Peace in Our Cities in a Time of Pandemic:

Preventing an Escalation of Violence Against Women

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PEACE IN OUR CITIES

The Peace in Our Cities platform was launched on International Day of Peace in September 2019 out of an urgent demand to reverse trends of urban violence around the world. Peace in Our Cities (PiOC) brings together the political leadership of Mayors, local and international peacebuilders, the imperatives of the Sustainable Development Goals, and a bold assertion that we have the tools and knowledge to build peace and save lives in urban areas. With seventeen cities and more than two dozen organizing partners signed on to date, PiOC represents over 20 million people globally. Working together through evidence-based approaches, PiOC is committed to achieving a 50% reduction in urban violence by 2030.

Peace in Our Cities is co-facilitated by three organizations: Impact:Peace, Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice at the University of San Diego; +Peace Coalition; Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Find out more about Peace in Our Cities: www.sdg16.plus/peaceinourcities

Preventing an Escalation of Violence Against Women: City Action in the Wake of COVID-19

The COVID-19 Pandemic's Impacts on Women's Safety

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-ranging impacts on daily life worldwide, with social and economic effects falling harder on women than on men,[1] and women and girls' safety being particularly affected. Quarantine, social isolation and lockdown measures put in place to prevent the spread of the virus have led women and girls to be exposed to increased risks of victimization. Previous research from other pandemics and emerging data from the COVID-19 crisis indicate several contributing factors. Confinement with potential perpetrators, in a context of increased socioeconomic and psychological stress and increased caretaking responsibilities at home, has made women more likely to be exposed to intimate partner violence. School closures have also meant that girls are more likely to spend more time with potential abusers at home, potentially increasing risks of sexual exploitation and abuse.

At the same time that risks have been increasing, it has also become more challenging to access services and support. Already over-stretched and under-resourced health, social assistance, security and justice sector services have experienced further restrictions in access and reductions in funding, as resources have been diverted to the public health crisis.[2] Health service providers and emergency first responders, specifically, often a first entry point for survivors of violence against women (VAW), have experienced a significantly increased burden due to the virus. Informal services and networks, such as those provided by civil society organizations or women's groups, often sought by survivors, have also seen their activities limited due to economic stress and quarantine orders.[3]

Evidence has confirmed expectations of a significant rise in VAW during COVID-19. In several countries and cities there were immediate spikes in calls to VAW hotline numbers at the beginning of the crisis. In others, declines in reporting also raised concerns, as experts expected women to be more restricted in their ability to seek help when confined with abusers.[4] In Brazil, data from twelve states pointed to a 27 percent increase in complaints to the national VAW helpline in the first two months of quarantine, in comparison to the same period of the previous year, and a drop of 25.5 percent in the number of domestic violence complaints reported through police stations.[5] Calls to VAW hotlines in Cyprus and Singapore registered an increase of 30 percent and 33 percent, respectively,[6] and in areas of China police reports of domestic violence increased threefold in the first two months of quarantine, as compared to 2019.[7] In Canada, Germany and Spain, to mention a few, increases in reports of domestic violence and an escalation in the demand for shelters were also reported.[8] Most of these initial data were based on administrative records and from multiple sources. With time, rigorous research started to emerge to confirm those initial trends. In a review of 30 studies measuring VAW and children (VAW/C)during COVID-19 in places as diverse as Bangladesh, India, Mexico, Peru, Uganda, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, authors found that 13 studies (43 percent) showed increases in VAW/C and eight (27 percent) had mixed findings, with increases in at least one measure.[9] There is also growing evidence suggesting that mixed or decreasing trends are also partially linked to underreporting.[10]

Intimate partner violence has been the most widely documented and analyzed form of VAW during the pandemic. However, women have also experienced increases in other forms of violence. The extensive economic hardships related to COVID-19, the familial and social impacts of school closures,[11] and dangerous changes in migration due to travel restrictions and stricter border controls have all created fertile ground for both labor and sex trafficking to flourish during the pandemic.[12] Although human trafficking also affects boys and men, women and girls regularly account for the majority of victims.[13] Researchers have also documented landlords' sextortion of vulnerable young women in the United States and the United Kingdom unable to pay rent during the pandemic.[14] Online violence has also increased, with more sexual harassment cases, dissemination of unsolicited pornographic content (increasing the risk of sextortion), and searches for child abuse being registered in several places.[15] New forms of online violence have also emerged, such as zoom-bombing and sex-trolling. The risk of VAW in public spaces has also increased. Lockdown, social distancing and curfews have led to reduced circulation of people on the streets, in parks and on public transport, affecting women's freedom of movement, access to services and livelihoods. In places such as Chile, the United Kingdom, Canada, Nigeria, the Philippines, Kenya, India and the United States, there have been reports of sexual violence against women during quarantine.[16] Vulnerable women, such as those with disabilities or unstable housing, LGBTQI and migrants, have also been at higher risk of sexual exploitation and abuse by law enforcement authorities charged with enforcing lockdown and quarantine measures.[17] Finally, health care workers, most of them women, have also experienced a higher risk of violence at work by patients and their families, in public spaces when commuting to work, and in their homes, given the increased pressure from work and personal caretaking responsibilities.[18]

This brief presents an overview of policies implemented by governments, often in partnership with other stakeholders, to address the aforementioned increased risks of VAW that have emerged with COVID-19. It aims to provoke thinking on actions that can be taken by city governments to protect women whose violence burden and isolation have increased in the context of COVID-19. Some of these measures could also be considered as permanent options to improve the protection and care of women and girls at risk of victimization, as COVID-19 also exposed several gaps in the provision of services, data and legislation. Adverse impacts of quarantine and social isolation measures on mental health may also persist for a significant period of time after the pandemic, and some of those – such as depression, mental health struggles and related negative coping mechanisms, such as alcohol abuse – have been associated with increased risks of VAW. This emphasizes the need for the adoption of short-, medium- and long-term measures to prevent VAW.

Box 1. Defining Violence Against Women

Violence against women (VAW) takes many forms and occurs in many places. It includes sexual, physical and psychological abuse and can happen in the home, on the streets, in schools, in workplaces, in farm fields and in refugee camps. Domestic violence refers to violence perpetrated within the home, and it may be perpetrated against women, children, the elderly, siblings and so on. Intimate partner violence (IPV), often used interchangeably with domestic violence, actually refers only to violence perpetrated by a partner or former partner, and it is one of the most common forms of VAW. Finally, although VAW and gender-based violence (GBV) are also often used as synonyms, GBV also includes violence against men, boys and sexual minorities or those with gender-nonconforming identities. Hence, VAW is one type of GBV.

Source: Violence Against Women and Girls Resource Guide.[19]

Policy Trends and Recommendations to Address VAW in the COVID-19 Context

The increased risks and trends of different forms of VAW have generated many innovative responses (see Box 2). Greater attention to VAW has also led to intensified public support for investments in support services for survivors and engagement in awareness raising.[20] While it may be too soon to evaluate the full extent of these responses, there are valuable lessons to be learned from these experiences, particularly as we navigate the different waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and anticipate future scenarios.

Box 2. Tracking Policy Responses to Prevent Violence Against Women During the Pandemic

While this research brief is focused on policy responses at the city level, there has been significant action at the national and international levels worth considering as well. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker[21] is an online tool, with an integrated gender lens, that has been gathering information on national government-led policy measures to confront the COVID-19 crisis. As of November 2020, the platform had registered 704 initiatives specifically related to VAW, of which 83 were implemented in Africa, 190 in the Americas, 157 in Asia, 224 in Europe and 50 in Oceania. The World Bank has also been systematizing information on VAW policy responses in the GBV and COVID-19 Initiatives[22] shared document, which has identified five major trends in government responses: (i) adaptations to justice sector interventions; (ii) communications campaigns using mass media; (iii) increased resources available to survivors; (iv) innovations in the provision of support to survivors; and (v) increased funding to organizations that work on the prevention of VAW.[23] As of November 2020, the tool had captured 163 initiatives around the world, including at least 30 subnational or city-level interventions. The Center for Global Development (CGD), the Lancet Commission on Gender-Based Violence and the Maltreatment of Young People, the UN University International Institute for Global Health, and the German Institute for Global and Area Studies have also announced a new joint research effort to assess how current policy responses, led by sub-national governments, align with evidence on "best practice" in reducing VAW and supporting survivors, while also identifying remaining gaps.

Violence against women is a complex phenomenon, driven by several factors, and as such requires a multi-sectoral response, engaging a wide range of actors and services. In the context of the pandemic, where services are already strained, a comprehensive approach is even more needed. The practices and recommendations described below span sectors as diverse as public health, social assistance, law enforcement and justice. They also involve different levels of government and partnerships with multiple actors, from community-based organizations, schools and faith groups to the private sector, the media and international organizations. The policy recommendations and related practices are divided along the following main lines of action: (i) response and protection systems; (ii) justice and law enforcement interventions; (iii) awareness raising; (iv) interventions focused on controlling environmental factors that can increase risks of VAW; and (v) measures to prevent VAW beyond the domestic space. These were identified based on an extensive review of the existing literature on the impacts of COVID-19 and other pandemics on VAW, as well as official documents and news articles. Annex 1 provides a list of guidelines and tools that could be useful in the design and implementation of similar efforts.

1. **Strengthen and Adapt Response and Protection Systems**

A crucial first action taken by many governments early on was to ensure that VAW prevention and response services would not only continue but also be strengthened during the pandemic. That involved several different measures, including: (i) establishing as essential services in national and sub-national laws facilities such as shelters, one-stop-shop centers and other services that provide health, psychosocial and legal support for survivors of VAW and their families and ensuring this information was widely disseminated; (ii) ensuring that women in situations of violence would be allowed to circulate to seek help; (iii) expanding, enhancing or adjusting existing services, such as helplines, support centers and shelters, by hiring additional personnel and providing specialized and additional training for emergency situations, including in the provision of remote services;[24] and (iv) introducing new ways of reporting and accessing support, such as through WhatsApp, online chat, video calls or code-word systems implemented in essential businesses,[25] such as grocery stores or pharmacies.[26] The following initiatives illustrate the kind of action being taken:

- Several cities established services for women victims of violence as "essential services," for example in New York City, which has allowed key VAW services to remain in operation. In **Mexico City**, the government also provided an online mapping of services that remain in operation and ensured that hospitals continue to provide emergency prophylaxis kits and perform abortions in cases of sexual violence.[27]
- In **Teresina city, Brazil**, social workers started to send daily comforting audio messages through WhatsApp to women at risk, including advice on positive parenting and coping strategies.[28] The city also launched its own hotline number women could call to receive counseling, hear women's empowerment messages, and be referred to other services if needed.[29] It also used different outlets – WhatsApp, radio, TV, social media (including Instagram and Facebook Live with the Secretary of Women and other guests), and the citizen feedback/consultation app Colab – to disseminate information about service hours and discuss increased risks of VAW.[30] The **state of Kerala, India**, relaunched a WhatsApp number and a state tele-counseling facility for women, and similar efforts were implemented in **several cities of Bolivia**.[31]
- In **Bogotá, Colombia,** the local hotline Línea Purpura expanded its reach by adding to the toll-free number options via WhatsApp, online chat, and email. The line provides orientation on judicial, health and psychological support, and refers survivors to the appropriate services. The city also launched a massive campaign to advertise the existence of the hotline and encourage reporting.[32]
- In the **Province of Córdoba, Argentina**, the Ministry of Women established a Gender and Violence Emergency Plan immediately after lockdown to guarantee assistance through a local hotline with 100 operators, available 24 hours a day, to provide assistance and refer cases to specialized professionals on duty. A WhatsApp messaging line was also made available, connecting survivors to professionals. In addition, coordination teams were put in place to respond, follow up and monitor each individual case according to its specific needs. The Plan also included the establishment of Women Emergency Reference Points, with information on VAW support placed in essential businesses (e.g., pharmacies, grocery stores, gas stations, etc).[33] It also used the existing Municipal Network to Fight Violence Against Women to coordinate emergency actions at the community level through the engagement of mayors with social and local leaders.[34]
- The Government of **Yukon**, **Canada**, provided free mobile phones to 325 women at risk of violence and equipped them with internet and four months of free services to facilitate access to support.[35]

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- In several U.S. cities, such as **New York, Chicago and Los Angeles**, local governments partnered with hotels to expand the shelter capacity for victims of domestic violence.[36]
- In **Houston**, the city government partnered with Uber, who provided a $50,000 grant to provide free rides to victims of domestic violence.

Innovations in the provision of support services and prevention measures must not rely on digital platforms alone. Efforts must also reach women with no or low-tech access, in addition to those who may have access but may not feel safe to use it in a context of confinement with their abuser. In these settings, it is important to focus on managing personal safety during a period of prolonged confinement by stimulating the creation of safe zones in the home. Public safe spaces can also be equipped with phone booths/stalls where survivors can call VAW case workers on standby at particular times. Alternative entry points and systems can also be established for survivors to seek help – such as pharmacies, grocery stores, water pump stations, public transport stations, etc. Other discrete forms of alert and request for support developed by women's organizations, security forces and human rights activists vary significantly and can be adapted to different contexts, according to existing resources, cultural norms and safety. They include code words, whistles/alarms and the placement of specific objects outside the home.[37] For example, in northeast **Nigeria**, VAW phone booth stations have been put in place, enabling survivors to access phone-based case management support at specified hours. [38]

Strengthening response and protection services also requires updating and disseminating information on referral systems, raising awareness among all frontline workers involved in the crisis's response, and ensuring coordination between government agencies and service providers.[39] Since some disruption or modification to protection and response services is expected to happen, clear, updated information on referral pathways and partners from all sectors (health, justice, security, social services) should be disseminated and made accessible to professionals in these areas and communities, via phone or other online platforms. VAW should also be fully integrated into health system response.[40] The initiatives below exemplify this type of action being taken:

- In **Mumbai**, researchers from the Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT) have been reviewing the scale-up of Dilaasa, a crisis intervention program for survivors of VAW. Although Dilaasa and helpline services were recognized as essential services during lockdown, they had to adapt service delivery methods and inform citizens and parents about such adaptations. The program continued with psycho-social support services at public hospitals, while also introducing remote counseling and establishing contact with shelter homes to enable access for women in danger. Dilaasa also made arrangements with police to facilitate emergency travel passes for women, mobilizing private transport providers and engaging with community housing committees to assist women facing violence.[41]
- In **Khartoum State**, Sudan, a 24/7 community-based referral mechanism was established and expanded to three more states – Blue Nile, White Nile and North Kordofan – with higher demand.[42]
- In **Somalia**, the national Gender-Based Violence Sub-Cluster provided frontline aid workers with training on VAW and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, and service providers updated referral pathways.[43]

Teachers and school staff should also be provided with training on the increased risks of VAW/C during the pandemic, as well as with guidance on how to respond in the event that suspected abuses emerge during their remote engagement with students or are identified upon students' return to classes. They

should also receive appropriate training to manage confidential discussions with students and be supported in establishing referral systems to the mapped services that exist in their communities.[44]

Finally, strengthening informal networks (e.g., family, friends and community support systems, as well as community-based organizations[45]) is also crucial to ensuring that women access services for support.[46] City governments should allocate resources to the work of women's groups and local organizations working on VAW prevention and create flexible funding mechanisms, which may be crucial in the event that other services are partially or temporarily suspended or strained.[47]

2. Adapt Justice and Law Enforcement Interventions

Several measures have been taken by justice system and law enforcement agencies to ensure women's protection by facilitating reporting and legal services. These include (i) improving access to and maintenance/renewal of restraining orders; (iii) establishing virtual court hearings; (iv) providing online legal services; (v) increasing time and mechanisms for reporting, for example through apps and online platforms with geo-referenced systems and panic buttons with links to police services, information on geo-located provision of services and chat options for support;[48] and (vi) expanding training to police officers.[49] The list below provides examples of cities and provinces that have been implementing this type of measure:

- In **Washington, D.C.**, and **New York**, extensions to stay-away and protection orders for domestic violence cases started to be provided during the pandemic without the requirement that victims show up in court. This measure has remained in effect during the public health emergency.[50]
- In **Rio Grande do Sul State, Brazil,** judges started to provide remote assistance for VAW victims after in-person assistance was suspended and continued processing new requests and automatic extensions of existing emergency protective measures during quarantine.[51] In **São Paulo** and **Rio de Janeiro**, police started to allow online domestic violence reporting. São Paulo also allowed judges to grant emergency protective measures virtually and to transmit summonses through WhatsApp.[52]
- In **India**, courts in **Jammu** and **Kashmir** directed local government to create special funds for addressing VAW and alternative/informal spaces for women to report abuses (e.g., grocery stores and pharmacies). In the State of **Odisha,** the police started a special patrol with the help of the state's crime records bureau to reach out to VAW survivors.[53]

3. Raise Awareness

Many governments, civil society organizations and activists have increased social awareness efforts to help prevent the escalation of VAW during the pandemic. Such measures have included broad awareness campaigns on the risks of VAW and the services available for survivors, along with the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to promote social messages on issues such as healthy conflict resolution and positive parenting.[54] Awareness campaigns should disseminate information and resources via multiple types of platforms and leverage national, local, community-based, civil society and private sector actors to reach a broader audience as well as more targeted locations and groups. Everything from television and radio to paper flyers posted in neighborhoods, essential businesses (pharmacies, grocery stores) and other public spaces (elevators, public transport stations) should be considered.[55] Distance learning and remote work also make schools and employers

good sources for the dissemination of information about the heighted risks of VAW and resources for survivors. City examples of awareness raising initiatives are described below:

- In **Madrid, Spain,** the government launched the campaign "You Are Not Alone" (*NoEstásSola*), focused on intimate partner violence, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, and sexual violence. Information to raise awareness about the issue and publicize support services and other resources was broadcast on social media, radio and television. A printable poster was also sent to the city's neighboring communities to be placed in highly visible places. All the campaigns' materials were also made publicly available so that communities and other organizations could use them as well.[56]
- In **Houston, United States,** city and county leaders together launched a campaign website – #noCOVIDabuse – where all information related to resources for survivors was systematically compiled. The website includes messages of support to survivors; information about resources for shelter and temporary hotel lodging, safety planning and domestic violence services through program partners; and specific instructions on what to do to be safe at home (e.g., "If things escalate, stay in a room with quick access to an exit"; "Keep your phone fully charged"; "Give your children, friend or family members a 9-1-1 code word"; "Know where weapons are stored in the house").[57] The website also provides links to resources and printable versions of the campaign's key information, in English and Spanish. It also has suggestions for how citizens in general can engage in and support the campaign, for example by offering video script samples for making a personal video to disseminate or templates for taking a selfie with the campaign's logo.
- In **Phoenix, United States,** the city's Family Advocacy Center, the Phoenix Police Department and the Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence joined forces to spread awareness of the resources available for survivors through the "Domestic Violence Help!" campaign.[58]
- In **Hawassa City**, **Ethiopia,** safe city messages on prevention of and response to domestic violence and sexual violence were shared with religious authorities for community outreach.[59]

4. Control Environmental Factors That May Exacerbate VAW Risks

External factors that influence the risks of VAW should be understood and mitigated, including by local governments. Evidence shows, for example, that a woman is five times more likely to be killed by a domestic abuser when a firearm is accessible.[60] The well-documented link between firearms and VAW has led to specific recommendations to prevent an increase in VAW through arms control during the pandemic.

The United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNLIREC) has provided several specific recommendations[61] to governments, including: (i) to improve data collection on crime (by including more variables of interest) and ensure better coordination and sharing of official data between the various relevant institutions (police, public ministry, forensic institutions); (ii) to cross reference data on records of perpetrators of domestic violence and VAW to cancel firearm licenses; (iii) to suspend or revoke firearm licenses of potential perpetrators of VAW, disable permit applications, and confiscate arms and ammunitions when necessary; (iv) to include protocols for registering the presence of firearms in the home in complaint handling and risk assessment procedures; and (v) to ensure that arms control measures are included in initiatives to address VAW during the pandemic.

The European Union-supported Armed Violence Monitoring Platform, which detected new incidents of family violence involving the use of firearms in southeast Europe right after lockdown measures started

to be enforced in 2020, has also called for increased alertness and response to the risks related to the presence of firearms at home.[62]

Amid the surge in gun and ammunition purchases in the United States during the pandemic, NGO [Everytown for Gun Safety](#) has recommended that law enforcement be given enough time to complete background checks and that essential community gun violence intervention programs continue and be provided with the needed support.[63] Others have recommended awareness-raising on safe and controlled storage of firearms in the home.[64] During the pandemic, U.S. state courts in **Oregon, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts,** among other states, have allowed extreme risk laws filings and proceedings to be carried out remotely when possible. These laws, which are also referred to as "red flag" laws, allow family members or law enforcement to petition a court for an order to temporarily prevent someone in crisis from accessing guns.[65]

Substance abuse is also a well-known risk factor for intimate partner violence. The potential increase in the consumption of alcohol and other substances during quarantine as a coping mechanism has led some governments to impose restrictions on alcohol sales in an attempt to reduce the risks of VAW/C during confinement. For example, in **Nuuk**, capital of **Greenland**, alcohol sales were banned in the beginning of quarantine.[66]

5. Consider Different Forms of VAW Beyond Intimate Partner Violence

Although most of the evidence on increased risk factors and the incidence of VAW have focused on intimate partner violence, the increased risk factors for women in public spaces in the context of the pandemic should also be considered by city governments. In addition, local authorities should be aware and ready to respond to other forms of VAW, such as human trafficking and exploitation and abuse by state agents.

Measures to ensure greater vigilance in public areas with higher incidence of VAW, and especially in public transportation, have been implemented and should be considered. Partnerships with the private sector for free or discounted transportation services may also be recommended. Examples of initiatives of this kind being implemented are listed below:

- In **Valparaiso**, **Chile,** the Safe City and Safe Public Spaces Initiative, in collaboration with the Mayor's office and UN Women, is promoting bystander interventions around empty buildings to prevent VAW in public spaces during COVID-19.[67] Valparaiso's Regional Ministerial Secretary of Women and Gender Equity also launched a contingency plan against gender-based violence during COVID-19 and called for the support of community residents to report cases.[68]
- In **Colombo**, **Sri Lanka**, the government is working with the World Bank to gather data, including crowd-sourced data, to identify areas of higher risk of victimization and implement evidence-based policies to enhance safety in public transport and other public spaces. It is also working with the UN to promote public awareness regarding women's safety in public spaces.[69]
- In **Bogotá** and **New York,** alternative safe and autonomous transportation options for women, such as cycling, have been encouraged.[70]
- In **India,** different cities such as **Mumbai** and **Delhi** have been using the Safecity app to highlight sexual harassment and assault trends in public spaces and provide support to victims. Safecity is a crowd-sourcing platform through which users can anonymously report violent incidents by place, time and type of harassment/violence. The data collected is aggregated into hot spots on a map that indicate trends at a local level, which people can then use to improve their own situational awareness, engage

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communities to take action, and make representations to institutions such as the police, civic officials or transport authorities for safer spaces and better security. The app also offers access to helplines, hospitals and police information in a user-friendly format.[71]

Specific measures should also be taken to address the increased risks of human trafficking, even in the absence of data showing increases in prevalence. Combating human trafficking should remain a priority of national and local governments, law enforcement, philanthropists and the private sector, and its risks should be included in awareness-raising initiatives.[72] Recommended measures include: (i) providing protection and assistance through essential services for human trafficking victims, regardless of documentation status; (ii) training staff and volunteers in all sectors handling VAW and trafficking, ensuring the provision of safe referrals; (iii) ensuring that migrants, including irregular migrant workers and displaced people, are included in preparedness and response plans and activities and that support is based on the criterion of vulnerability, not legal status;[73] and (iv) prioritizing livelihood interventions targeted at those at higher risk of trafficking and exploitation (e.g., female workers in the informal market, women dependent on their work for immigration/residency status, and workers who live with their employer, among others).[74]

The initiatives described below provide examples of both government and non-government led initiatives being implemented that could help to prevent human trafficking:
- Cities have been engaging in international advocacy to improve the lives and ensure protection of migrants and refugees during the pandemic. The Mayors Migration Council Leadership Board, which includes mayors of cities as diverse as Amman, Freetown, Milan, Kampala and São Paulo, called for a global COVID response inclusive of migrants and refugees.[75] The pledge included a commitment to take action to ensure safe, equitable access to services regardless of migration status, including healthcare and economic relief; to empower migrants and refugees to be part of the solution to COVID-19, including through the regularization of immigrant essential workers; and to combat misinformation, racism and xenophobia.
- City governments have also provided positive examples of inclusive and human-rights-based policies towards migration, which can help to prevent trafficking and exploitation.[76] Mayors are increasingly reaching across borders to help one another achieve common goals, as demonstrated by the Mayors Dialogue on Growth and Solidarity initiative, focused on improving human mobility. The initiative is composed of 20 cities across Europe and Africa. One concrete action resulting from this work includes a partnership between Milan and Freetown to support the Milan fashion industry's investment in Freetown talent.
- Some nongovernmental organizations and multi-stakeholder coalitions of businesses, governments, civil society and academia are working with online platforms to create new opportunities in the tech business for survivors, while developing tech-based solutions to help prevent human trafficking and improve understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on human trafficking.[77] For instance, AnnieCannons has created long-term employment solutions for trafficking survivors in tech-based jobs that could be expanded during COVID-19. Based in California, the organization has established relationships with local shelters and case management providers to receive referrals.[78]

The potential increase in abuse by law enforcement agents and the army, who in some countries and cities have been charged with the task of enforcing lockdown and social distancing measures, also requires special attention. In the context of economic and social stress caused by the pandemic, vulnerable areas with persistent inequality and already deteriorated social cohesion may see an increase in public disorder and a consequent increase in public space militarization. Women are often more

exposed to psychological, sexual and physical abuse and torture by state agents, especially those in the most vulnerable groups, such as LGBTQ+, women with unstable housing, migrants, refugees and those with disabilities. Authorities should guarantee immediate and impartial investigation when these cases emerge and train their forces in charge of patrolling to prevent abuses from happening.[79]

Finally, the increase in online and ICT-facilitated violence has also led to the design or strengthening of policies to prevent this specific form of violence. An increase in online violence may prevent victims from accessing services that have been offered digitally during the pandemic, from legal/judicial services to school and groceries. By contrast, ensuring women's safe and inclusive access to the internet may contribute to increased women's participation online and reduce the gender digital divide. Practices in this area have included: (i) disseminating information on how to report cases of online VAW and access services; (ii) awareness-raising and training; and (iii) ensuring user privacy and safety. In order to prevent a further escalation of different forms of online VAW and promote women's online inclusion, governments should: (i) include online violence prevention in COVID-19 response plans and programs focused on VAW; (ii) strengthen law enforcement and justice officers' capacity to address online violence through a gender lens; (iv) provide and widely disseminate information to internet users on how to report cases and access services online during COVID-19; and (v) engage women's rights organizations in the development of guidance on safe and inclusive ICTs for women and girls.[80]

The following initiatives are examples of efforts to address online VAW:
- In **El Alto, Bolivia,** the city is developing simple communications material on the impacts of online violence and how to report it.[81]
- The global Take Back the Tech! campaign shares information and creates collective knowledge related to women and ICT, providing capacity building and education, producing media alternatives, networking and disseminating practices from different countries.[82]
- The Jigsaw[83] platform is undertaking research and developing technology to address violence and harassment online against women.

Transversal Principles of VAW Response and Preparedness

In addition to the overall policy trends and recommendations described in the previous section, there are a few general principles and suggestions that city leaders should consider when planning their immediate, medium-term and long-term responses to VAW in the context of COVID-19.

First, all emergency response and preparedness planning should specifically include measures to prevent VAW. While the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caught the world off guard, there are now enough lessons and evidence to help city officials plan ahead. The recommendations discussed in this brief ideally would be included in medium- and long-term local strategic planning and resources secured to ensure the readiness of response and protection systems. Plans should include training personnel dealing with VAW in specialized and non-specialized services on how to respond in a context of emergency where VAW rates can quickly escalate. Protocols also need to be in place for how these services should continue to function safely for survivors and workers in emergency situations. It is also crucial to have strategies developed to disseminate information about service hours of operation. Finally, investments must consider women's safety in public spaces, including those repurposed for health and food security and temporary shelter during the emergency period.[84]

Second, women should be involved in every phase of decision-making regarding plans and policies to combat the adverse impacts of COVID-19,[85] especially those related to VAW. The presence of women in policy-making has been shown to result in the enactment of more gender-sensitive policies[86] and women's leadership in local government to result in better outcomes related to safety and security of marginalized groups.[87] Women's groups are also actively responding to the pandemic crisis in several areas where women have been impacted. Their leadership, views and innovations on design and delivery methods should be part of response programs and policies.[88] The views of those groups mostly affected by the pandemic, such as female health workers, migrants, refugees and informal sector workers should be taken into consideration in order for policy actions to adequately meet their needs.[89] In the medium and longer term, local governments should consider implementing strategies to meaningfully increase women's voice and agency in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies, for example through the promotion of gender quotas at the local administration; targeted trainings in political literacy for women; and the provision of increased financial resources for organizations working on VAW at the community level.[90]

Third, local governments should establish coordination mechanisms with a specific focus on women's safety, involving all relevant sectors, such as health, security, social assistance, economic development and transport. These authorities should gather all relevant sex-disaggregated data – following ethical guiding principles of data collection and exchange, and prioritizing existing administrative systems while social isolation and quarantine measures are still in place – in order to assess not only impacts on VAW but also specific vulnerabilities of women in the pandemic context, which should then inform responses. Partnerships with civil society and community-based organizations should also be strengthened during the crisis, ensuring that VAW community-based prevention efforts will continue if there are safe alternatives to do so (e.g., through radio, television, or faith and community leaders). Multi-sectoral partnerships with those actors, as well as women's organizations, the private sector and academia, should also foster knowledge production and exchange, community mobilization and the design of more comprehensive policies to promote women's resilience.

Conclusions

COVID-19 increased several risks to women and girls. At the same time, the pandemic became an opportunity to significantly enhance women's policies and build the necessary resilience to prevent increases in VAW in the long term. Awareness of the scope of risks facing women increased dramatically, leading to higher concern and potentially more public support for investments in this area. The pandemic also exposed gaps in the provision of protection, response and prevention services and programs, indicating areas that should be prioritized and leading to innovative policy-making. Also, despite the enormous diversity in settings, which prohibit general prescriptions, the policy trends show that several of those policies were adapted in cities of different sizes, cultures and income levels.

This crisis could therefore enable improvements to women's safety in the long run, helping to build resilience and to ensure safer cities for women and girls in any emergency context. Regardless of the level of decentralization and autonomy, city governments are crucial players on this front. Cities should be ready to respond to these increased risks and raise awareness about women and girls' safety and health during the pandemic, with technical capacity and resources allocated to this issue.[91] Local authorities should also be diligent in documenting and sharing their good practices and lessons learned from actions implemented so far, helping to promote continuous learning across contexts and ensuring women's participation and agency throughout these processes. Finally, future research on this topic

should be more action oriented, prioritizing the links between existing evidence on policies that are known to be more effective to prevent and reduce VAW in emergency contexts. [92] This includes identifying the gaps to fill to ensure better responses in the future, including specific discussions on government and donors' financing, coordination and partnerships.

Appendix 1. Available Tools to Prepare for and Respond to Increased Risks of VAW During COVID-19

With the increased risk of violence against women and girls during the pandemic, several tools can help governments and other stakeholders provide better support to survivors. These include:

i. Digital Services Toolkit: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic[93] provides information on the use of tools such as online chat, text messaging and video calls to support survivors of VAW, from how to develop capacity to how to choose a vendor or platform. The resources target programs and agencies focused on domestic violence, sexual assault and victim services.

ii. Guidelines for Mobile and Remote Gender-Based Violence Service Delivery[94] offers detailed guidance on how to establish and provide mobile and remote services to survivors of VAW, with details on how to handle case management, psychosocial support and referrals.

iii. COVID 19: Resources to Address Gender-Based Violence Risks[95] is a webpage that provides key resources to support the integration of VAW risk mitigation into COVID-19 response.

iv. Identifying & Mitigating Gender-Based Violence Risks Within the COVID-19 Response[96] notes key, sector-specific GBV risks that are likely to occur and/or be exacerbated during the COVID-19 response, along with recommendations on how to mitigate these risks.

v. Remote-Offered Skills Building Application (Rosa)[97] provides continuous training to staff working on VAW, including key content on VAW knowledge, case management, communication and attitude skills. It also offers a space for facilitated remote discussions and distance supervision.

vi. Developing Key Messages for Communities on Gender-Based Violence[98] provides preliminary guidance on how to implement effective communications at the community level, combining different formats for different audiences (survivors, women, adolescents, LGBTQI, men and so on).

vii. Guidance Note 4: How Can VAW Prevention Programs Adapt?,[99] developed by international NGO Raising Voices, offers a series of ideas to organizations on how to continue with community-based prevention activities safely while also mitigating increased risks of COVID-19 for women.

viii. Not Just Hotlines and Mobile Phones: GBV Service Provision During COVID-19,[100] a brief produced by UNICEF, provides a series of alternative entry points for survivors of VAW with no- or low- tech options to alert trustworthy stakeholders and access support services.

ix. Guidance Notes to Support Activist Organizations in Adapting and Sustaining VAW Prevention Activities During COVID-19[101] provides recommendations on how organizations should continue to implement prevention efforts in a safe environment, including through online means and traditional media (e.g., radio or television) and through key stakeholders (e.g., faith and local leaders, community organizers, teachers/school administrators, public health officials and so on).

x. Handbook to Address Violence Against Women in and Through the Media[102] shows how visual, audio, print and online media can help continue to raise the visibility of VAW. Launched prior to the COVID-19 crisis, its guidance may still help show how the media can advance the understanding that the risk factors that drive violence are exacerbated in the context of a pandemic.

xi. United States' National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)[103] discusses how to safely protect VAW survivors and other vulnerable groups, with specific recommendations regarding confidentiality and mitigation of risk in communications and community engagement.

xii. Spain's Guidelines for Women Experiencing VAW During COVID-19[104] (in Spanish) provides detailed information on how women experiencing violence during the pandemic can access psychological, judicial and support services, with specific guidance for women living with their abusers and for those not living with abusers.

xiii. Peru's Guidelines for Awareness-Raising[105] (in Spanish) discusses how to build awareness of VAW risks during the pandemic.

xiv. [RESPECT Women: Preventing Violence Against Women](#) provides guidance based on the most up-to-date evidence for medium- and longer-term VAW prevention efforts. This guidance may be useful, as risk factors for VAW may be enhanced after the pandemic due to loss of income and livelihoods and the effects of potential increases of abuse at home and in public spaces.

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