

# Domestic abuse and Covid-19: Epidemic of violence in times of a pandemic

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Almost one third of women worldwide have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their intimate partner and more than one third of all murders of women (38%) may be classified as femicide. Against this background, the World Health Organisation has long recognised gender based violence in general, and intimate partner (or domestic violence) in particular as a public health problem<sup>1</sup>. It is beyond doubt that intimate partner violence is affecting a disproportionately large number of women globally and that, as such, this form of violence is an epidemic<sup>2</sup> that is killing hundreds of women every day<sup>3</sup>.

A too large number of women and their children have to face, on a daily basis, the stress of sharing their often confined living space with their oppressor, living in fear of a situation that might trigger the dreaded violence. This is already very difficult when the offender is only spending a limited time with the family, but it gets exponentially more dangerous when they get no other 'outlet' – but their own family members, because of a society wide lockdown.

Therefore, it is no wonder that we at Victim Support Europe were alarmed on behalf of those vulnerable victims with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the announcement of strict confinement measures in response.

Understanding the impact of the pandemic on the needs of victims of domestic violence is still a work in progress and it will take some time to fully understand the sufferings caused to vulnerable victims during this complex time. Early data indicates that indeed, our fears were justified – the pandemic did increase the incidence of domestic violence. In France, for example, during the two months of confinement (mid-March to mid-May) the number of helpline calls to the 116 006 helpline related to domestic violence have tripled in comparison to the same period from the previous year, while the local branches of France Victimes registered an increase of 57% in victims of domestic violence. Interestingly, the more the lockdown lasted, more victims were exposed to violence at home – in the last three weeks of

**116 006 - Helpline for All Victims of Crime**

As of June 2020, the 116 006 number is operational in:

Austria	France
Belgium	Germany
Czech Republic	Greece
Denmark	Hungary
Estonia	Ireland
Finland	Italy
France	Latvia
Germany	Lithuania
Greece	Luxembourg
Hungary	Malta
Ireland	Netherlands
Italy	Poland
Latvia	Portugal
Lithuania	Romania
Luxembourg	Slovakia
Malta	Slovenia
Netherlands	Spain
Poland	Sweden
Portugal	United Kingdom
Romania	
Slovakia	
Slovenia	
Spain	
Sweden	
United Kingdom	

A EUROPEAN-WIDE FREE NUMBER DESIGNED TO OFFER VICTIMS OF CRIME DIRECT ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

116 006 is the European number of victims of crime. It is a toll-free number where all victims of all crimes can seek support and information. 116 006 is currently active in 13 EU Member States

<sup>1</sup> WHO, see at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

<sup>2</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary defines epidemic as an occurrence which is affecting or tending to affect a disproportionately large number of individuals within a population, community, or region at the same time. See Merriam Webster Dictionary at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epidemic>

<sup>3</sup> A total of 87,000 women were intentionally killed in 2017. More than half of them (58%) 50,000— were killed by intimate partners or other family members, meaning that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day. United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide: Gender-related killing of women and girls*, 2019, available at: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet\\_5.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf)

lockdown, France Victimes registered 60% increase in reports of domestic violence<sup>4</sup>. Similar trends were recorded in many other VSE member organisations.

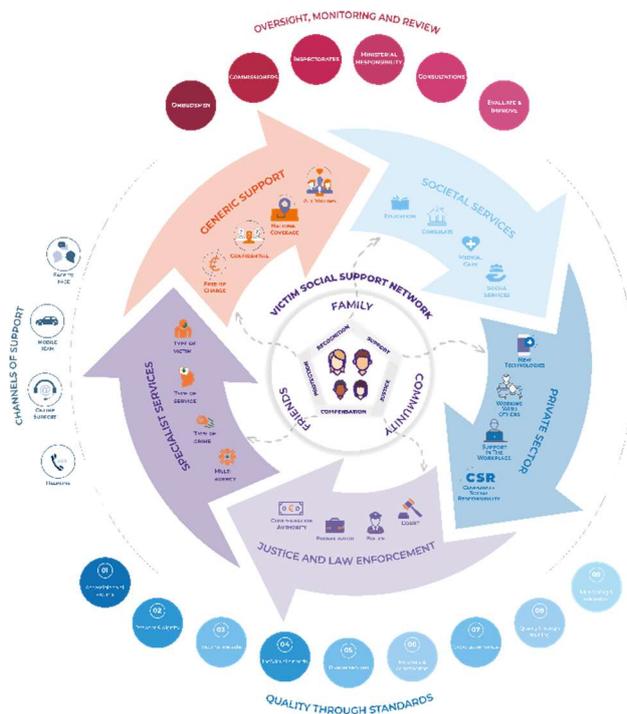


Image: VSE's vision of a national victim support system<sup>5</sup>

To support victims of crimes in general, and victims of domestic violence in particular, it is necessary to properly understand their needs and to cater to them. What is crucial, in this regard, is that there is a properly developed system of support services. This means that there should be a nation-wide system of generic support services in combination with high quality specialist services. This is not only a policy recommendation but also a legal obligation stemming from the EU Victims' Rights Directive. Even before the pandemic, there was a concerning lack of available victim support services. The dire need for services only increased with the lockdown. This kept victim support services going even when almost everything else has stopped – once again showing that victim support services are **essential services**, together with grocery shops, public transport and other basic services that keep the basic needs of a society fulfilled.

Having caught wind of the potential increase in crime, in particular in domestic violence, we at VSE were also quick to respond. Early in the lockdown, we created a special Covid-19 page on our website<sup>6</sup>, with a particular emphasis given to victims of domestic abuse and providing some practical tools to help support victims. We also registered some good practices. In Brussels, for example, the authorities have requisitioned a hotel with the aim to provide temporary shelter to victims of domestic violence<sup>7</sup>. The European Parliament also opened its doors to homeless women in Brussels, many of whom were victims of domestic abuse<sup>8</sup>. In France and Spain, pharmacies encouraged victims to use code words to alert pharmacists about ongoing domestic violence<sup>9</sup>. For the umpteenth time in human history, we evolved with the situation and showed that where there(?) is a will, there is a way.

<sup>4</sup> France victimes, VSE's founding member, brings together 130 local branches who support victims of crimes throughout France. More information about France victimes and their response to Covid-19 pandemic can be found here: <https://www.france-victimes.fr/index.php/categories-inavem/105-actualites/973-violences-conjugales-13085-victimes-accompagnees-durant-le-confinement>

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed understanding of what it takes to set up a comprehensive national victim support system, see Victim Support Europe, VOciare synthesis report, available at: [https://victimsupport.eu/activeapp/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/VOCIARE\\_Synthesis\\_Report-web.pdf](https://victimsupport.eu/activeapp/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/VOCIARE_Synthesis_Report-web.pdf), p. 89 to 99.

<sup>6</sup> <https://victimsupport.eu/covid-19-information/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.brusselstimes.com/brussels/105172/brussels-hotel-to-shelter-domestic-violence-victims-amid-coronavirus-quarantine/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52500342>

<sup>9</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/02/europe/domestic-violence-coronavirus-lockdown-intl/index.html>

However, just like the epidemic of domestic violence, the Covid-19 pandemic appears to be far from over. While there is significant investment and the commitment to find a viable long-lasting solution for the former – in the form of a vaccine and/or treatment, the latter will be more difficult to fix.

We need to keep reminding ourselves that for many women and their children their own homes are more dangerous than the killer virus, and that even after the global outbreak of a deadly disease has been brought under control, these vulnerable victims will continue to live in fear for their lives on a daily basis. Domestic violence kills 50,000 women every year and, if that is not an argument convincing enough – it also causes enormous losses for the economy<sup>10</sup>. We as society need to do all we can to eradicate the violence at the place where the person should feel safest – at home. We need to be ready to fight it as determinedly as any other epidemic that threatens the life as we know it – because it is exactly that – an epidemic that threatens our public health.

We are only as good as how we treat our most vulnerable. We have a lot of room to improve and we are already very late in making things better. We owe it to all 50,000 women killed every year and the hundreds of thousands of those women and their children who have feared for their lives before and during Covid-19 and who will continue to do so unless we act. It is on us.

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<sup>10</sup> According to the US Center for Disease Control, only in the US the lifetime economic cost associated with medical services for intimate partner violence (IPV) related injuries, lost productivity from paid work, criminal justice and other costs, was \$3.6 trillion. The cost of IPV over a victim's lifetime was \$103,767 for women and \$23,414 for men. See: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/fastfact.html>.