



Civil Society Strengthening Platform¹ Guidelines to better support women and girls victims of violence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

The current COVID-19 pandemic represents a great social and economic disruption to all human beings, affecting disproportionately women and girls due to widespread pre-existing discrimination and inequalities². Every crisis creates inequalities and aggravates older ones, such as the inequalities existing against women and girls. It is necessary for states to step up their efforts and increase the measures to protect women and girls victims of violence.

Home is not always a safe place for women and their children, and they are especially at-risk during lockdown, as they cannot escape their abusers. A grave concern is that social distancing and confinement rules imposed by national governments have triggered additional risks of domestic violence.

Although in almost all other countries number of reports for domestic violence increased as the lockdown and other measures took place, it was not the case for North Macedonia. Namely, the number of reports in relevant institution was more or less the same as in this period 2019 even though civil society organizations who opened telephone lines for support stated that they received calls for support on daily level. In order to provide support and help to women and children victims of DV, National Network established 3 services which provided telephone and online support: counseling and support by social worker, counseling and support by psychologist and counseling and support by legal advisor. These services were established in March 2020. The experience of National network to end violence against women and domestic violence is in line with these statements.

National Network to End VAW and DV prepared and sent several documents to the Government, relevant ministries and the media related to adopted measures for COVID 19. Namely, on 09.04.2020 a Request for amending the decision for prohibition of movement of citizens over the entire territory of the country³ was sent to the Government. This document stipulated adoption of two urgent measures, namely: exceptions from sanctioning women victims and their children leaving the

¹ The Civil Society Strengthening Platform is a platform gathering 9 women's organizations in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey with the goal to strengthen women's voices and agency at a regional level.

² <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2020/04/voices%20of%20womens%20organizations%20on%20covid19final.pdf?la=en&vs=2118>

³ <http://www.glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk/en/09-04-2020-request-to-the-government-of-rnm-for-amending-the-decision-for-the-prohibition-of-movement-of-citizens-over-the-entire-territory-of-the-country/>



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home because of a threat and a direct risk of violence, and when domestic violence is reported during curfew, for the perpetrator to be removed from the home and subject to appropriate sanctions (detention, issuance of temporary protective measures, etc.) in order to protect the victim from future violence in her home was sent.

On 13.04.2020 a Request for issuing urgent measures for protection of women and children of domestic violence during state of emergency⁴ was sent to the Government of RNM. The document contained an explanation of the current situation, the risk factors for increasing domestic violence, the risk factors for reporting the violence and a list of proposed urgent measures for protection of women and children victims of domestic violence.

Additionally, National Network prepared a Protocol on Health Care and Safe Housing for Victims of Domestic Violence at Centers for the Victims of Domestic Violence (Shelters) and other centers providing housing services in the event of a health crisis or pandemic which was sent to the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy on review. The MLSP acknowledged the need for such document and gave affirmative support for further adoption. However, the Protocol is still in draft version and is not adopted.

On 18.05.2020 an Overview of urgent measures and steps for protection of women and children victims of domestic violence undertaken by the Government and competent intuitions⁵ was prepared and published. This document contains the proposed urgent measures and the steps undertaken by the competent institutions for the period 14.04.2020-15.05.2020, as well as the follow-up steps that need to be undertaken.

The present guidelines are to remind and support the national government and service providers in Republic of North Macedonia, to better respond to the needs of women and their children, girls' victims of violence to the effects of the lockdown measures in light of the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. These guidelines are to be applicable also after the lockdown measures are lifted.

The guidelines are prepared by National network to end violence against women and domestic violence and WAVE Network, in frame of the Civil Society Strengthening Platform project, a project ongoing in 7 countries in the Western Balkans and Turkey, supported in frame of the European Union and UN Women programme 'Implementing norms, changing minds'⁶.

⁴ <http://www.glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/urgent-measures-for-protection-of-women.ang.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk/en/19-05-2020-overview-of-urgent-measures-and-steps-for-the-protection-of-women-and-children-victims-of-domestic-violence-undertaken-by-the-competent-institutions/>

⁶ <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/regional-programme-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkey>



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In order to better cater to the needs of women and girls' victims of violence, the Government of Republic of North Macedonia through the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of health, Ministry of education should consider the following:

- Prevention and support services provided by women's NGOs and other state services should be declared essential services to allow them to function at full capacity
- Provide financial support to women's NGOs running vital support services such as: helplines for women victims, women's shelters, counselling services for women victims
- Constantly engage with women's NGOs to plan the response to the COVID-19 crisis, in planning the lockdown measures and the lift of the lockdown measures
- In consultation with women's NGOs, prepare and implement emergency protocols for shelters for victims of violence, to address the challenges of the pandemic
- Cooperate with women's NGOs and other civil society organisations to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups that are most at risk, such as: women with disabilities, Roma women, women living in rural areas
- Continue to adhere to the standards of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – the Istanbul Convention – especially in times of crisis
- Gather gender responsive data and statistics for sound policy-making. There is need for a rapid national gender-responsive assessment of the needs and priorities of women victims of violence and disadvantaged groups
- Provide clear instructions and standard operating procedures to all state institutions (health, education, social work, police) so that they can provide a gender-sensitive response to victims of violence
- Provide strict orders for health care professionals, social workers, police and other institutions involved in these actions to maintain the confidentiality of the location of women's shelters
- Launch awareness raising campaigns (online or using other platforms) to inform citizens on services available for women and girls victims of violence, and develop APPs that can be used by victims of violence to contact support services

Guidelines to better support women and girls victims of violence:

- Women and their children that need to reach a shelter, or other services, should be tested of COVID-19 with priority
- Distribute enough, free of charge, protective equipment (such as masks, gloves) to women's support services (women's shelters, women's counselling services)



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- In cooperation with regions/cities, ensure sufficient bed capacity for victims of domestic violence and their children who cannot be admitted to women's shelters (for example the use of hotels with reception, free apartments over AirBnB)
- Women's easy access to abortion and affordable measures of birth control should be ensured
- Coordinate delivery of medicine and food to vulnerable and excluded groups of women

Guidelines the Ministry of Justice and State Police should consider when supporting victims of violence:

- Violence against women and domestic violence should be prioritized by courts, and should be considered 'cases of emergency' by the courts
- Consistently record and keep records of all calls and visits to police stations to report cases of violence
- In cases of reported violence, domestic violence, strictly apply the steps predicted in the Joint Protocol for dealing with cases of domestic violence (where all relevant institutions are included) and Rulebook on Risk assessment when committing violence and the Rulebook on the manner of issuing temporary measures.
- Increased penalties for domestic and sexual violence, as well as violence against children, for the duration of the lockdown measures to counter the spread of COVID-19
- Public campaign to inform the population about the legal services that continue to be provided to better support victims of violence
- Emergency protection orders and protection orders (criminal or civil) should be immediately available to protect women and girls victims of violence
- Children of victims of violence should always be included in these protection orders
- Short-term protection orders should be replaced by longer term protection orders
- Risk assessment procedures should be conducted on a case-by-case basis



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