done to ensure that women’s rights are effectively protected at all times.