

## COVID-19 and Gender Violence: Domestic Violence Status and Response\*

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### Summary

- There is anxiety about the likelihood of escalating domestic violence around the globe, as the activities performed in public spaces have diminished due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the amount of time spent at home is rising. There is also a belief that the policy responses for victims of domestic violence have become more difficult to implement due to social distancing and movement restrictions.
- The international community, such as the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Women's Organization, is working on many guidelines to rescue and support the women victims of violence during the COVID-19 outbreak. They are also making efforts to strengthen the support for victims whose situations have become more difficult during the COVID-19 epidemic abroad.
- In Korea, in a situation where COVID-19 is spreading, counseling is provided for the victims of domestic violence, shelters are continuously operating, and there are efforts to provide money for emergency disaster assistance. However, in reality, difficulties are occurring in relation to sending those with suspected infections to the relevant shelters, separating the offenders from the victims, and providing follow-up care for victims.

- Meanwhile, as COVID-19 continues spreading over the long term, the possibility of intensifying domestic violence is becoming a reality at the sites that assist the victims of domestic violence. In a situation where social distancing and non-contact activities are increasing, and the rate of going out is reduced, systems to effectively support the victims of violence are not in place.
- We will look at the policies related to gender violence in the environment where COVID-19 is spreading, focusing on domestic violence. In addition, after reviewing the policy responses from a gender-based viewpoint, we would like to suggest some directions to improve these policies.

\* The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and the Korea Institute for Women's Policy held four sessions of "Relay Discussions for Women and Families Related to COVID-19." The purpose was to understand the current status of women's employment and the income crisis, changes in family life, and the domestic violence issues caused by COVID-19, and to find out how to respond in terms of the country's policies. This issue is based on the contents and discussions presented at "The 4th COVID-19 Relay Debate According to the Areas of Women and Families" held under the theme of "COVID-19 and Gender Violence: Current Status of Domestic Violence and How to Respond."

## The dark side of the COVID-19 pandemic and examples of overseas policy responses

- Due to the social distancing to prevent COVID-19 infections and the restrictions on going out, the activities taking place in public spaces have decreased, while the time spent in private areas at home has increased significantly. The international community has expressed concern over the increasing possibility of a further increase of violence, abuse and control in the home (U.N. Women, 2020; UNFPA, 2020; National Human Rights Commission, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).
- Domestic violence has been reported to be on the rise in several countries. However, it has become more difficult for domestic violence victims to request assistance, due to the bans on going out or restrictions on their movement. Support for these victims has also become more difficult.
  - In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights and human rights activists reported that gender-based violence, including domestic violence, is on the rise (UNOHCR, April 15, 2020; National Human Rights Commission of Korea, 2020 re-quoted).

<Table 1> Increasing domestic violence in each country

Country	The response
USA	Results of a survey by NBC News of 22 police agencies in early April 2020 revealed that 18 agencies reported an increase in domestic violence reports compared to the previous month (Kingkade, NBC News, April 5, 2020).
England	After the lockdown, the number of searches for helplines and the website of Refugee, a domestic violence support group, increased sharply (Townsend, The Guardian, April 12, 2020). After the lockdown in England and Wales, the number of domestic violence murders increased over a period of three weeks (Williamson et al., May 15, 2020, The Conversation).
China	The number of domestic violence reports in February 2020 increased by about three times compared to February of the previous year (February 2019: 47 cases → February 2020: 162 cases).
Australia	After the shutdown in the central region, cases of domestic violence increased by up to 25% in the first month (Jonscher and Brash, ABC Alice Springs, June 22, 2020).
Spain	In the first and second weeks of April 2020, the number of helpline consultations increased by 47% compared to the same period in 2019 (Burgen, The Guardian, April 28, 2020).

- [Difficulty in requesting support] It has been pointed out that, for victims of domestic violence isolated with the perpetrators, the perpetrators have greater control and may make it difficult for the victims to seek appropriate assistance (UNOHCR, April 15, 2020; National Human Rights Commission, 2020 re-cited). After the lockdown due to COVID-19, the number of helpline counseling and domestic violence reporting incidents decreased significantly in Italy. Even after the New York City lockdown, the number of domestic violence reports received by the police dropped sharply. In Spain, the number of reports of domestic violence also fell dramatically. It is thought that the isolation of the victims caused by the lockdown made it difficult for these victims to request assistance.
- [Difficulty in supporting victims] In the coronavirus pandemic, the importance of shelters, medical services, police, and the judicial services needed to help victims has been underestimated. In some cases, the provision of services was reduced or abolished, making support for these victims difficult. Also, the victims have had the responsibility to prove they are free from COVID-19 before being admitted to the shelters (UNOHCR, April 15, 2020; National Human Rights Commission, 2020 re-cited).

- International organizations, such as the United Nations Office for Human Rights (UNOHCR) and the U.N. Women's Organization, recognize the need for active rescue efforts for victims of gender-based violence by developing specific countermeasures.
- During the coronavirus pandemic, the United Nations Office of the Supreme Representative of Human Rights guidelines stated that protecting and providing services to victims of gender-based violence victims should be made an essential service. In addition, the guidelines stipulated that people should be exempt from penalties if they violated the restrictions and lockdowns to report or avoid violence (UNOHCR, April 15, 2020; National Human Rights Commission, 2020 re-cited).

### **Guidelines from the United Nations Supreme Representative Office for Human Rights (UNOHCR) on how to respond**

- Services that protect or rescue the victims of gender-based violence are essential.
- Update the counseling referral channels to reflect the changes in good shelters. Keep the updated information available to crucial communities and service providers.
- Related experts, including service providers, should pay attention to the reports received via the counseling request route and should set up a cryptographic message system for reporting domestic violence.
- Secure enough safe shelters for the victims of domestic violence and their children. For women and girls who are unable to enter the shelters due to a suspected COVID-19 infection, take specific measures to isolate them safely.
- Make good use of direct helplines, online chat, and various other support and reporting tools that can be accessed securely, even though remotely.
- If domestic violence is foreseen based on a variety of available methods, raise the awareness of the potential victims and witnesses about how to get or ask for help in advance, and explain how eyewitnesses should respond.
- Evict abusers from the home and ensure immediate and proactive action is taken by the judiciary to protect victims. If the perpetrator is released, take steps to ensure the safety of the victims of gender-based violence.
- Exempt from punishment those who have violated the lockdown to report or avoid violence.
- Continue to ensure medical, psychosocial and economic support for the survivors. Ensure safe treatment and management of the victims of sexual violence, especially the victims of marital rape.
- Consult with women's groups, LGBTI+ organizations, shelters and counseling managers to develop measures to prevent and respond to cases of violence.

1) Cristoferi and Fonte, Reuters, 2020 4. 6.; Goldin, Time, 2020. 3. 18.

2) Southall, The New York Times, 2020. 4. 17.; Burgen, The Guardian, 2020. 4. 28

- The U.N. Women's Organization has established five areas to support the issue of violence against women amid the COVID-19 pandemic. These areas include: prevention and awareness-raising of violence against women, rapid assessments, access to essential services such as hotlines and shelters, violence against women in the public sphere, and support for women's organizations. (U.N. Women, May 30, 2020). Simultaneously, are national chapters of the U.N. Women's Organization are supporting the women's organizations working to end violence against women as their key partners. Immediate support to local women's organizations is promoted through the "U.N. Trust Fund to End Violence against Women".

### **U.N. Women's Activities to Respond to the COVID-19 pandemic**

- Conduct monitoring and emergency assessments of violence against women and girls (in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Egypt, Fiji, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Malawi, Morocco, Palestine, South Africa, Tonga, Tunisia, and Vanuatu).
- Provide services related to gender violence. Seek support from partners, including the police and law enforcement agencies, to update the protocols and referral routes (in Bolivia, Ecuador, South Africa, Sudan, Trinidad, and Tobago).
- During the lockdown period, cooperate with 85 organizations and churches to support the establishment of the "Emergency GBV Referral System" (in South Africa).
- Provide telephone counseling services for the survivors of gender violence against women in refugee camps. Provide essential hygiene products to hospitals and shelters (in Jordan).

- In major countries: by actively using encryption technology, the authorities are improving the reports of domestic violence and strengthening their proactive responses. They are also promoting measures to enhance victim support services.

- The reporting of victims is being facilitated through passwords when visiting pharmacies, to improve the reporting of domestic violence victims (the "Mask 19" password is used in France and Spain). Alternately, various channels and technologies can be used to send reports in different ways (Spanish location chat service, Italian WhatsApp and mobile app, etc.).
- Given that reporting can be difficult, the relevant authorities are also seeking preemptive measures by proactively contacting all victims who have a history of reporting domestic violence, to check on their situation (Ireland).
- To support victims, pop-up counseling centers are operating in stores nationwide (France), while hotels and convents are being used as shelters for victims (France, Italy).

- A dedicated domestic violence department has been set up under the coronavirus response system (Australia), government support to organizations that support the victims of violence against women has been expanded (France, Ireland), penalties for the perpetrators have been strengthened and the applications for restraint facilitated (Australia), and multiple campaigns against gender-based violence and to actively promote victim support have been implemented (Spain, Ireland, Scotland).

**<Table 2> Best Practices in Each Country's Policy Response to Domestic Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Country	The response
Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Announced a chat service for victims to report incidents that includes location technology.</li> <li>- (Canary Islands) In cases of domestic violence, a password ("Mask 19") is used to request assistance at pharmacies.</li> <li>- Implemented campaigns against gender-based violence and promoted victim support services through online pamphlets.</li> </ul>
France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In the event of domestic violence, a password ("Mask 19") is used to request assistance during a pharmacy visit.</li> <li>- Over 20,000 hotel rooms have been provided as accommodation for victims.</li> <li>- About 20% of stores nationwide operated pop-up counseling centers to support the victims of violence,</li> <li>- Established a support plan of 1 million euros (approximately \$1.1 million) to support groups for the victims of violence against women.</li> </ul>
Italy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A reporting channel has been prepared through message services such as WhatsApp.</li> <li>* It is possible to report domestic violence via a converted mobile application that was developed to report school violence and drug trafficking (with a message or photo).</li> <li>- (Emilia-Romagna Area) By converting a facility used as a convent into a support facility for victims of domestic violence, victims can use the online reservation service (Booking.com) to find women-only accommodation.</li> </ul>
Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Established a domestic violence task force within the Ministry of Local Communities, and guaranteed the use of services in cooperation with the police and service providers.</li> <li>- Allowed electronic monitoring of criminals.</li> <li>- Made it possible for victims to apply for a restraining order online.</li> </ul>
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Proactively responded to all victims who had a history of reporting domestic violence through the "Operation Faoisimh" operated by the police.</li> <li>- The Ministry of Justice allocated 160,000 euros to communities and volunteer organizations.</li> <li>- To support victims, promotions and campaigns were implemented through T.V., radio, and social media advertisements.</li> </ul>
Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Promoted a 24-Hour Victim Support System through a campaign to prevent domestic violence.</li> </ul>

Source: National Human Rights Commission (2020); Kottasová and Donato, CNN, April 6, 2020; France24, March 30, 2020; Cristoferi and Fonte, Reuters, April 6, 2020; Davies and Batha, Swissinfo.ch, March 26, 2020; Shepherd, ABC News, April 14, 2020; Fletcher, RTE News, April 16, 2020; Stafford, Edinburgh Live News, April 11, 2020

## Current status of domestic violence-related policy responses during COVID-19<sup>3)</sup>

- The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family along with the National Police Agency are taking the following measures to provide support for the victims of domestic violence in the absence of a face-to-face environment.
  - [Accident support consultation centers] In response to the spread of COVID-19 and the escalation to the crisis warning stage, there was a notice regarding the closure of facilities, including counseling centers. However, even while the counseling centers were closed and face-to-face services were constrained, non-face-to-face services were strengthened. As the transition occurred from social distancing to living in a distanced manner, guidelines were sent to restart the operation of these facilities at the local governments' discretion (in June).
  - [Victim protection shelters] Living facilities such as shelters and the 24-hour 1366 Center were excluded from the recommendation to close at the end of February. Both the 1366 Center and the living facilities have continued their normal operations. For the victims who need to be admitted to such living facilities, it is possible to enter the facility with support for medical expenses after the diagnosis of a COVID-19 infection.
  - [Emergency disaster subsidies] The victims of domestic violence living in shelters are considered as belonging to separate households, and an emergency disaster subsidy is provided. Guidance is given to the facility managers to apply for this subsidy on behalf of the victims. When an objection to an emergency disaster subsidy is filed, a request is made to the Ministry of Public Administration and Security to ensure that the shelter's local community center is not exposed to a perpetrator of violence.
- At the same time, the situation with infectious diseases during the pandemic has caused the following difficulties.
  - If there is a concern about the recurrence of domestic violence, the victim must be sent to an emergency shelter or facility, but it is difficult to house the victims in shelters if they show symptoms of a suspicious infection, such as a fever. In particular, if the victim is a person suspected of being infectious or is in self-quarantine, admission to the facility is impossible; thus, a problem exists.
  - Due to the risk of COVID-19 infection, measures to separate perpetrators from the victims at the scenes of domestic violence are becoming more cautious and difficult.
  - Due to COVID-19, "non-contact" interaction has become commonplace. As face-to-face activities have been reduced, there are difficulties created in the follow-up services for victims.

3) This section is a summary of some of the discussions between Chae Myung-sook (Women's and Youth Rights Protection Division at the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family) and Park Soon-ki (Inspector in the Domestic Violence Countermeasures Section of the Women's Safety Planning Division, National Police Agency).

## Experience in the field supporting victims of domestic violence during COVID-19 and alternative actions<sup>4)</sup>

- The domestic violence reporting rate in Korea is so low that the reporting rate cannot significantly confirm an increase or decrease in domestic violence. However, in the field, experts can sense that the rate of domestic violence is increasing.
  - Based on counseling statistics from the Korea Women's Hotline, by comparing the ratio of sessions related to domestic violence among the total number of counseling sessions before and after the spread of COVID-19, the rate of domestic violence counseling increased from 26% in January to over 40% in February and March.
  - Staff at domestic violence counseling centers across the country have assessed many requests for family counseling due to an increased rate of conflict and violence resulting from the prolonged COVID-19 situation, combined with increasing homework, school suspension, unemployment, and growing economic problems.
  - In a nationwide examination of Women's Emergency Call 1366, the rate of counseling for damage resulting from domestic violence was 57.6% in 2020. In contrast to a decline in phone consultation rates from April to June during the same period last year, it showed an increasing annual trend. On the other hand, the in-house consultation rate decreased from 8.5% in 2019 to 6.8% in 2020, while the visiting consultation rate dropped from 3.7% in 2019 to 2.0%. It is therefore a possibility that victims are remaining in a situation where they continue to endure damage, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Due to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, we are experiencing an increase in conflict within families. However, a suitable victim support system has not been established.
  - In the case of emotional violence without any evidence of physical violence, there is a tendency that to not recognize this as actual violence. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, under a robust social distancing policy, it has been difficult to go out and working from home has been intensified, so the victims' options are bound to be limited.
  - There have been many times during the COVID-19 pandemic when only telephone counseling has been possible, instead of in-person interviews. Sometimes, even phone counseling has been tricky because the perpetrator is also working from home. Therefore, it is difficult for the victims to report damage or to consult with others over the phone, resulting in an increased sense of isolation. Moreover, due to the implementation of the social distancing policy, the domestic violence counseling centers were closed four times from February 28 to June 12.

4) This section summarizes some of the discussions between Song Lan-hee (Secretary-General of the Korea Women's Hotline), Jeh Oh-bok (Co-Representative of the National Association of Domestic Violence Counseling Centers), and Yang Si-young (General Secretary of the Women's Emergency Call 1366 National Council).



- The shelters continuously operated and sufficient support for quarantine expenses was provided, but in fact, new victims were unable to enter these facilities. In addition, it sometimes seemed unfair that the government divided the shelter residents into temporary living support recipients and non-recipients. It is difficult to determine how much the victims of domestic violence benefited from the emergency disaster subsidies.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, victims have become more isolated and it is difficult for them to receive support. Therefore, the following measures are required: establishing an infrastructure to maintain victim counseling services; strengthening the promotion of related services; improving support systems for safe protection and providing support for victims; strengthening organic cooperation with the police and other associated agencies; strengthening swift punishment for the perpetrators of violence; and ensuring the safety of emergency shelters.
  - In order to improve victim support, first of all, telephone and video counseling services that can replace closed interviews need to be activated. Structural settings for safe phone/video consultations are also required. In addition, in situations where the victims have become isolated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, publicity should be strengthened so that the victims can recognize the possibility of requesting assistance.
  - The system for safeguarding and helping victims of domestic violence needs to be improved. In the case of the emergency shelters under 1366, shared living spaces and multi-person rooms are provided instead of separate areas for each individual, making it difficult to maintain social distancing in a resident's daily life to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Therefore, it is necessary to improve these environments, such as by providing one room per person. Temporary protection could be delivered in temporary police lodgings when the capacity for admission to a shelter facility is exceeded.
  - There is a need for quarantine measures to ensure the safety of emergency system facilities, such as support for 24-hour COVID-19 testing at emergency shelters and social public medical treatment for this purpose. The human rights of the workers in the field should also be considered.
  - It is necessary to effectively manage and monitor families in crisis, by strengthening organic cooperation between 1366, the initial support system for the victims of violence against women, and support organizations such as the police.
  - It is necessary to expand the personal safety measures for victims of domestic violence and to deal with punishments for offenders in a prompt manner. Substantial punishments should be established for the perpetrators, while separating the perpetrator from the victim and providing time for the victim to become stably self-reliant. In addition, as the occurrence domestic violence increases, child abuse may also increase, so support for child counseling services is also necessary.

- Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Korea did not enforce a full lockdown or fully restrict movements. However, working from home, as well as the closing of restaurants and stores, closing schools and social distancing, which were all expanded due to COVID-19, are all matters that could escalate economic difficulties for families and increase the family members' responsibilities, resulting in increased conflict among family members.
- However, there is no data showing how much domestic violence incidents in Korea have increased or decreased. Therefore, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, continuous efforts are required to understand the current status of domestic violence and improve the support for victims. The implementation of comprehensive policies is also required.

## Directions for improving the policies from a gender-based perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic and gender violence

- The COVID-19 pandemic has increased gender-based violence in intimate relationships, such as cases of domestic violence, by increasing the time we have spent living in confined spaces. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a barrier to the existing policies related to gender-based violence. Accordingly, it is necessary to respond to the policies from a gender-based perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic and domestic violence.
- During the ongoing and recurring COVID-19 outbreak, the following policy improvements are needed to prevent domestic violence and to effectively protect and support the victims.
  - Establish an infrastructure for non-face-to-face counseling and reporting to provide support services to victims during the pandemic.
  - Improve the environment in emergency shelters, including providing one room per person for victims to help them quarantine and prevent collective infections. At the public health level, support should be provided for COVID-19 screenings of the residents in these facilities.
  - Enhance access to related reporting and counseling services, to prevent isolation of the victims and to strengthen publicity.
  - In order to separate the victims from the perpetrators, punish the perpetrators quickly and strictly.
  - From a gender-based perspective, the support economic independence of victims through the provision of financial support such as disaster subsidies.
  - Strengthen organic cooperation between the police and the organizations supporting gender violence crisis management and monitoring services.

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