

WHAT INITIATIVES HAVE BEEN CREATED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF WOMEN EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19

Introduction:

Reports around the world show that rates of domestic violence during COVID-19 have increased. Since the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic on March 11, 2020, accessing services became more challenging, for many women, due to many factors such as decreased privacy, isolation in lockdowns, and/or restrictions on travel. In this project we summarize evidence collected through searching media reports of initiatives developed to support women experiencing domestic violence since the onset of COVID-19. **Our purpose is to rapidly share our results with service providers and decision-makers to contribute to the adaptation and expansion of services to meet the needs of women during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Methods:

On June 23, 2020, we searched the NEXIS Uni database for media reports including newspapers, magazines, newswires, and press releases. We searched for media reports published in English or French of initiatives developed to support women who experienced domestic or intimate partner violence, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. We excluded initiatives developed prior to COVID-19 (e.g. toll-free hotlines). Our search resulted in 2,459 items; after reviewing each item, we identified **51 unique media reports**. These reports were published from March 2020 – June 2020. While the reports were published by sources in multiple countries (i.e. Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Japan), the reports referred to initiatives in many other parts of the world, such as various countries in central and South America, Asia, Africa, and Europe.



Results:

In the media reports, we identified **4 main categories of initiatives** developed to meet the needs of women experiencing domestic violence during COVID-19. The first category has 3 subcategories.

1) Technology-Mediated Services and Resources

The largest number of sources referred to new or expanded initiatives involving services provided via various forms of technology including: social media (e.g. WhatsApp, Snapchat, other live chatrooms), Zoom, Apps, expanded resources for online supports and helplines, new telephone consultations, alarm bracelets, and new ads for services using various forms of media. Various twitter hashtags have also been developed:

[#YouAreNotAlone](#)

[#SafeSpace](#)

[#AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic](#)

Many campaigns specific to individual countries have been launched or expanded during COVID-19 such as:

- Australia: **“Help is Here”** and **1-800-RESPECT**
- United Kingdom: **“UK Says No More”** <https://uksaysnomore.org/>
- Ireland: A new interactive map was developed to help find services close to home www.StillHere.ie

Silent solutions: Various forms of technology have been developed, mostly in specific areas or countries, that can help women report abuse when talking is not an option; such as an abuser potentially overhearing the conversation.

- After calling emergency services (e.g. 911, 999) a person can **press 55** without speaking. This alerts police, letting them know it is a domestic violence emergency.
- Launched by the Canadian Women’s Foundation, a hand signal can be used on video calls by pointing your palm to the camera with the thumb tucked, then closing your fingers over your thumb. <https://canadianwomen.org/signal-for-help/>
- Developed in France, **“App-Elles”** allows women and girls to discreetly alert three trusted contacts when they are being attacked. It sends a GPS alert, a recording is made of the attack in real time on both the victims and contacts’ phones. Women can also use bracelets to send an alarm without using a phone.
- Snapchat: If a person searches for support related to abuse, violence or stalkers, they see content with subtitles instead of audio automatically playing.

IT Security Skills: With many technologies being utilized during COVID-19, some initiatives have been developed to help survivors learn how to delete chats and messages, records of phone calls and their browser histories. Telegram messenger has been promoted as a cloud-based communication system for secret chat only.

Access to Technology: A small number of media reports focused on initiatives to provide women with access to technology so they could look up information or call for help when in need. This included providing free cell phones and free Wi-Fi. One initiative from the United Kingdom involved buying pay-as-you-go handsets with credit on them and hiding them in food packages that were delivered.

¹We use domestic violence to refer to any type of abusive behaviour that occurs between intimate partners, such as spouses or those living in a common-law relationship, or in a dating relationship.

2) Partnerships with Essential Services

Many media reports focused on providing supports to women who have experienced abuse through partnering with essential services that remained open during COVID-19 such as grocery stores and pharmacies. These initiatives included women using code words (e.g. Mask 19) or purchasing specific items that would signal that help is needed. In the United Kingdom, an initiative involved adding contact information for local domestic violence supports on receipts. Other initiatives involved training staff how to respond to women who needed help, having safe spaces available within stores where women could make contact with other services (e.g. emergency shelters), and providing services from trained counselors within stores. One unique example was a hair salon in Florida that partnered with a domestic violence centre to make the boutique a haven for women by providing food, clothing, first aid kits, or a place to wait safely.

3) Housing, Shelter, and Transportation

Many media reports focused on new initiatives to provide emergency housing to women such as hotels providing empty rooms for free, fundraising campaigns to purchase nights for women and children needing a safe place to sleep, hotel rooms being used for those seeking protection orders, and those fleeing abuse to be considered priority for housing services. The **Good Samaritan Rental Initiative** was developed in Australia with landlords making properties available for survivors who have nowhere to go. In Ireland, vacant subsidized housing units were quickly brought back into use. The United Nations has funded new domestic abuse shelters in countries seeing a surge in abuse since the COVID-19 pandemic began, such as in Tunisia. Many women's refuges and shelters are remaining open during COVID-19 with modifications implemented, such as reducing the number of clients in person and providing enhanced services via distance (e.g. hotlines, phone consultations and virtual sessions), applying physical distancing measures, taking turns using the kitchen and laundry facilities, and everyone wearing masks. One example from the United Kingdom was about a woman and her children with symptoms of COVID being given a unit in a shelter separate from other families. In many countries, Uber is providing free rides to domestic violence shelters. A moving company in Florida is offering free services to anyone fleeing domestic violence during COVID-19. Women can call the police or a domestic violence shelter to coordinate with the company.

4) Legal and Justice System:

Many new initiatives were developed to support women's legal needs, such as new phone lines developed to provide free legal advice, automatic extensions added to restraining orders, court-protected safe zones at home (e.g. non-molestation orders), court cases being conducted remotely using video links, and family courts remaining open (e.g. South America). Police departments in the United States are helping to set up FaceTime calls with Judges for hearings. A probation board in Northern Ireland expanded services by providing increased monitoring for perpetrators. This included remote monitoring for lower-risk domestic abuse perpetrators, continued face-to-face supervision for high risk offenders, and increased liaison with partner organizations. A report from the United Kingdom included dedicated police officers to check on past victims of domestic violence. Finally, travel restrictions during lockdowns can be eased for women experiencing abuse to access services.

Discussion & Recommendations:

- Although our search was limited to media reports published in French and English, we identified initiatives across many countries, and this information can be utilized to expand and adapt domestic violence services during the COVID-19 context.
- Many initiatives are dependent upon various forms of technology which are not available to all women. In particular, women who do not have the financial resources to pay for smart phones or computers or live in places without a reliable internet connection (e.g. rural, remote areas) are particularly vulnerable during COVID-19. A small number of initiatives were identified to increase women's access to technology, and expanding such initiatives is crucial.
- Many initiatives are specific to a country or region, and it could potentially be harmful if women believe that a service is available to them when it is not. Thus, information aimed at women needs to be explicit about where services are provided.
- Police need to accommodate the need for women to travel during a lockdown situation to allow them to access services, such as a shelter.
- Training for people working in various sectors is needed to support women experiencing domestic violence. For example, staff working in essential services open during COVID-19, such as grocery stores and pharmacies need to be aware of how to support women who experience domestic violence.
- Most of the initiatives we found were designed for women already experiencing abuse. During COVID-19 when the risk of experiencing domestic abuse is heightened, campaigns are needed to raise awareness about abuse and prevent abuse from occurring. For example, methods for screening those at increased risk of abuse during COVID-19 are needed.
- Many initiatives focused on helping women get access to information and resources to break free of an abusive relationship and to support women and their dependent children after leaving their home and an abusive situation. Additional initiatives are needed that support women being safe in their own homes, especially for those women who prefer to remain in their homes and communities, such as older women.

Contact:

Dr. Lori Weeks, School of Nursing, Dalhousie University,
Halifax, Nova Scotia Canada

Email: lori.weeks@dal.ca

Phone: 1-902-494-7114.

This report is available at <https://www.unb.ca/mmfc/resources/>

Contributors:

L. Weeks, C. Stilwell, M. Rothfus, D. Neeb, L. Jackson, M. Macdonald, A. Carson,
E. Moody: Dalhousie University, A. Weeks, C. MacQuarrie: University of Prince Edward Island,
H. Helpard: St. Francis Xavier University, S. Dupuis-Blanchard: Université de Moncton,
K. LeBlanc: Beausejour Family Crisis Resource Centre.

Acknowledgements:

We thank the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research at the University of New Brunswick for their assistance in formatting and distributing this report. We also thank the Joanna Briggs Institute Centre of Excellence: Aligning Health Needs and Evidence for Transformative Change AH-NET-C) at Dalhousie University for their support as well as funding support from a SSHRC Explore Grant, Dalhousie University.



Sources:

- My working week: "A mother arrives at our refuge with Covid-19 symptoms"; We are getting full very quickly but it's important that women who have survived domestic abuse know we can support them. (2020, April 13) The Guardian (London).
- Covid 19 coronavirus: Code words at supermarkets possible for victims escaping violence. (2020, April 15) The New Zealand Herald.
- Armstrong, J. (2020, May 8). TikTok video shows how victims trapped at home with abuser can make a "silent" 999 call; Kaitlyn McGoldrick, 14, made the viral clip to show viewers how to make a "silent" 999 call for those trapped in their homes with their abusers and unable to speak up. Mirror.Co.Uk.
- Bagshaw, E. (2020, March 29). Domestic violence help, telehealth gain \$1b boost. The Sun Herald (Sydney, Australia).
- Barr, S. (n.d.-a). Boots pharmacies offer "safe spaces" for domestic abuse victims seeking support during lockdown; "Self-isolation offers a new method of control over victims, making it very difficult for them to seek support," charity head states. The Independent (United Kingdom).
- Barr, S. (2020, May 1). Which shops are offering safe spaces to victims of domestic abuse? "The expansion of safe spaces into supermarkets could save lives," says Lyndsey Dearlove, head of campaign UK Says No More. The Independent (United Kingdom).
- Brown, D. (2020, April 24). Uber donates rides to abuse victims; Pandemic has added to hurdles for survivors. USA TODAY.
- Cohen, D. (2020, May 11). Snapchat Teams Up with National Network to End Domestic Violence. Adweek.Com.
- Covid 19 coronavirus: Family violence tipped to rise, but help services are there 24/7 during lockdown. (2020, March 25). The New Zealand Herald.
- Covid 19 coronavirus: Kiwis help Women's Refuge give victims a safe night during lockdown. (2020, April 15). The New Zealand Herald.
- Domestic violence shelters adapt as COVID-19 forces families home. (2020, March 19). National Post (Canada).
- Domestic violence support revamped. (2020, April 20). The Japan News.
- Duffy, M. (2020, April 6). St. Petersburg salon offers help for Tampa Bay domestic violence victims; B. Blaze Hair Boutique will use its drive-through to distribute food, clothing, first aid kits and information to those in need. Tampa Bay Times.
- Evans, J. (2020, March 25). Amid coronavirus, Tampa Bay's crisis centers and hotlines brace for flood; Some lines are already getting surges in calls. Others expect them in days or weeks. Here's what they're doing to help. Tampa Bay Times.
- Blaney, F. (2020, April 28). Domestic abuse calls up by 20%; Victims told 2km lockdown limit doesn't apply. Daily Mirror.
- Free legal help line launched for those affected by domestic violence. (2020, April 3). The Gazette (Montreal).
- Holland, K. (2020, April 14). Families fleeing domestic violence leave refuge over fears about coronavirus; Council properties awaiting refurbishment used to house families leaving refuge. The Irish Times.
- Hunter, F. (2020, May 3). Domestic violence campaign tackles complaints surge. The Sun Herald (Sydney, Australia).
- Hunter, F., & Noyes, J. (2020, March 30). Apps and aid against violence in package. The Age (Melbourne, Australia).
- Hymas, C. (2020, April 27). Call to create "safe spaces" in supermarkets; Coronavirus; Domestic abuse; Home affairs committee asks Government to make it easier for the victims of domestic abuse to get help. The Daily Telegraph (London).
- Hymas, C. (2020, April 15). Domestic abuse killings treble as victims could be offered escape route; Fears over a rise in domestic abuse has led to demands for radical solutions for women trapped in violent relationships during the lockdown. The Telegraph.
- Jessica Marszalek. (2020, May 2). Game-changing plan helps violence victims flee their COVID hell. The Courier Mail (Australia).
- Johnson, S. (2020, May 12). "We wrap services around women": Brazil's innovative domestic violence centre; With violence against women endemic in the country, new initiatives are desperately needed but slow to arrive. The Guardian (London).
- Keena, C. (2020, April 1). Courts to pilot hearing cases remotely during pandemic. The Irish Times.

Kelly, A. (2020, April 28). Digital divide “isolates and endangers” millions of UK’s poorest; Charities warn of “devastating effect” as most vulnerable households left without access to web. *The Guardian* (London).

Willsher, K. (2020, May 9). “This is so wrong”: Hollande highlights domestic violence in French lockdown; Ex-president backs new app for victims as WHO reports 60% rise in domestic abuse calls. *The Guardian* (London).

Latin America shelters struggle to help women in coronavirus lockdowns. (2020, April 9). *National Post* (Canada).

Yi, B. L. (2020, March 30). Australia coronavirus lockdown pushes “safe phones” demand for women. *The Star*.

Matthews, L. (2020, June 9). Domestic abuse hand signal you need to know which could save somebody’s life; The Canadian Women’s Foundation has created a hand signal for those who are victims of domestic violence which can be used silently on video calls during the coronavirus crisis. *Mirror.Co.Uk*.

Oppenheim, M. (2020, April 9). Coronavirus: How do we help domestic abuse victims trapped with abusers during lockdown? *The Independent* spoke to frontline service providers and experts about how best to support victims during the coronavirus crisis. *The Independent* (United Kingdom).

Oppenheim, M. (2020, April 12). Government launches domestic abuse awareness campaign as incidents rise. *The Independent - Daily Edition*.

McFadden, B., & Green, A. (2020, April 11). Coronation Street cast stars urge domestic abuse victims to use “silent 999 option”; In the video, which has been released in conjunction with Women’s Aid, female Coronation Street stars warn there are measures in place that can help protect domestic abus. *Mirror.Co.Uk*.

McMahon, A. (2020, April 1). Irish domestic abuse victims promised swift justice during pandemic. *TheTimes.Co.Uk*.

Gillis, M. (2020, May 22). Demand high at text service for women living with violence. *Ottawa Citizen*.

Meredith, F. (2020, April 3). One unintended consequence of the lockdown: A dramatic surge in incidents of domestic abuse; With families cooped up indoors, urgent support must be given to victims of violence in the home, says Fionola Meredith. *Belfast Telegraph*.

Moloney, A. (2020, April 23). Bogota’s supermarkets become safe spaces for women to report abuse. *National Post*.

Olivia Petter. (2020, April 7). Women’s Aid launches “the lockdown” campaign to highlight current risk of domestic violence; ‘While home may be the safest place to protect ourselves from the virus, it is certainly not a safe place for women and children who are indefinitely trapped with. *The Independent* (United Kingdom).

Percannella, A. (2020, April 23). “A double layer of isolation”: Domestic abuse survivors struggling to call for help; In Italy, as elsewhere, women are trapped with perpetrators, but support groups are trying to make communication safer. *The Independent - Daily Edition*.

Petter, O. (2020, March 25). Coronavirus: Women’s Aid issues safety advice to women isolating in abusive households; “Survivors are telling us that they are feeling unsafe with the prospect of being isolated in the house with their perpetrator,” says charity. *The Independent* (United Kingdom).

Preston, A. (2020, April 15). Help at hand for victims of domestic abuse: Long. *Belfast Telegraph*.

Pugh, R., & Jolly, B. (2020, June 12). Tesco’s “hidden” message on receipts discovered by eagle-eyed shoppers; Tesco has left the contact information of the National Domestic Abuse Helpline and the Bright Sky app to help fight domestic violence during the lockdown. *Mirror.Co.Uk*.

Saunders, K. (2020, April 20). Moving company offering free services to those facing domestic violence; Anyone impacted by domestic violence during the coronavirus lockdown can get free moving services from College H.U.N.K.S. Hauling Junk. *Tampa Bay Times*.

Norris, S. (2020, March 30). For people with an abusive partner, lockdown means captivity; Social isolation from coronavirus is fuelling a rise in domestic abuse cases—And leading charities to shift their support online. *The Guardian* (London).

Selvaratnam, T. (2020, March 23). Where Can Domestic Violence Victims Turn During Covid-19? *The New York Times - International Edition*.

The Monitor’s Editorial Board. (2020, April 30). Why domestic abuse is now an international cause; A spike in domestic violence during the coronavirus lockdown has resulted in a vigorous response to provide shelter and protection beyond one’s home. *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Thompson, A. (2020, April 8). Hotel chain offers escape from abuse. *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia).