



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
30 July 2020

Original: English

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## Seventy-fifth session

Item 27 of the provisional agenda\*

### Advancement of women

## **Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls**

### **Report of the Secretary-General**

#### *Summary*

The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [73/148](#), provides information on measures taken by Member States and activities carried out within the United Nations system to eliminate violence against women and girls. Emphasis in the report is placed on the urgent need for efforts to eliminate violence against women in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), as well as on the process for reporting on advances in the elimination of sexual harassment. The report also includes conclusions and specific recommendations for future action.

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\* [A/75/150](#).



## I. Introduction

1. The year 2020 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a comprehensive and visionary agenda for achieving gender equality that clearly articulates the need to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls as a prerequisite for achieving equality, development and peace. In 2020, the world is also five years into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in which target 5.2 was defined as the elimination of all forms of violence against women and Goal 5 as the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Under the 2030 Agenda, it is clear that ending violence against women is not only an objective in itself and an aspect of gender equality, but is also crucial to the achievement of other Goals, such as poverty eradication, access to health care and education, decent work and the building of a just and peaceful society.

2. As part of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a global review of implementation was carried out, in which progress made in eliminating violence against women and girls, as well as the challenges and priorities for accelerated implementation, were identified (E/CN.6/2020/3). The review also revealed that the elimination of violence against women and girls had been the top priority for action among States in the previous five years. During that period, over 80 per cent of States reported that they had taken action to introduce, strengthen, implement and enforce laws on violence against women, and 87 per cent of States reported that they had introduced or strengthened services for survivors of violence. Despite those efforts, the review indicated that significant barriers to the effective implementation and enforcement of laws remained, including a lack of adequate resources, very low reporting rates, institutional barriers and the existence of patriarchal systems and gender stereotypes prevalent within security, police and justice institutions. Too many women remain without access to services, and the approach for providing services and carrying out measures, such as protection orders, is not integrated, which increases the risk that women will be subjected to further harm and violence. While growing attention has been paid to prevention, efforts remain ad hoc and short term. Overall, while States have prioritized violence against women and girls, efforts have been characteristic of piecemeal and incremental approaches, rather than of transformative policies and systemic change.

3. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has further exposed violence against women as a global emergency requiring urgent action. The pandemic has laid bare not only the failure of previous efforts to effectively prevent and respond to violence, but also the deeply entrenched and systemic nature of violence perpetrated by men against women and girls. Prior to the pandemic, almost 18 per cent of women and girls between 15 and 49 years of age who had ever been in a relationship had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner over the previous 12 months. There is significant regional variation, with the highest prevalence, 24 per cent, in the least developed countries (E/2019/68). The cost of inaction is significant for survivors, families and society at large.

4. As the COVID-19 pandemic deepens, the growing economic and social stress has an impact on everyone, but in particular women. At the same time, restrictions on movement and social isolation measures increase women's vulnerability to violence in the home, most often perpetrated by men. Since lockdown measures were introduced, reports of violence against women have increased in many countries, giving rise to a shadow pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The impact on women is amplified, since they

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls", policy brief, 2020.

experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in fragile, conflict and emergency situations where institutional capacity and services are limited.

5. In addition to exacerbating violence and inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic is jeopardizing the progress achieved so far in the elimination of violence against women and girls and will slow the progress being made on the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals related to violence against women. In recent years, momentum has grown, new social movements have emerged and public attention has increasingly been paid to violence against women and girls in both the public and private spheres, including new demands for accountability and action. Building on that momentum and given the renewed call for urgent action prompted by the pandemic, there is an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen responses to all forms of violence against women through innovative solutions and partnerships, strengthened collaboration and support for women's organizations.

6. Against that background, the present report includes outlines of innovative approaches for responding to and preventing violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19, in line with the Secretary-General's appeal to all Member States on 5 April 2020, in which, following up his appeal on 23 March 2020 for a global ceasefire, he reiterated the need for an end to all violence everywhere, from war zones to peoples' homes and pointed out the links between all forms of violence against women and the need for solidarity in the face of the pandemic. In line with General Assembly resolution 73/148, the report also includes descriptions of key advances in the elimination of sexual harassment. Such progress should not stall in the context of COVID-19. The report also contains information provided by Member States,<sup>2</sup> an intergovernmental organization<sup>3</sup> and United Nations entities.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Innovations in addressing violence against women and girls in the context of the pandemic

7. There are no gender-neutral pandemics and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Experience from the outbreaks of the Ebola virus disease and the Zika virus shows that health pandemics exacerbate existing inequalities, including with regard to economic status, disabilities, age and gender, and also increase the risk of women being subjected to violence.<sup>5</sup> It has been found that violence against women has continued to escalate in the aftermath of previous health crises.<sup>6</sup> During the Ebola crisis, the specific needs of women and girls, especially with regard to addressing

<sup>2</sup> Argentina, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, Czechia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Morocco, Myanmar, Norway, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, Russian Federation, San Marino, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Zimbabwe. To access submissions, see [unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/major-resolutions/general-assembly/ga75-2020](https://unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/major-resolutions/general-assembly/ga75-2020).

<sup>3</sup> The Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

<sup>4</sup> The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

<sup>5</sup> International Rescue Committee, "Everything on her shoulders: rapid assessment on gender and violence against women and girls in the Ebola outbreak in Beni, Democratic Republic of the Congo", 15 March 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Monica Onyango and others, "Gender-based violence among adolescent girls and young women: a neglected consequence of the West African Ebola outbreak", in *Pregnant in the Time of Ebola: Women and Their Children in the 2013–2015 West African Epidemic*, David A. Schwartz, Julienne Ngoundoung Anoko and Sharon A. Abramowitz, eds. (Cham, Switzerland, Springer, 2019).

violence against them, were largely ignored during response and recovery planning, which created a secondary crisis.<sup>7</sup> Those omissions must not be repeated in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. Across the world, confinement to home and social isolation as a result of the pandemic, combined with widespread economic insecurity and lost livelihoods, have created new risks for women and girls in respect of exposure to violence. The current circumstances limit the availability of social support and make reporting difficult. However, a number of sources suggest that rates of reported intimate partner violence across the globe are on the rise, with calls to hotlines increasing fivefold in some countries.<sup>8</sup> There is a risk that other forms of violence may also intensify in the context of COVID-19. For example, women's fears and experiences of sexual violence and other forms of violence in public spaces, where social distancing has emptied streets and modes of transport of all people except those performing essential services, are also likely to escalate.<sup>9</sup> In addition, as people spend more time online than ever, reports suggest that online violence, harassment and abuse against women is also increasing.<sup>10</sup>

9. In that context, the Secretary-General has called upon Member States to declare shelters for women essential services; set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and groceries; increase investment in online services and civil society organizations; make sure that judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers; create safe ways for women to seek support without alerting their abusers; prevent the release of prisoners convicted of violence against women; and scale up public awareness campaigns, particularly those targeted at men and boys. A total of 146 States Members and observer States of the United Nations have responded to the call, committing to make prevention of and redress for gender-based violence a key part of their national and global responses to COVID-19. To support the Secretary-General's call, United Nations entities have identified critical actions to strengthen the collective effort to eliminate violence against women and girls.<sup>11</sup> The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, in conjunction with regional and global women's rights mechanisms, has also called upon States to take urgent steps to combat gender-based violence against women in the context of COVID-19, both during the recovery phase and beyond.<sup>12</sup>

### **Inconsistencies in addressing violence against women and girls in national COVID-19 response and recovery plans**

10. It is critical to ensure that the prevention of violence against women and girls is addressed as an institutional policy priority in all national COVID-19 response and recovery plans, in line with the Secretary-General's appeal to Member States on 5 April 2020. Given the positive benefits of eliminating violence against women and girls for families, communities and society at large, it is also recommended to ensure the investment of adequate resources for response and prevention within fiscal stimulus packages. On the basis of an analysis of 90 countries, many of which

<sup>7</sup> Monica Onyango and Alexandra Regan, "Sexual and gender-based violence during COVID-19: lessons from Ebola", *The Conversation*, 10 May 2020.

<sup>8</sup> UN-Women, "COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls".

<sup>9</sup> UN-Women, "COVID-19 and ensuring safe cities and safe public spaces for women and girls", 2020.

<sup>10</sup> UN-Women "Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19", 2020.

<sup>11</sup> UN-Women, "Inter-agency statement on violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19", 24 June 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Joint statement by the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and the Platform of Independent Expert Mechanisms on Discrimination and Violence against Women, Geneva, 14 July 2020.

responded to the Secretary-General's appeal, at least 37 countries have integrated the prevention of violence against women and girls into their COVID-19 response plans or have developed dedicated plans to address violence against women and girls during the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> For example, Japan has integrated the prevention of domestic violence into its COVID-19 response and Bangladesh has included specific interventions to address violence against women in its COVID-19 preparedness and response plan. The Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ecuador and Panama have included services for women who are victims of violence into their national COVID-19 response strategies. Fiji has set up a specific working group on gender-based violence as part of its national COVID-19 response.

11. Countries such as Bulgaria, Greece, Guatemala, Ireland, Lithuania, Paraguay and Peru have introduced specific laws, decrees or policy frameworks addressing violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19. Promising practices include a strong focus on institutional coordination and referrals to ensure that survivors do not fall through the cracks. The United Nations-European Union Spotlight Initiative, as the largest global investment to eliminate violence against women and girls, is incorporating a focus on COVID-19 into its programming (see box 1).

**Box 1**

**Responding to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19): the United Nations-European Union Spotlight Initiative**

The Spotlight Initiative is a global, multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. Through a partnership that fosters collaborative, innovative and participatory approaches, over the past two years, the Initiative has focused on policy and law reform; the strengthening of institutions; prevention through transformative change of social norms, attitudes and behaviours; access to high-quality, comprehensive and multisectoral services; the strengthening of data collection; and support for women's rights organizations.

Several programmes under the Spotlight Initiative include a response to COVID-19. At the start of the pandemic, United Nations teams immediately repurposed \$21 million, developing COVID-19 plans in all country programmes and ensuring that prevention and response efforts can continue, including by supporting online services, innovative access methods and the use of technology. In Mozambique, for example, the Initiative is supporting government partners in the provision of personal protective equipment, hygiene products and key information materials on COVID-19 prevention, as well as by alerting government and civil society partners to expected spikes in cases. To ensure that women can continue to have access to justice, mobile courts are provided with laptops, modems, telephone credit, fuel and personal protective equipment, allowing them to continue their work. In Mexico, the Initiative has collaborated with the Government of Mexico to release the video #NoEstásSola ("You are not alone") in order to reach women experiencing domestic violence and let them know that violence is not normal. In Malaysia, the Safe and Fair programme is funding a migrant resource centre to provide migrant workers with information on safe migration and COVID-19 prevention, as well as to support women migrants who have experienced violence.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN-Women, COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker. Available at <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/covid-19-gender-dashboard.html> (accessed on 7 August 2020).

## Critical role of women's organizations in preventing and responding to violence against women and girls

12. Evidence shows that the strength of women's organizations is one of the most important factors in driving positive policy changes to eliminate violence against women and girls.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, specialist services offered by women's organizations play a critical role, providing vulnerable groups of women with services when those of the Government often do not reach them. The specialist services provided by women's organizations are also important in informing quality standards and the government approach to service provision. The specialist services should ideally complement government services, rather than operating as a replacement to fill the gaps where government services do not exist.

13. In research conducted with specialist women's organizations during the pandemic, it has been found that services operated by civil society and women's organizations, such as crisis centres, helplines, shelters and safe accommodation, have been scaled back or subjected to funding cuts, which has reduced the already meagre number of sources of support available to women in abusive situations.<sup>15</sup> Many women's organizations are struggling to maintain their presence and continue to deliver services, particularly because premises and staff are often diverted to COVID-19 screening and testing. At the same time, many are continuing to provide their services without adequate access to personal protective equipment.

14. While women's organizations have in the past been underfunded, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are operating in a context of lost fundraising income, additional technological costs from remote working, increasingly complex caseloads and staff shortages, exacerbating prior shortages. Women's organizations are a crucial nexus between survivors and Governments and play a vital role in informing national responses. The financial impact of COVID-19, however, will also affect the capacity of women's organizations to advocate policy reforms on violence against women and, in the long term, to provide services to survivors of violence.

15. It is crucial to ensure the availability of urgent and flexible funding for support services operated by civil society and women's rights organizations. Australia, France and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have allocated additional dedicated funding to organizations providing specialist services for women who have experienced violence. In partnership with the Spotlight Initiative, the United Nations in support of actions to eliminate violence against women allocated an additional \$9 million in May 2020 for up to 44 existing civil society organizations receiving grants in sub-Saharan Africa, to help them to adjust to challenges arising as a result of COVID-19. In 2019, the fund was managing 137 projects aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and girls in 70 countries and territories.<sup>16</sup> The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, also in partnership with the Spotlight Initiative, has also supported civil society organizations in addressing violence against women during the pandemic by allocating \$2 million through its COVID-19 emergency response window funding mechanism.

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<sup>14</sup> Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, *The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women's Rights Around the World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women, "Impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls: through the lens of civil society and women's rights organizations", May 2020.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women, *Annual Report 2019* (2020).

## Innovative approaches in services to prevent violence against women

16. It is essential that services to prevent violence against women be maintained. While there have been efforts to support and adapt such services in general, they are insufficient to match the scale of the problem in the context of the pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many women and girls lacked access to basic free essential services for their safety, protection and recovery, such as emergency helplines, police and justice sector services, health care, safe accommodation, shelter and psychosocial counselling. The global review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action on its twenty-fifth anniversary revealed that, while important progress has been made in strengthening laws to address violence against women, services continue to be significantly underfunded and understaffed, lack coordination and fall below quality standards. As a result, poorly resourced women's organizations and civil society are left to fill the gap.

17. In the context of COVID-19, life-saving care and support for women who have experienced violence, such as mental health and psychosocial support and the clinical management of rape survivors, may be disrupted when health service providers are overburdened with COVID-19 cases. Access to vital sexual and reproductive health services, including for women who have experienced violence, is likely to become more limited.<sup>17</sup> Even when basic essential services are maintained, the collapse of a coordinated response among different sectors and the application of social distancing measures mean that many women and girls will face significant challenges in their access to support. For example, a recent survey in the United Kingdom indicates that over three quarters of front-line services (76 per cent) have needed to reduce their service delivery because of COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> In addition, it may not be safe for women and girls to telephone for services if they are at home with their abusers and closely monitored. A domestic violence helpline in Italy, for example, reported that it had received 55 per cent fewer calls in the first two weeks of March, but that contact from women by text message and email had increased.<sup>19</sup>

18. In response to those challenges, States have reported on the efforts made to strengthen services and ensure that services remained accessible. In an analysis of 90 countries, at least 43 of them have adopted measures to ensure that shelters for women who are survivors of violence continued to function or had expanded their capacity.<sup>20</sup> For example, Fiji and Tonga have formally recognized emergency shelters and women's crisis centre organizations as essential services. Canada has also kept domestic violence shelters open as essential services during lockdown and strengthened them through increased funding. The Government of Norway has decided to define employees at shelters as personnel in critical social functions, who are able to send their children to kindergarten and school even though they are closed for the majority of children. In Brunei Darussalam, the police force has been provided with special training on violence against women in the context of COVID-19. Croatia has specifically requested all government bodies to continue to provide support services to survivors of domestic violence. In France, as shelters have reached their capacity, hotels are providing alternative accommodation for domestic violence

<sup>17</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), "COVID-19: a gender lens – protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and promoting gender equality", March 2020 (p. 5).

<sup>18</sup> The survey was conducted from 24 to 27 March 2020. See [safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/SafeLives%20survey%20of%20frontline%20domestic%20abuse%20organisations%20for%20COVID-19%2030.03.20\\_0.pdf](https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/SafeLives%20survey%20of%20frontline%20domestic%20abuse%20organisations%20for%20COVID-19%2030.03.20_0.pdf), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison and others, "Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence", *The Guardian*, 28 March 2020.

<sup>20</sup> UNDP and UN-Women, COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker.

survivors. Several other countries have also introduced alternative accommodation for survivors of violence (Austria, Argentina, Belgium, Greece, Russian Federation and Turkey).

19. In Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, support is being provided to accelerate community-level service delivery for survivors of violence, with particular attention paid to women in the informal economy, as well as young girls and women affected by HIV/AIDS. Portugal has opened two new emergency shelter facilities, including specialized services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons and those living with mental illness and physical disability. Such efforts also contribute to the commitment to leave no one behind.

20. Many countries have adapted their service delivery through the use of innovative online, telephone and/or mobile technologies, or community outreach, to raise awareness, support referrals and deliver support to survivors. In Czechia, postal workers have been trained to recognize signs of domestic violence and communicate with victims to offer support and referrals. In Madrid, an instant messaging service with a geolocation function offers survivors of violence access to an online chat room through which they can obtain immediate psychological support. Kazakhstan and Lithuania have worked with technology providers to develop an algorithm to detect and identify victims of violence and provide referrals to appropriate services and support. Cambodia has trained local services specializing in violence against women to provide online counselling. Countries such as Japan, Myanmar and San Marino have extended their domestic violence counselling helplines to provide coverage 24 hours a day, every day. Japan has also integrated text messaging and email consultations. In the context of reduced access to police and justice services, innovative approaches to bring services closer to women are particularly important. There are significant opportunities to develop innovations to address the problem of violence against women at scale.

#### Box 2

##### **Strategies to increase women's access to police and justice services in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)**

As a consequence of COVID-19, access to justice may be limited: police officers are required to respond to new demands because of lockdown restrictions; some courts, including specialized courts, have closed or have postponed hearings, resulting in a backlog of cases; and databases tracking offenders have not been regularly updated. Informal justice mechanisms that are appropriate for addressing violence against women may become impractical during COVID-19 responses. Women and girls may have more difficulties in promptly reporting violence either in person or through helplines. Protection orders may not be enforced during this time, contributing to impunity. In addition, most interventions continue to put the focus and responsibility on the victim or survivor to take action, rather than putting the onus on perpetrators to act by, for example, leaving the family home. To increase women's access to police and justice services, many Governments have adopted new strategies, as outlined below.

##### **Innovative partnerships**

In the Canary Islands, Spain, the Institute for Equality of the Canary Islands launched the Mascarilla-19 ("Mask 19") campaign to provide assistance to victims of gender-based violence through pharmacies. Since pharmacies were one of the few types of essential businesses to remain open during the lockdown imposed in Spain, any woman subjected to domestic violence was encouraged to go to a local pharmacy and request a "Mask 19". Pharmacy staff would note her name, address and phone

number and call the police and support workers. The survivor could wait for the police and support workers to arrive or return home where they would meet her. Given the success of the campaign in Spain, it has also been launched in Argentina, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Norway. Monitoring the uptake of the strategy would make it possible to assess its effectiveness.

#### **Use of technology to enhance women's safety and access to support**

Police in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have encouraged the use of a disguised free app, Bright Sky, which provides support for survivors of gender-based violence, including the contact information of all domestic abuse support services in the country. A journal function allows episodes of abuse to be securely documented through text, audio, videos and photos, and the entries are saved in the app; there is also a button to call the emergency services. The evidence provided is expected to be helpful in court proceedings for recalling the date, time and occurrence of abuse.

Italian police officers are utilizing a YouGov app, originally designed to help young people report bullying and drug dealing, but now adapted to provide survivors with a way to message the police without the knowledge of their partner.

In Morocco, the Kolona Maak platform can receive reports from women around the clock and immediately transmit them to the police, providing another channel through which the police to receive notifications, in addition to traditional correspondence methods.

#### **Adaptation of justice services**

The Government of Colombia has issued a decree to guarantee continued virtual access to services, such as legal advice, psychosocial counselling, police and justice services, including hearings. Canadian courts are offering online hearings, having identified a list of urgent matters that can still be brought to court and, in some cases, are conducting hearings over the telephone or by videoconferencing.

In France, cases of domestic violence are dealt with by the courts as a priority. Hearings involving immediate trial proceedings are still being held so that judges can continue to issue protection orders. It is also possible to send a text message to a specific number as an alert to trigger the intervention of the police.

In Hubei Province, China, the court system has responded to applications for personal safety protection orders from survivors by introducing a simplified procedure for verifying evidence.

Argentina has taken steps to address delays in the judicial processes and extended protection orders for survivors to 60 days. In Italy, instead of the survivor having to leave the home she shares with an abuser, prosecutors have ruled that in situations of domestic violence the perpetrator must leave.

The Government of Australia has amended family law to facilitate the response of the justice system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The amendments, inter alia, allow courts to impose electronic monitoring requirements for bail, conditionally suspend imprisonment orders, enable online filing of restraining orders and establish new cases, increase fines and extend the limitation period for restraining orders.

21. Agencies and entities of the United Nations are supporting efforts to adapt and strengthen services in the context of COVID-19. For example, the World Health

Organization (WHO) has provided technical assistance and guidance to health services to ensure the appropriate response and care of survivors of violence against women during the pandemic. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) is supporting countries to adapt their services, including by developing specific protocols to strengthen referral pathways, raising awareness about services and establishing partnerships with the private sector, including technology providers, to increase the reach of services. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has set up toll-free hotlines in several countries for survivors of violence, provided technical assistance and training to health services and established mobile clinics for survivors of violence.

22. It is essential to ensure that services related to violence against women remain open as essential services, as well as to develop strategies to increase access and strengthen referral pathways through technological platforms and community outreach. While it is important to adapt services by delivering them by telephone or online in order to reach women and girls during lockdown and social isolation, there are challenges. For instance, there is a very limited focus on reaching women in remote areas, who are at significant risk of being systematically excluded from responses, particularly those who are at a disadvantage because of digital inequality. It is critical in that respect to ensure that all women and girls have access to affordable information and communications technology (ICT). Where women lack access to ICT, the integration of support for victims into spaces such as pharmacies and groceries, as well as the establishment of alert systems through code words or signals, can improve women's safety.<sup>21</sup>

### **Prevention of violence against women and girls by tailoring economic support**

23. The COVID-19 pandemic has significant implications for the prevention of violence against women and girls, because it threatens gains made in gender equality across all domains. Several risk factors that contribute to violence, such as economic insecurity, are likely to intensify during this time. Evidence shows that enabling women to have access to and control over regular, secure and long-term income is critical to preventing violence.<sup>22</sup> If women's earnings are irregular or insecure, their economic situation may mean that they are unable to challenge or leave abusive partners. Further changes in either a man's or a woman's income could also increase violence against women, especially if the man's identity as breadwinner is called into question. Widespread and increasing unemployment as a result of the pandemic is likely to exacerbate those risk factors. Other risk factors, such as alcohol abuse, are also likely to intensify, particularly as support services for substance abuse may be inaccessible.<sup>23</sup>

24. In the face of widespread income loss and unemployment, the provision of universal social protection, in particular directly into the hands of women, can act as a cushion against economic insecurity and poverty as risk factors for violence. Evidence prior to the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that cash transfers show some promise for preventing violence, such as by reducing levels of intimate partner violence.<sup>24</sup> Many developed and developing countries have introduced temporary

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<sup>21</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Not just hotlines and mobile phones: gender-based violence service provision during COVID-19".

<sup>22</sup> UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2019–2020: Families in a Changing World* (New York, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> UN-Women, "Prevention: violence against women and girls and COVID-19", 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Ana Maria Buller and others, "A mixed-method review of cash transfers and intimate partner violence in low- and middle-income countries", *World Bank Research Observer*, vol. 33, issue 2

social protection measures in response to the crisis in order to facilitate access to health care, protect jobs and mitigate income loss.<sup>25</sup> By early April 2020, 106 countries had introduced or adapted social protection and jobs programmes in response to COVID-19.<sup>26</sup> In those programmes, social assistance through non-contributory transfers is the most widely used tool, followed by social insurance and labour market interventions. States provided limited information on economic support for women, specifically in relation to violence against women and girls, in the context of COVID-19. From a gender perspective, the extension of social protection to workers in the informal economy is critical, given that, globally, a significant share of women's employment is informal and that they therefore have limited or no access to social protection. A gender lens and specific tailoring to women is critical to the design of social protection policies that support the prevention of violence against women and girls in the context of COVID-19.

### Need to adapt prevention strategies

25. Prevention strategies should not be put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic but adapted to the current context. There is a risk that strategies to prevent violence, which were already ad hoc and short term, will stall. With the increased focus on adapting and strengthening services to respond to the increased number of reports of violence against women, the information provided by States suggests that prevention strategies have been deprioritized. Many prevention strategies and much programming have been put on hold during the pandemic because of restrictions on movement, face-to-face interactions and public events. However, given the increasing number of reports of violence against women during the COVID-19 crisis, it is more important than ever to promote prevention through the transformation of norms, attitudes and stereotypes that accept and normalize violence.

26. While traditional avenues of prevention, such as face-to-face interactions, are limited, new opportunities have emerged. For example, multiple forms of media, particularly online forms of communication, have a larger audience than ever before and can be utilized for the prevention of violence against women and girls. Belgium has launched an awareness-raising campaign on radio, television and social media, which directs people to services and further information about violence against women. In Senegal, governmental and non-governmental organizations have delivered messages about violence through several national and local channels, including on television and radio. Similar campaigns have been launched in Australia, Azerbaijan, Czechia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Morocco, Serbia and the United Kingdom.

27. It will be critical to adapt and maintain the momentum in existing prevention initiatives that are already delivering results. Many community mobilization programmes involve exploring the possibilities for delivering activities virtually.<sup>27</sup> New forms of community mobilization and engagement are also possible that transform norms and attitudes perpetuating violence against women and girls. For example, in China, the Chinese version of the hashtag #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic has taken off as part of advocacy efforts. The campaign provides links to online resources, which is helping to break the silence about violence and expose it as a risk during

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(August 2018).

<sup>25</sup> International Labour Organization, "Social protection spotlight: social protection responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in developing countries – strengthening resilience by building universal protection", May 2020.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations, "Policy brief: the impact of COVID-19 on women", 9 April 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Raising Voices, "Guidance note 2: how can activist organizations adapt?", series on preventing violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic, Kampala, 2020.

lockdown. Online communities of men and boys have also started challenging harmful and violent masculinities, demonstrating solidarity with women and girls (see box 3).

28. While restrictions related to COVID-19 are being imposed, there is also an opportunity to incorporate lessons, programmes and discussions on healthy relationships, the appropriate use of technology, life skills and comprehensive sexuality education using remote and distance learning methods. States provided little information on their efforts to prevent violence against women and girls through education in the context of COVID-19.

**Box 3**

**Virtual strategies to prevent violence in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) with a focus on men and boys**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to new efforts to engage men and boys as allies in the prevention of violence against women, in particular through the mobilization of online communities.

In India, the Akshara Centre, along with partners, has mobilized the support of well-known public figures to urge the public to unite their efforts to counter domestic violence. It has produced and disseminated an online video, available in three languages and with the hashtag #LockdownOnDomesticViolence, calling on bystanders to take an active role by reporting domestic violence and speaking out against abuse.

In Latin America, new online movements of men and boys have emerged, which have mobilized behind the hashtags #MasculinidadesEnCuarentena (“masculinities in quarantine”) and #AislamientoSinViolencia (“isolation without violence”) and share personal videos and statements challenging violence against women and encouraging other men to step up in solidarity with women and girls.

In Africa, the MenEngage Alliance has shared messages and videos calling for positive behaviour by men during lockdowns.

**Need for an increasing role of the private sector in prevention and response and stronger intersectoral partnerships**

29. In the context of COVID-19, women are increasingly working at home. The private sector therefore has a critical role to play in addressing violence against women, in particular intimate partner violence, as a workplace issue. Employers, managers and colleagues may be the only source of immediate contact outside the home for many survivors, and thus they may be in a position to provide a lifeline to those without access to any other support. In the current context, it is important to ensure that managers are trained to identify and handle disclosures of violence against women appropriately, as well as to establish referral pathways to support services.<sup>28</sup>

30. Strong partnerships between employers and women’s specialist services with expertise in countering violence against women and girls are important in ensuring that workplace responses to violence against women are informed by a survivor-centred approach. Many innovative practices by the private sector have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the provision of alternative options

<sup>28</sup> United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women, “Shadow pandemic solidarity campaign: domestic violence in COVID-19 – guidance tool for employers and businesses”, 2020.

regarding where employees can work; access to safe accommodation; financial support; additional training and assistance to help managers to support employees who experience violence; and increased communication to employees about the services and support available to them (see box 4).

Box 4

**Adaptation of policies on violence against women by private sector organizations in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)**

Many employers have been responsive to the increased risk of violence faced by women in the context of COVID-19.<sup>29</sup> Vodafone, for example, has adapted its global policy and its toolkit on domestic violence and abuse to focus on ensuring that employees can work safely from home. The global policy and updated guidance, which are based on the principles of “recognize, respond and refer”, provide comprehensive workplace support, including 10 days of paid safe leave and security measures adapted to remote working from home. In addition, two podcasts have been launched for managers to raise awareness about the heightened risks of domestic violence during and after periods of lockdown.

Some companies have created networks and campaigns using social media and other technology to raise awareness about domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kering, for example, which operates in France, Italy, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America, has developed an awareness-raising campaign with the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone to provide information and tailored online resources and to signpost for victims and survivors specialist organizations that can provide support during the pandemic.

**Increasing the use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic without causing more harm**

31. Technology has emerged as an important tool for expanding the reach of services, as well as a means of establishing a broader community and more social connections, however, there are also more opportunities for the online exploitation of women and girls. While digital inequality for women and girls remains a critical concern, millions are now using videoconferencing more frequently to work and study. Specific cases have been documented by media and women’s rights organizations of the display of unsolicited pornographic videos while women are participating in online social events, the use of threats of violence and harmful sexist content and “Zoom-bombing” during video calls, whereby the unexpected participants are shown racially charged or sexually explicit material.<sup>30</sup>

32. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some Member States and technology providers have prioritized action to address the risk of increased abuse and harassment online. For example, in Australia, the eSafety Commissioner has developed resources to keep girls and boys safe online during COVID-19 isolation, including parental controls and bystander approaches. In the United Kingdom, the services of a helpline funded by the Government that supports victims and survivors who have experienced intimate image abuse have been expanded. In response to cases of the sexual

<sup>29</sup> Women’s Empowerment Principles, UN-Women, “The COVID-19 shadow pandemic: domestic violence in the world of work – a call to action for the private sector”, May 2020.

<sup>30</sup> UN-Women, “Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19”, 2020.

harassment of students engaged in online learning, Israel has introduced new e-safety measures in the delivery of online education.

33. Several technology providers have developed policies that allow for the identification and reporting of and redress for incidents of harassment or violence against women on platforms of Internet service providers. Facebook, for example, has rolled out a new safety feature in India that enables users to easily lock their account so that people on the platform with whom they are not friends cannot view their posts and zoom into or download their profile picture and cover photo. Twitter also rolled out a plug-in, “Safe DM”, in February 2020 to block and delete unsolicited nude images in private Twitter messages.

34. There has been growing momentum to address violence against women and girls facilitated by technology. As part of the 25-year global review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, over half of reporting States claimed to be introducing or strengthening legislation in that respect. However, more efforts are needed to work with and regulate technology providers in order to hold them accountable for action or inaction in keeping women safe online. That is even more urgent in the context of COVID-19.

### **III. Advances in eliminating sexual harassment**

35. General Assembly resolution [73/148](#) contains a comprehensive set of recommendations for the elimination of sexual harassment. In the past two years, important momentum has been gained in addressing sexual harassment as a form of violence against women and girls, particularly in the wake of the Me Too movement and similar movements. During the COVID-19 pandemic, although the focus has rightly been on domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual violence persist. Sexual harassment perpetrated online has become a more significant issue in the context of COVID-19. In addition, a significant share of women have continued to work in essential services and informal work, where they have remained vulnerable to sexual harassment. As many countries are relaxing restrictions, building on the momentum of recent years to strengthen action on sexual harassment across all domains will become an increasingly urgent priority.

36. A major development in the past two years has been the adoption of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), which is the first ever international labour standard in relation to violence in the world of work, with particular emphasis on violence against women. In the Convention, violence and harassment are defined as “a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices” that “aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm”. It covers everyone who works, including interns, apprentices and people who exercise the duties or authority of an employer, and applies to the public and private sectors, the formal and informal economy, as well as urban and rural areas.

37. States have reported on a wide range of actions to eliminate sexual harassment, in line with resolution [73/148](#). A promising trend is the strengthening or expansion of legislation to address sexual harassment. For example, Peru has criminalized sexual harassment, including sexual blackmailing and the dissemination of sexualized images and video content without consent. Costa Rica has introduced specific legislation to address sexual harassment in sport. Morocco has criminalized sexual harassment across multiple spheres, including at work and in public spaces. Norway has reformed its discrimination laws to strengthen the obligations of public authorities to prevent sexual harassment and counter stereotyping. Such an approach reflects current practices, given that proactive steps are required to prevent and respond to

sexual harassment, rather than reliance on an individual to make a complaint. Other countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, are considering reforms to sexual harassment laws.

38. Significant progress has been made with regard to legal provisions on sexual harassment in public spaces, in particular at the city and municipal levels. Such laws will be of renewed relevance as countries relax lockdown restrictions. In 2018, France adopted a new law covering sexist insults, degrading or humiliating comments, and hostile and offensive sexual or sexist behaviour towards a person in public areas, schools or workplaces. The Philippines has adopted two city-level laws to address sexual harassment in public spaces. In 2016, Quezon City passed the first ordinance penalizing the sexual harassment of women in public spaces through an amendment of the Gender and Development Code. In 2018, the City Council of Manila passed a stand-alone ordinance, with specific provisions on sexual harassment, including on catcalling, wolf-whistling, leering and groping. The ordinance identifies practical, clear, simple and accessible procedures and provides for mandatory training.<sup>31</sup>

39. Despite the progress that has been made, significant gaps in coverage of sexual harassment laws remain, and implementation and enforcement remain a major challenge, as is the case with other laws on violence against women. Out of 189 countries, 35 remain without legislation on sexual harassment; 59 do not have legislation on sexual harassment in the workplace; 123 do not have legislation on sexual harassment in education; and 157 do not have legislation on sexual harassment in public spaces.<sup>32</sup>

40. In response to the recommendations contained in resolution [73/148](#), several States reported on efforts to shift the culture of acceptance regarding sexual harassment in the workplace. In Portugal, for example, the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment has launched a campaign on zero tolerance for harassment at work and disseminated a guide on developing a code of conduct to prevent and combat sexual harassment at work. Recognizing the need to address the vulnerabilities of persons in specific occupations to sexual harassment, Ecuador has issued specific guidance on supporting domestic workers who experience sexual harassment. In Sweden, the Government has requested that the Equality Ombudsman focus efforts on sexual harassment. Following dialogue with employers, the Government of Saudi Arabia has issued a ministerial decree to improve responses to sexual harassment in the workplace. In Australia, the Human Rights Commission has undertaken a large-scale national enquiry into sexual harassment in the workplace, recommending a comprehensive reform agenda, including primary prevention, and a new regulatory model to shift from a reactive model of responding to sexual harassment that requires complaints from individuals to a proactive model that requires positive actions from employers.

41. Despite those efforts, the majority of responses to sexual harassment in the workplace remain limited, with minimal action taken to comply with the law, and the existence of systems and policies that protect perpetrators and deter women from speaking out or victimize them for doing so. Moreover, existing labour inspections, including into occupational health and safety, do not pay adequate attention to sexual harassment. Changing the culture of workplaces to create environments free of sexual harassment ultimately requires strong leadership at the national and employer levels with an explicit commitment to equality and respect in the workplace, transparency and accountability and a safe and supportive environment for victims and survivors to speak out and be heard.

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<sup>31</sup> UN-Women, *Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls Global Flagship Initiative: International Compendium of Practices* (New York, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> World Bank Group, *Women, Business and the Law 2018* (Washington, D.C., 2018).

42. Few countries (Australia and Slovenia) reported on efforts to measure the prevalence of sexual harassment. Significant data gaps still exist on sexual harassment in private and public spaces as well as on the facilitation of sexual harassment and other forms of violence through technology. Similarly, significant gaps still exist in the collection of data on survivors, perpetrators, service provision and justice outcomes through administrative records. The dearth of national sexual harassment data indicates that there is an urgent need to develop international standards for measuring sexual harassment across multiple spheres to inform regular data collection and analysis. Research and evidence on the impact of sexual harassment across multiple settings is also needed, in particular in the context of COVID-19 and the recovery from the pandemic.

## IV. Conclusions and recommendations

### A. Conclusions

43. Violence against women and girls, rooted in unequal power relations between women and men, persists as a global emergency, with serious impacts on the health and lives of women and girls, families, communities and society at large. While States have taken steps in response, such as the introduction of laws and policies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, changes have been neither systemic nor transformative, with implementation and the provision of adequate resources remaining significant challenges. As COVID-19 has spread, measures to mitigate it have proliferated, including social distancing and restrictions on movement. The increasing number of reports of violence against women and girls points to deeply embedded norms and stereotypes that excuse violence perpetrated by men. The current situation underscores the heightened urgency of concerted and effective action from all stakeholders to eliminate violence against women.

44. The response to the pandemic has entailed significant innovation by Governments to address violence against women, including the adaptation of services, the use of technology and the strengthening of multisectoral partnerships and multilateralism. However, more efforts and investments are needed urgently. Too many women remain without access to potentially life-saving support, while services are stretched and operating under restricted conditions. Women's organizations, which play a critical role in the pandemic response and the elimination of violence against women and girls, are increasingly under financial and operational pressure.

45. It is critical that the response to COVID-19 does not stall or reverse advances already made in the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls. In recent years, growing movements across the world have demanded accountability and action to end violence against women and girls, with a focus on sexual harassment. As a result, States have made important progress in strengthening laws and introducing new approaches to prevent and respond to sexual harassment.

### B. Recommendations

46. **States should ensure the prioritization of the prevention of and response to violence against women and girls in national plans for COVID-19 response and recovery, along with effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Investments in preventing and responding to violence against women should be part of fiscal stimulus packages and an integral part of “building back better”.**

47. **In order for women's organizations to be able play their critical role, States should:**

(a) Enable women's organizations to participate in decision-making processes regarding COVID-19 response and recovery;

(b) Ensure that urgent and flexible funding is available for support services operated by civil society and women's rights groups.

48. States are called upon to consider support services for women, including shelters, health services and psychosocial support, as essential services. Increased funding and adaptation are needed in order to reach all women, regardless of their situation, in their homes and communities, and ensure that no one is left behind, so that women who are disadvantaged or who live in remote areas also have access to services. Innovative referral pathways and partnerships should be pursued, using a range of strategies to reach women without access to ICT.

49. Police and justice services are urged to ensure that incidents of violence against women and girls are accorded high priority, ensuring women access to protection orders and holding perpetrators to account. States should introduce specific measures to address backlogs and enable women to have access to courts, including specialized courts, for example, through videoconferencing, and telephone and mobile courts. States should establish an accurate, up-to-date database to track and monitor registered offenders effectively. The onus should be placed on perpetrators to leave the home and change their behaviour, rather than on victims and survivors.

50. States should utilize traditional media, social media and online technologies to shift norms, stereotypes and attitudes that normalize and excuse violence. States should support measures to engage men and boys as allies in eliminating violence against women and girls.

51. As part of an overall strategy to prevent violence, the design of economic support and stimulus in response to COVID-19 and recovery plans, States should guarantee gender-responsive and universal access to social protection, as that is critical to ensuring women's economic security and independence. This should include wage subsidies and other forms of safety nets.

52. All actors, including in the private sector, should play their part in supporting women who experience violence, using survivor-based approaches in partnership with women's organizations, with such efforts further strengthened in the context of COVID-19.

53. States should ensure access to safe and affordable ICT for women and girls, and work with technology providers to eliminate online violence and harassment, in particular in the context of COVID-19, ensuring access to fast and effective remedies for women who experience such violence and harassment.

54. Reform to strengthen laws addressing violence against women and girls must not be halted. In addition, the elimination of sexual harassment – the most pervasive form of violence against women – has to remain a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery. States should continue efforts to enact comprehensive laws that recognize sexual harassment as a form of discrimination against women and a human rights violation and ensure that such legislation addresses multiple spheres, including the world of work, educational institutions, and public and online spaces. Laws should be integrated with a range of implementation and enforcement measures, including strategies to encourage victims and survivors to report sexual harassment, the establishment of survivor-focused complaints processes and prevention strategies.

55. States should, without delay, ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190). They should prioritize actions that create culture change in order to eliminate sexual harassment in the world of work. Those actions should include the creation of positive obligations for employers to prevent and respond to sexual harassment; the establishment of new standards of transparency and accountability for employers to report on their efforts; and the conduct of mandatory, evidence-based training on sexual harassment.

56. States, together with the United Nations system and other relevant stakeholders, should continue to strengthen efforts to improve data on violence against women and girls, including by addressing gaps in national sexual harassment data and developing methodologies to collect data on sexual harassment and violence whose perpetration is facilitated by technology. States should also conduct research on the impact of sexual harassment across diverse settings, including in the context of COVID-19 and recovery.

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