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Call for submissions: COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović, is following closely the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's right to a life free from violence. As she warned in a recent [statement](#) in 27 March 2020, measures to deal with the current health crisis may lead to an increase in domestic violence against women.

As initial police and hotline reports suggested, domestic violence has already surged in many countries, as measures imposing isolation compel some women to be kept at home under the same roof with perpetrators, thus exacerbating women's vulnerability to domestic violence, including femicides. The risk is aggravated by fewer police interventions; the closure of courts and limited access to justice; the closure of shelters and services for victims, and reduced access to reproductive health services.

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women wishes to receive all relevant information on the increase of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from civil society, States, National Human Rights Institutions, international organisations, academia and other stakeholders on the following issues:

SINGAPORE’S RESPONSE ON
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE (COVID-19)

1. To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

Singapore entered its COVID-19 Circuit Breaker¹ period on 7 Apr 2020. The Circuit Breaker lasted until 1 Jun 2020. During this period, there was an increase in referrals and calls related to domestic conflicts and violence.

- Comparing the two weeks before and after the Circuit Breaker started, NGO-run Family Violence Specialist Centres (FVSCs)² saw a 37% increase in calls³.

¹ The Circuit Breaker refers to an elevated set of safe distancing measures to pre-empt the trend of increasing local transmission of COVID-19 in Singapore. These include restrictive movement measures to reduce social interactions.

² These specialist centres are the PAVE Integrated Services for Individual and Family Protection Specialist Centre, and the Care Corner Project StART and TRANS SAFE Family Violence Specialist Centres.

³ COVID-19: MSF keeping ‘close watch’ on domestic abuse cases as more reach out for help over Circuit Breaker period. Channel News Asia. Apr 23, 2020. Retrieved 1 June 2020, from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/covid-19-msf-domestic-abuse-violence-cases-circuit-breaker>

- In April and May, the Singapore Police Force received an average of 485 reports of domestic violence per month⁴, a 25.6% increase from the previous monthly average of 386 cases in February and March⁵, before the Circuit Breaker period.
- The offences include causing hurt, using criminal force, assault, criminal intimidation and wrongful confinement.

2. Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Singapore Government runs several helplines that are available to persons experiencing stress, anxiety, or violence. These include:

- National CARE Hotline. The hotline was set up specifically during the COVID-19 period. It was done in anticipation of the increased demand for help to deal with psychological and emotional issues during the period.
- ComCare Hotline for social assistance

⁴ The number of family violence cases for April and May was 490 and 479 respectively, giving an average of 485 reports per month.

⁵ The number of family violence cases for February and March was 349 and 423 respectively, giving an average of 386 reports per month.

- Agency for Integrated Care Hotline
- Belle, Beyond the Label Helpbot (mental health-related support through a chatbot by the National Council of Social Services)
- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline
- Police Hotline (999). Persons who are unable to speak on the phone may also text 71999, and those who are hearing impaired can dial 70999.
- For non-urgent information, the public can either call 1800-255-0000 or use the online i-Witness Platform.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) also operate several helplines. Members of the public can contact these centres to report violence, or for counselling services. These include, but are not limited to:

Violence and Abuse

- PAVE Integrated Services for Individual and Family Protection
- Trans Safe Centre

- Project StART
- Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre
- HEART @ Fei Yue Child Protection Specialist Centre
- Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) Women's Helpline. AWARE offers online chat service to persons who are unable to call.

Counselling

- Fei Yue's Online Counselling Service
- Heart4U. This is a WhatsApp channel. Individuals seeking help can either text or call this helpline
- Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH) Helpline
- Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) Helpline
- Silver Ribbon Singapore
- TOUCHline (Counselling)

- Care Corner Counselling Centre
- Community Psychology Hub's Online Counselling platform

Government and NGO-run helplines were available throughout the Circuit Breaker period and continue to be available.

There was an increase in the number of calls to both the Government and NGO-run hotlines relating to domestic violence during the start of the Circuit Breaker period.

In the first two weeks of the Circuit Breaker, the Government's adult and child protective services saw a 14% increase in calls. The NGO-run FVSCs also saw a 37% increase in calls, which peaked in the third week of the Circuit Breaker but have since stabilised.

3. Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?

Yes, victims of family violence who need urgent accommodation may stay in alternative accommodation in one of the four crisis shelters, which continue to be open throughout the COVID-19 period, including during the Circuit Breaker period. The four crisis shelters are Anglican Family Centre, Casa Raudha Women Home, Good Shepherd Centre, and

Star Shelter, which is run by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO).

In general, Government-funded Social Service Agencies⁶ (SSAs) have remained open and contactable during the COVID-19 period.

4. Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?

Crisis shelters remain open and there is currently sufficient capacity for family violence survivors who need urgent accommodation.

The Government constantly monitors the utilisation of capacity in each crisis shelter and will provide alternative accommodation for family violence survivors when necessary.

5. Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Family Justice Courts have remained open to protect our citizens throughout the COVID-19 period, including during the Circuit Breaker period. Applications for protection orders against family violence can still be made during this period.

⁶ Government-funded SSAs include 47 Family Service Centres, 2 FVSCs, 1 Integrated Services for Individual and Family Protection Specialist Centre (ISIFPSC), 4 Crisis Shelters, and 2 Child Protection Specialist Centres.

To streamline the process and make it more accessible to persons in need, the Family Justice Courts implemented the Integrated Family Application Management System (“iFAMS”). Applicants have the option to appear before the Magistrate in person or via video link for the court proceedings to be issued against the alleged perpetrator.

6. What are the impacts on women’s access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?

Singapore remains committed to minimising the pandemic’s impact on women’s access to protection and justice. The Family Justice Courts continued to provide access to all persons needing protection from the courts during the Circuit Breaker period, including women.

Where there is imminent danger of family violence, the Magistrate attending to the application may issue an Expedited Order (i.e. a temporary Protection Order) while the application of the Protection Order is still pending. This is to ensure the safety of the applicant.

Applications where allegations are serious in nature, such as those involving physical injuries, are heard by the Court on an urgent basis. During the Circuit Breaker period, hearings were done via video conference from homes or in separate video-link rooms within the Court house, for the safety and health of parties involved and Court staff.

7. What are the impacts of the current restrictive measures and lockdowns on women's access to health services? Please specify whether services are closed or suspended, particularly those focusing on reproductive health.

The Government has ensured that all residents, including women, continued to enjoy access to essential or urgent health services, including reproductive health services, during the Circuit Breaker period. All hospitals and healthcare clinics remain open.

The following essential healthcare services remained open during the Circuit Breaker period⁷:

- Services which would be impacted by time delay, such as:
 - Services for patients with urgent medical conditions; and
 - Some in-vitro-fertilisation services
- Obstetric and child delivery.

Following a temporary suspension during the Circuit Breaker period, which ended on 1 Jun 2020, other specialist outpatient services, medical

⁷ More information could be found in the following link: <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/end-of-circuit-breaker-phased-approach-to-resuming-healthcare-services>.

procedures and allied health services for patients with higher needs have resumed operations⁸.

8. Please provide examples of **obstacles encountered** to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

With families being required to stay home during the Circuit Breaker period, many family members have had to juggle caregiving duties, managing the studies of their children and their own work commitments. This may have given rise to domestic friction and quarrels, and potentially domestic violence.

Being in close physical proximity with abusers may deny victims the space and privacy needed to contact their support network. As a result, victims might not feel empowered to seek help.

The Circuit Breaker period may also have adversely affected victims' abilities to reach out to relevant parties for the necessary intervention and help required. Hence, the Government intensified the 'Break the Silence against Family Violence' public campaign during the Circuit Breaker period.

⁸ More information could be found in the following link: <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/end-of-circuit-breaker-phased-approach-to-resuming-healthcare-services>.

The on-going campaign is conducted through free-to-air TV, radio, Google ads, YouTube, social media and digital screens at public housing lifts and lobbies, to convey messages on how other family members, friends and neighbours can step up by detecting and reporting family violence.

9. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by **Governments**.

The Government is committed to preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures taken to combat such violence is as follows:

- a. Formation of inter-agency taskforce to tackle family violence**
- In February 2020, Singapore set up an inter-agency taskforce to tackle the problem of family violence. The taskforce comprises members from Government agencies, the Courts and community partners⁹. It is co-chaired by Senior Parliamentary Secretary (SPS) of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and SPS of Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF).

⁹ Community partners include hospitals, NGO-run specialist centres for family violence, crisis shelters, and family service centres. Family Service Centres are based in the community to provide help and support to individuals and families in need. They are staffed by social service professionals.

- The Taskforce looks into the challenges faced by various groups experiencing violence. It also identifies ways the Government can work with community partners to empower victims and perpetrators alike to break the cycle of violence.
- While the Taskforce was not set up specifically in response to COVID-19, the Government has collaborated with Taskforce members such as SCWO (with more than 60 member organisations) and Casa Raudha Women Home (a crisis shelter) to develop infographics on managing family conflict, and dealing with family violence during the COVID-19 period.
- The infographics were shared widely and publicly, with more than 220, 000 views to date.
- SCWO, United Women Singapore, and Casa Raudha Women Home (all NGOs) will be facilitating focus group discussions to deepen the Taskforce's understanding of the family violence landscape. The outcomes of the discussions are used to identify key areas for improvement and develop initiatives to better support victims of family violence.
- The Taskforce also examines how to better support and empower victims of family violence when their cases go through the

criminal justice system. This includes strengthening operational processes and further enhancing protocols between the Courts, SSAs and other stakeholders to ensure that victims receive seamless and timely support.

b. Step up safety monitoring

- Community-run SSAs funded by the Government, such as FVSCs and crisis shelters, remained operational during the Circuit Breaker period, as they are classified as essential services.
- The FVSCs continued to watch over their clients through remote means during the Circuit Breaker period. Where necessary, staff made in-person calls with adequate protection for higher risk cases. During the Circuit Breaker period, FVSCs' phone lines continued to be answered remotely by staff.
- During the Circuit Breaker period, the Government ensured the safety of clients of its statutory protective services by stepping up on check-ins and monitoring of adherence to safety plans via phone/video calls.
- This included activating additional staff in non-operational roles, volunteers, and the community to be part of the client's safety

plan, where there was a need to. This also took into account elevated safe distancing measures.

c. Tighten inter-agency referrals

- Throughout the Circuit Breaker period, the Government ensured that services were integrated so that victims could get the help that they need in a timely manner.
- The Government, the Police and SSAs continued to work closely to attend to cases with the necessary public health precautions in place. SSAs adjusted their modalities of service delivery, without compromising the safety of individuals and families facing family violence.
- Community-based social services continued to ascertain the risks and needs of the families, provide casework and counselling, and make referrals to other services such as crisis shelters.
- The Police proactively referred victims assessed to be at a higher risk of encountering further violence to social services, even if the victims do not request for it. They also contacted victims within the first week of their lodging a police report to check on their well-being and if they needed further assistance.

- Helplines run by Government-funded, NGO-run FVSCs remained in operation during the Circuit Breaker period, for the public to approach and seek help.
- The Government also set up the National CARE Hotline, which is now manned by over 700 psychologists, counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists, and public officers trained in psychological first aid. It offers 24/7 emotional and psychological support to children, youth, adults, and families who face stress and anxieties arising from the COVID-19 crisis.
- These may include fears about the pandemic, marital and family tensions, or worries over financial issues. Persons experiencing family violence can also call this hotline for assistance.

d. Raise public awareness to report abuse and violence

- To raise public awareness to report abuse and violence, the Government intensified the ‘Break the Silence against Family Violence’ campaign. This was done through free-to-air TV, radio, Google ads, YouTube, social media and digital screens at public housing lifts and lobbies. The campaign continues to encourage neighbours to step up by detecting and reporting on family violence.

- The Government partnered SSAs such as Casa Raudha Women Home, SCWO and the Children’s Aid Society to provide practical tips on staying resilient and safe at home together through infographics. Information on available resources in case family violence occurs is also provided in these infographics, which have been shared widely and publicly on social media.
- The Government also circulated information on how the community can identify signs and symptoms of family violence, as well as offer help and step in when one comes across incidents of family violence.

e. Fundraising for vulnerable groups

- The National Council of Social Services (NCSS) set up the Invictus Fund to marshal private sector donations to support the work of SSAs that delivered critical services to vulnerable groups in the community particularly during the COVID-19 period. The Government has contributed S\$18 million to top-up the Invictus Fund.
- This included NGO-run FVSCs and crisis shelters that remained operational during the COVID-19 period.

10. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by **NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies**.

a. Heightened monitoring for persons with risk of experiencing violence

When the Circuit Breaker was first announced, the FVSCs quickly contacted their existing clients to strengthen safety planning. This was to mitigate the risk of violence recurring during the prolonged stay at home. The FVSCs also increased the frequency of check-ins on more vulnerable clients, through a combination of telephone and video calls. Where necessary to address the safety risks, the FVSCs made in-person visits, with proper safe distancing measures in place.

b. Raising public awareness

Several NGOs highlighted the situation for various groups of vulnerable women through various channels such as articles, infographics and others:

○ PAVE Integrated Services for Individual and Family Protection (PAVE)

- PAVE, in partnership with Ang Mo Kio Police Division, launched the comic book ‘A Day with Bob’, to raise awareness of family violence for primary school students in Feb 2020. PAVE Executive Director Dr Sudha Nair raised awareness on MSF and SSA’s efforts to protect those who are vulnerable to abuse and violence in her interview with ‘Talking Point’, a programme on current affairs in Singapore which is broadcast on free-to-air TV, in May 2020.
- PAVE has developed a Community Guardian App to equip the community to detect, report and intervene in family violence. PAVE has implemented Phase 1 of the App, where groups of volunteers have been trained to look out for family violence victims, especially those who are unable to report the violence themselves.

○ SCWO and Casa Raudha Women Home:

- The Government’s Family Violence Task Force, SCWO and Casa Raudha Women Home developed several infographics to

raise awareness on family violence during the COVID-19 period.

○ Crisis Shelters:

- Participated in a media feature on the work of crisis shelters during the COVID-19 period.

○ PPIS (Singapore Muslim Women's Association):

- PPIS participated in a local radio interview to discuss the issues relating to domestic abuse, and how vulnerable groups can be supported by the community, social workers, as well as social agencies like PPIS during the COVID-19 period.

○ Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)

- Besides operating their helpline, AWARE has raised public awareness on the plight of various vulnerable women groups during this pandemic.



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11. Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.

All submissions should be sent to vaw@ohchr.org as soon as possible, and will be received until **30 June 2020**. You are kindly requested to provide your submissions in English, French or Spanish. Kindly indicate if you **do not** wish your submission to be made publicly available.



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Glossary

FVSCs – Family Violence Specialist Centres

MHA – Ministry of Home Affairs

MSF – Ministry of Social and Family Development

NCSS – National Council of Social Services

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

SCWO – Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations

SSAs – Social Service Agencies