



Protection and support to victims of crime during COVID-19 pandemic - exchange of good practices on how to deal with victims of domestic violence, cybercrime and hate crime

(Information collected by DG JUST)

DISCLAIMER: This document raises attention to the situation of victims of crime during COVID-19 pandemic and presents examples of selected good practices. The presented measures serve as non-exhaustive examples and are included for information purpose only. This general document in no way binds the Member States or the European Commission. This disclaimer adds to the general disclaimer available at https://e-justice.europa.eu/content_legal_notice-365-en.do?init=true.

The protection and support of victims is a pressing issue during COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the situation of victims of domestic violence is aggravated by social distancing and isolation during periods of confinement.

Member States are encouraged to take special measures of support and protection for victims of domestic violence within their **national COVID-19 emergency schemes**. In particular, it is crucial to ensure effective access to on- and off-line support services, including psychological aid and other social services. It is also crucial to ensure physical protection of these victims.

Several media outlets have reported an alarming increase in domestic violence in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in France, reports of domestic violence increased by 32%¹. In Spain, the emergency number for domestic violence received 18% more calls in the first two weeks of lockdown than in the same period a month earlier². In Belgium, a three-fold increase has been reported in calls to the listening service of the Collective Against Family Violence and Exclusion³.

The Commission has published information on support for victims of domestic violence on a dedicated COVID-19 page⁴. The European Institute for Gender Equality has created a COVID-19 page that includes information for victims of gender-based violence⁵. The Council of Europe also has a dedicated page on women's rights and the COVID-19

¹ European Women's Lobby policy brief (https://womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/ewl_policy_brief_on_covid-19_impact_on_women_and_girls-2.pdf)

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52216966>

⁴ https://e-justice.europa.eu/content_impact_of_the_covid19_virus_on_the_justice_field-37147-en.do

⁵ <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-gender-equality/gender-based-violence>

pandemic⁶. Victim support organisations, such as Victim Support Europe, have also been setting up dedicated pages on COVID-19⁷.

Below are some examples of good practices on how to ensure support and protection to victims of domestic violence during the pandemic situation. This is a non-exhaustive list.

How to communicate with victims during the pandemic situation?

Member States are encouraged *to develop awareness raising campaigns*, to ensure that victims of domestic violence have the necessary information about the services that they can access for emergency protection and support. Such campaigns are already taking place in several Member States⁸. It is particularly important to ensure that those persons who may be in contact with victims of domestic violence at the time of confinement are in a position to inform about the available support and protection. In this regard, special attention should be paid to health workers, (including pharmacists), supermarket workers or postal workers. In addition, police officials should be particularly vigilant to the already reported and new cases of domestic violence.

Information about the existing on-line websites and helplines on support to victims of domestic violence should be widely spread. For example, information on closest support services for victims of domestic violence: <https://www.wave-network.org/find-help/>.

How to report crime?

During times of confinement, victims of domestic violence must have the possibility to report crime /in an easy way. This must also include simple ways to contact and alert the police, such as text messages or online chats, and the use of code words with doctors, pharmacists or post office workers. It is essential that justice systems continue to work during the pandemic to ensure that abusers continue to be prosecuted and that individuals convicted of violence against women are kept in detention, if needed. Suspension or delay of court proceedings can cause significant distress to victims. It is important to ensure that emergency barring orders, restraining and protection orders against the perpetrators continue to be issued despite the lockdown measures (for example France).

Examples of good practice on improving communication with victims and crime reporting include the following:

- In Spain and France, information campaigns have been launched to advertise alert mechanisms for women to seek help in pharmacies.
- In Ireland, policing services are reaching out to former victims of domestic violence to ensure their wellbeing.
- In Germany, a “survival kit” on how to avoid violence has been published.

How to organise support and protection?

⁶ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/women-s-rights-and-covid-19>

⁷ <https://victimsupport.eu/covid-19-information/>

⁸ For example in France, Italy, Portugal, Spain

It is vital to include essential services to address domestic violence in preparedness and response plans for COVID-19 pandemic, fund them, and identify ways to make them accessible in the context of social distancing measures. Member States are encouraged to declare shelters as essential services, set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and grocery stores and create safe ways for women to seek support. Member States are encouraged to keep shelters and emergency housing available to all women and children who need to leave their homes for protection, and to facilitate access to these services.

No victim should feel discouraged from contacting support services due to the pandemic.

Moreover, health facilities should identify and provide information about services available locally for domestic violence victims. As advised by WHO, the use of e-Health and telemedicine in safely addressing violence against women must urgently be explored.

It is essential that Member States ensure adequate funding and investment in online services and support services. Digital contact with victims will be very important during this time, but it can be difficult for victims to call while at home with their abusers. It is vital to ensure that hotlines offer services via online chat or texting to ensure victims can seek out help while at home⁹. The COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity for setting up sustainable structures that protect women from violence¹⁰.

See below examples of good practices to victims of domestic violence during COVID-19 include:

Include support and protection of victims within national pandemic emergency schemes

- *Allow victims of domestic violence to seek help from support services.* In Italy, women who are victims of domestic violence are allowed to leave their homes and go to the nearest support service, without being reported and sanctioned by police authorities for violating strict confinement measures¹¹.
- *Declare support and protection for victims of domestic violence an essential service.* In Spain, services for support and protection of victims of domestic violence are declared an essential service so that they can keep running.
- *Establishment of a “social protection umbrella” for the women's shelter and women's counselling infrastructure.* In Germany, the government's social protection assistance package includes instruments to provide social service providers with financial protection against the coronavirus, which explicitly create safety nets for violence protection facilities¹².

⁹ <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>

¹⁰ <https://www.preventionweb.net/experts/oped/view/71320>

¹¹ https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/21/news/elena_bonetti_se_subite_violenza_chiedete_aiuto_andate_al_centro_antiviolenza_e_nessuno_vi_multera_-251867069/?ref=RHPPLF-BH-I251880435-C8-P3-S1.8-T1&refresh_ce

¹² <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/aktuelles/presse/pressemittelungen/bundesministerin-giffey-verabredet-mit-den-bundeslaendern-konkrete-hilfsmassnahmen-fuer-frauen-in-der-corona-krise/154100>

- *Increase funding.* In Austria, financial support is provided for women and girls affected by violence in times of crisis¹³. In France, one million euros was directed to domestic violence support services.

Go digital

- *Create an e-mail service/web-chat service/helpline for victims of domestic violence.* In Portugal, an email service was created to reply to questions and requests for support related to domestic violence¹⁴. In Austria, the government introduced a 24-hour helpline for victims of gender-based violence¹⁵. In Germany, the helpline for victims of domestic violence continues to provide advice 24 hours in 18 languages. Information about Member States' helplines for victims of violence is available at https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/helplines_web_final_17042020.png.
- *Develop special mobile applications.* In Italy, a special application has been developed in order to provide women the opportunity to get immediately in touch with law enforcement authorities¹⁶.

Involve the civil society

- *Offer alternative solutions to shelters to allow victims of domestic violence to quarantine in safety.* In several Member States, governments subsidize hotel rooms where victims can quarantine in safety¹⁷. In Spain, new space for emergency shelters has also been made available in response to the crisis. In Germany, authorities are encouraged to find pragmatic solutions for COVID-19-related shortages in shelters, such as short-term renting of hotels and holiday apartments.

Rise of certain forms of crime during the pandemic situation - cybercrime and hate crime

Member States should be also particularly vigilant to rise of certain types of crime during the pandemic situation, and to ensure that support and protection is provided to its victims.

According to EUROPOL, COVID-19 pandemic brings new opportunities for criminals to abuse the fears and working conditions of citizens¹⁸. The number of cyber-attacks is significant and expected to increase further. With a number of people teleworking from

¹³ <https://www.frauenring.at/opferschutz-corona-krise-ausgebaut>

¹⁴ <https://www.cig.gov.pt/2020/03/covid-19-novo-email-apoio-na-area-da-violencia-domestica/>

¹⁵ <https://orf.at/stories/3157761/>.

¹⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/european-countries-develop-new-ways-tackle-domestic-violence-during-coronavirus-n1174301>

¹⁷ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/european-countries-develop-new-ways-tackle-domestic-violence-during-coronavirus-n1174301>

¹⁸ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/pandemic-profiteering-how-criminals-exploit-covid-19-crisis>.

home, the chances for cybercriminals to exploit opportunities¹⁹ and vulnerabilities have multiplied.

EUROPOL has prepared prevention and awareness tips²⁰ to help the general public stay cyber safe. During the times of increased risks, it is particularly important to use parental control to safeguard child's online activity, secure electronic devices with passwords, PIN or biometric information and buy from reliable online vendors (after checking individual ratings).

More information about staying safe online: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/digital_en.

The Fundamental Rights Agency reports an increase in most EU Member States in incidents of racism, xenophobia and intolerance targeted at certain national or ethnic communities, which are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic²¹.

Member State efforts regarding victims of hate crime should aim at fostering reporting of hate crime, improving accurate investigation of bias motivations and providing support to these victims.

¹⁹ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic>.

²⁰ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/public-awareness-and-prevention-guides/make-your-home-cyber-safe-stronghold>.

²¹ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/covid19-rights-impact-april-1>