

# Policy Paper

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# The Covid-19 Pandemic and Violence Against Women in Asia and the Pacific



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# I. Introduction

In the background of the global public health and economic turmoil of the Covid-19 pandemic lurks another crisis: rising rates of violence against women (VAW). The true extent of VAW amidst Covid-19, deemed the “shadow pandemic” by the United Nations, will likely never be known as incidents of violence go unreported, stifled by lockdowns and centuries-old power dynamics around the globe. Amidst the combination of overwhelmed health systems, strictly enforced lockdowns, fear of the virus, stressful economic uncertainty and increased screen time, VAW has found a sordid opportunity to thrive. This paper addresses the shadow pandemic’s reach in Asia and the Pacific.

During the 1995 United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women, a global consensus was formed around the need to address persistent obstacles to women’s empowerment, solidified in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. One of the strategic objectives of the Platform for Action is eliminating VAW, noting that, “Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>1</sup> Progress towards eliminating VAW has been unsteady and uneven worldwide, including in Asia and the Pacific. Recognizing the need for continued action, in November 2019 member States and associate members of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) reaffirmed their commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action with the *Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review*. This declaration calls for the elimination of VAW, “re-emphasizing that sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, in public and private spheres, is a major impediment to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.”<sup>2</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic threatens Asia-Pacific’s ability to uphold the declaration’s promises.

Asia and the Pacific is further committed to eradicating VAW through their engagement with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda), which enshrines close monitoring and the eventual elimination of VAW. The fifth goal of the 2030 Agenda’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment. Specifically, SDG target 5.2 commits to “Eliminat[ing] all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.”<sup>3</sup> To effectively reach the 2030 Agenda’s overarching goal to leave no one behind, governments must take action now to prevent the Covid-19 pandemic from worsening VAW in Asia and the Pacific.

Considering the difficulty of producing reliable statistics on VAW even in “normal times,” this paper demonstrates how the Covid-19 pandemic increases the likelihood of VAW using a theoretical basis. This theoretical work is supported by media reports from regional news sources documenting the pandemic’s effect on VAW, mainly through reported increases in call volumes to domestic violence helplines. While providing an incomplete statistical picture, these types of data are presumably indicative underlying trends. Additional research will be necessary both during and after the pandemic to better understand how the virus facilitates VAW in Asia-Pacific and which measures are effective at preventing or reducing violence.

This paper provides a preliminary understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic influences the prevalence of VAW within Asia and the Pacific. The structure of the paper is as follows: the second section provides background on VAW in Asia and the Pacific. The third section describes the theoretical basis for why the Covid-19 pandemic is expected to increase women’s risk of violence. The fourth section describes policy responses to prevent, reduce and support victims of VAW prior to the pandemic as recommended by international sources and as practiced in the region. The fifth section compiles existing evidence of increases in VAW thus far in Asia-Pacific. The remaining sections discuss measures taken by governments and civil society organizations to prevent VAW and support survivors both prior to during the pandemic. Finally, policy recommendations to address the “shadow pandemic” are provided. If governments in Asia-Pacific wish to uphold their commitments to advancing gender equality and eliminating VAW, they must protect women’s safety even during times of crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women, “Fourth World Conference on Women”. Available at <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingdeclaration.html> (accessed on 28 July 2020).

<sup>2</sup> UN ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Beijing+25 Review* (Bangkok, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> UN, “SDG Knowledge: Goals.” Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5> (accessed on 28 July 2020).



## II. Background

### A. Definition of violence against women

During the 1990s, the international community began to recognize violence against women as an impediment to women's human rights following many years of advocacy by the women's rights movement.<sup>4</sup> In 1992, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) officially acknowledged that GBV inhibits gender equality, asking member States to report relevant data and measures taken to address the issue.<sup>5</sup> In 1993, the United Nations' Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women offered a formal definition of VAW: "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."<sup>6</sup> This definition has since been adopted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and accepted within the international community.

Violence against women may be perpetrated by the family, within the general community and by the State. Specific acts that meet the definition of VAW include but are not limited to: battering, sexual abuse (including of female children), sexual harassment and intimidation, rape (including marital rape), harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, trafficking and forced prostitution.<sup>7</sup> With the evolving world of technology and expanding access to the internet, recent definitions of VAW have been revised to include digital violence. A July 2018 resolution from the United Nations General Assembly recognized digital VAW as a "growing concern," describing VAW in digital contexts to include:

*Harassment, stalking, bullying, threats of sexual and gender-based violence, death threats, arbitrary or unlawful surveillance and tracking, trafficking in persons, extortion, censorship and the hacking of digital accounts, mobile telephones and other electronic devices, with a view to discrediting women and girls and/or inciting other violations and abuses against them.*<sup>8</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic is most likely to exacerbate two varieties of VAW: intimate partner violence (IPV) and digital violence. Intimate partner violence is an especially prevalent form of VAW. Worldwide, an estimated 30 per cent of women who have been in a relationship have experienced IPV in their lifetime.<sup>9</sup> This form of interpersonal violence is especially relevant during a lockdown when families are required to stay within the confines of their home. The pandemic is also likely to increase digital violence as the world turns to remote work and higher Internet usage for virtual socialization. Globally, Internet use during the pandemic has increased between 50 and 70 per cent. This facilitates exposure to incidents of sexual harassment, zoombombing, stalking, threats, and sex trolling.<sup>10</sup> Section III details the avenues through which IPV and digital violence are exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/VAW.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> General Recommendation No. 19,

[https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1\\_Global/INT\\_CEDAW\\_GEC\\_3731\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_GEC_3731_E.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/violenceagainstwomen.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Adopted text 38/5: Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts,

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session38/Pages/ResDecStat.aspx>

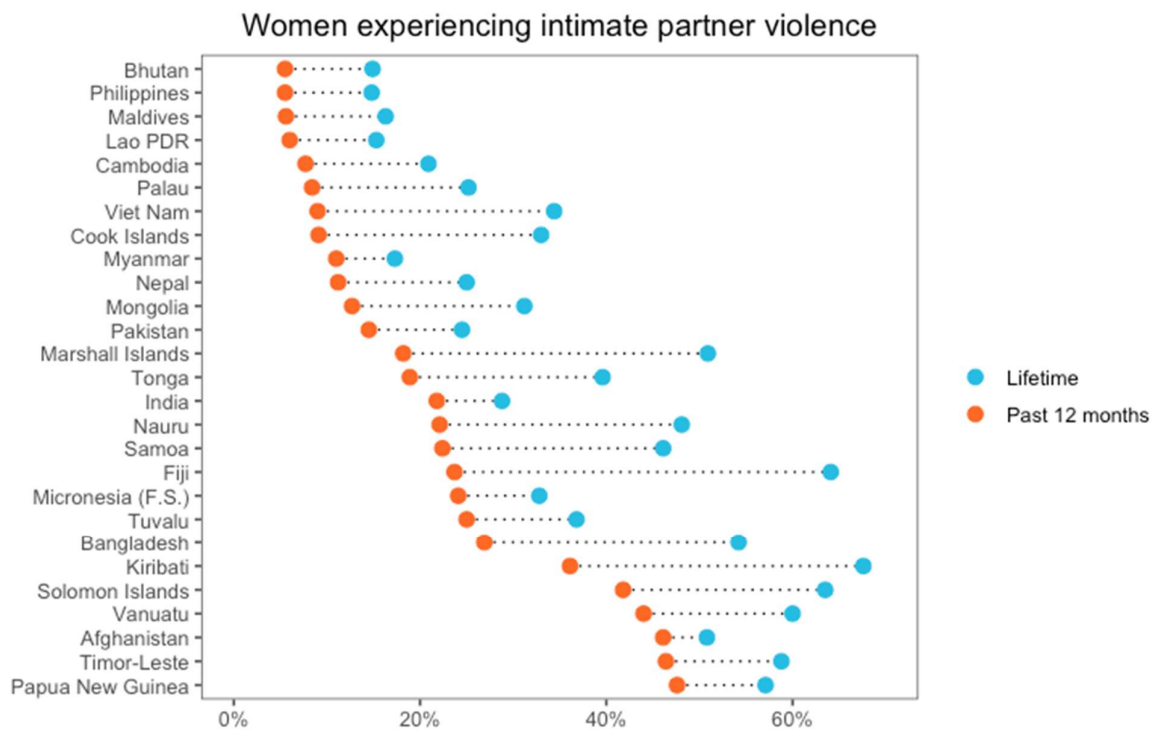
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-prevention-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3049>

## B. Measuring violence against women

The nature of violence against women, a result of power imbalances and often occurring within the home, makes it difficult to measure. Incidents go unreported due to cultural norms that relegate IPV to the private domain, fear of backlash from the perpetrator, stigma associated with having experienced violence and the belief that no help will come even if the violence is reported. According to the United Nations, fewer than 40 per cent of women who experience violence seek help from authorities or shelters.<sup>11</sup> With such low reporting rates, it is likely that any statistics collected on VAW are drastically undercounting the true incidence. As such, administrative data of reported VAW incidents cannot be accepted as an accurate metric.<sup>12</sup> The preferred method of data collection for VAW is survey data, but even this is collected unevenly and inconsistently, so measuring trends in countries and regions is difficult.<sup>13</sup> The dearth of data on VAW complicates policy responses and obfuscates Covid-19's effect on rates.

While the need for improved data on VAW is recognized among governments in Asia-Pacific, these data remain elusive. In the 20-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Asia and the Pacific, 64 per cent of respondent ESCAP member States and associate members (25 of 39 respondents) did not conduct regular surveys on violence experienced by women and girls.<sup>14</sup> The Sustainable Development Goals also emphasize report the incidence of VAW, but only 28 countries in Asia-Pacific have ever provided relevant figures and no countries provided data in more than one year. These gaps in data complicate any analysis of trends within the region or across years.<sup>15</sup> Without reliable pre-pandemic VAW data, the pandemic's impact on VAW is difficult to ascertain.



Source: UNFPA Asia and the Pacific (accessed 27 July 2020).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-supporting-%E2%80%98trapped%E2%80%99-domestic-violence-victims-during-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>12</sup> [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/docs/Guidelines\\_Statistics\\_VAW.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/docs/Guidelines_Statistics_VAW.pdf) pg 2

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/B20\\_Gender\\_Equality\\_Report\\_v10-3-E.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/B20_Gender_Equality_Report_v10-3-E.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> <https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/>



## C. Rates of violence against women in Asia-Pacific

Globally, the average likelihood that a woman will experience violence by an intimate partner in her lifetime is 30 per cent.<sup>16</sup> Although data are incomplete for the Asia-Pacific region, countries that have reported official statistics show considerable variation in both the proportion of women who have experienced IPV in their lifetime and over the last 12 months, as shown in the graph below.<sup>17</sup> The percentage of women who experienced IPV in the last 12 months ranges from 4.9 per cent to 47.6 per cent. The percentage of women having experienced IPV in their lifetime ranges from a low of 14.8 per cent to a high of 64.1 per cent.<sup>18</sup> These statistics are based on the most recent data available from 28 ESCAP member States and associate members.

Data are also available for the percentage of women who have experienced non-partner violence in the region within the last 12 months and over their lifetime. These figures, respectively, range from 0.9 per cent to 7.9 per cent and 5.1 per cent to 67.8 per cent. Data on non-partner violence in the last 12 months are only available for 12 countries in the region, and over the lifetime are from 17 countries. Data are not available for IPV and non-partner violence combined. As noted above, the Covid-19 pandemic can be expected to have a greater effect on IPV than non-partner violence.

## D. ESCAP's commitment to eliminating violence against women

In addition to facilitating the Beijing+25 Review which reaffirmed Asia and the Pacific's commitment to combatting VAW in the region, ESCAP promotes awareness of VAW through active support of the UN Secretary General's UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women campaign. Alongside other UN agencies in the Asia-Pacific region including UN Women, UNFPA, ILO, UNICEF and UNDP, ESCAP organizes activities to commemorate 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence. This is an international campaign that occurs annually to support awareness and advocacy efforts for ending VAW.

In 2019, these 16 days of action overlapped with the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference on the Beijing+25 Review from 27 to 29 November. In conjunction with the conference, several events were held to highlight the importance of addressing VAW. One such event was a luncheon with UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Ms. Dubravka Simonovic. The Special Representative stressed the importance of strengthening legislative commitments and State accountability to preventing VAW. Additionally, a media conversation was held to discuss trends and messages about VAW in Asia and the Pacific. Through the Asia-Pacific UNiTE Working Group, ESCAP has also been involved in work streams focused on highlighting ways to improve CEDAW and other frameworks, sharing resources on IPV and safe migration.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

<sup>17</sup> see appendix for explanation of why the data reported here may differ from other publications

<sup>18</sup> <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/knownvawdata>



### III. How Covid-19 exacerbates violence against women

The United Nations Population Fund estimates that the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to cause 15 million additional GBV cases worldwide for every additional three months of lockdown. This figure is based on a 20 per cent increase in violence during lockdowns.<sup>19</sup> The data presented via media reports and summarized in this section suggest a 20 per cent increase is a conservative estimate, with some countries reporting calls to domestic violence helplines doubling. Even with limited data, it is clear that the compounding effects of lockdowns and broader pandemic conditions facilitate violence and reduce victims' ability to report incidents or seek help.

Violence against women tends to increase during emergency events and disease outbreaks, thus the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on violence fit into a larger pattern.<sup>20</sup> For example, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, parts of Sierra Leone saw the teenage pregnancy rate increase by 65 per cent, likely attributed to increased rapes during the epidemic.<sup>21</sup> There are a number of factors that contribute to the increase in violence women experience during public health crises. This section identifies three avenues contributing to more violence and less support during the Covid-19 pandemic: (1) increased exposure to perpetrators due to lockdown orders and care responsibilities, (2) triggering stressful environments for perpetrators and (3) reduced support services.

#### A. Increased exposure to perpetrators

Four ways the Covid-19 pandemic increases women's exposure to perpetrators is through lockdowns limiting their ability to leave home, long-term effects of school closures on child marriage, their disproportionate burden of care work and more time spent online.

##### 1. Lockdowns and more time at home

While the lockdowns or stay-at-home orders many governments have imposed are necessary to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, they limit women's ability to escape domestic violence. Typically, IPV occurs among spouses or cohabitators, therefore often taking place within the home.<sup>22</sup> The pandemic has witnessed some of the most expansive government lockdown orders in history, in some countries enforced with the full weight of the law. Women experiencing violence at home are left with little hope of escape.

The graph below shows the severity of stay at home orders in Asia and the Pacific since January 2020, according to the Oxford Coronavirus Government Response Tracker. Stay at home measures have waxed and waned with the intensity of the virus in each country. The most severe lockdowns have required people to stay in their houses with minimal exceptions and have, in some countries, been strictly enforced through formal and informal channels. As of late July, over 260,000 people had been cited for violating the strict quarantine measures in place in the Philippines and 76,000 had been arrested.<sup>23</sup> During the severe lockdown in India, vigilantes took it upon themselves to enforce restrictions on movement, personally guarding their doorsteps and entrances to their neighborhoods.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_impact\\_brief\\_for\\_UNFPA\\_24\\_April\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1881/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/02/the-ebola-rape-epidemic-west-africa-teenage-pregnancy/>

<sup>22</sup>

[https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44350/9789241564007\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=21A6506762A6F4562206CAF8CE5CD41C?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44350/9789241564007_eng.pdf;jsessionid=21A6506762A6F4562206CAF8CE5CD41C?sequence=1) Pg. 12

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/duterte-turns-to-drug-war-tactics-to-fight-pandemic-in-the-philippines/2020/07/28/7f1dfbda-ca67-11ea-99b0-8426e26d203b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/duterte-turns-to-drug-war-tactics-to-fight-pandemic-in-the-philippines/2020/07/28/7f1dfbda-ca67-11ea-99b0-8426e26d203b_story.html)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html>





In these environments where both authorities and fellow citizens are on high alert for violations of stay at home orders and fear for spreading the virus runs high, women may be actively discouraged from seeking help outside the home, causing more them to remain in dangerous situations with their abusers.

Domestic violence has lasting effects on both the victim and other members of the household. One of the strongest predictors of a man committing IPV is whether he witnessed domestic violence against his mother while growing up.<sup>25</sup> Children who witness IPV are also more likely to experience behavioral or emotional problems, potentially leading to increased disciplinary measures at school and in extreme cases dropping out.<sup>26</sup> Considering the ripple effects of IPV, increases in VAW due to Covid-19 lockdown measures may continue long after the threat of the virus has subsided.



Source: Oxford Coronavirus Government Response Tracker (accessed 14 July 2020).

## 2. School closures and child marriage

In addition to the emotional and behavioral impact witnessing IPV may have on children stuck in their homes under lockdown measures, school closures may have long-term effects on young girls. Globally, 15 million girls are married before they turn 18 every year.<sup>27</sup> According to the most recent data available in ESCAP statistics, in Asia and the Pacific the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who were first married before age 15 ranges from 0 per cent to 22.4 per cent. These figures are higher for the percentage of women 20 to 24 who were married before age 18: from 3.9 per cent to 58.6 per cent.<sup>28</sup> The World Bank advocates that “one of the best ways to end child marriage is to keep girls in school.”<sup>29</sup> With schools either transitioning to remote learning or closing altogether to avoid community spread of the novel coronavirus, girls may be at greater risk for marriage.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pg. 5

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage>

<sup>28</sup> ESCAP data on SDGs

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage>



Girls married before age 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence.<sup>30</sup> Therefore if rates of child marriage rise due to school closures, so too may rates of IPV. Especially in regions of Asia and the Pacific where child marriage is prevalent, the reduction in schooling may subject more girls to greater risk of IPV. There are many additional negative effects of child marriage on a woman's health and economic outcomes, along with those of her children. Low educational attainment is a main predictor of whether a woman will experience GBV in her lifetime.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, not only may school closures increase rates of IPV through new marriages, but the closures may increase the likelihood of experiencing VAW even for girls who are not married underage.

### **3. Increased care work**

Globally, 70 per cent of health care and social sector workers are women.<sup>32</sup> High utilization of healthcare services due to the pandemic places many women in vulnerable positions, required to look after violent patients who are disproportionately male. The World Health Organization reports that between 8 per cent and 38 per cent of health workers suffer physical violence at some point during their careers, typically at the hands of patients or visitors.<sup>33</sup> Under the high stress environment the Covid-19 pandemic creates with unknown medical risks and no cure or vaccine, there is a high likelihood that healthcare workers are facing increasingly desperate patients and family members, exposing them to greater risk of violence.

Female healthcare workers may further experience stigma as a result of their proximity to the sick. In India, Accredited Social Health Activists ("Ashas"), who tend to be women, are meant to connect communities with the public health system. Tasked with enforcing quarantines, distributing basic information about the virus and sometimes testing community members, Ashas have reported being abused and attacked for both their enforcement roles and their potential exposure to Covid-19.<sup>34</sup> Disproportionately serving on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic places women at greater risk of violence.

In addition to their role as formal caretakers, women also disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid care work in the home. An April survey done by UN Women in Asia and the Pacific found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, women in all eight countries they surveyed reported an increase in their time spent caring for others at home.<sup>35</sup> If a family member becomes sick, women are more often tasked with nursing them back to health. The unequal amount of time spent caring for sick family members places women at greater risk of contracting the virus. Paid and unpaid care work thus expose women to virus-related health risks and violence.

### **4. More time online**

The transition to remote work and learning has increased the amount of time women spend online. Although digital violence is an emerging area of study, preliminary information on online and information and communications technologies (ICT) facilitated VAW suggests that women and girls are more likely to experience cyber harassment. Statistics on the prevalence of such incidences varies globally, with rates as low as 1 in 10 women experiencing cyber harassment in the European Union and as high as 40 per cent of women in Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, much of life has transitioned online in regions where Internet is accessible. More Internet usage may therefore lead to more opportunities for women to experience digital violence such as unsolicited pictures, sexist comments, physical threats and stalking.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/stories/child-marriage-around-world>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/workplace/en/](https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/workplace/en/)

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/indias-female-corona-warriors-underpaid-and-unappreciated>

<sup>35</sup> <https://data.unwomen.org/resources/surveys-show-covid-19-has-gendered-effects-asia-and-pacific>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2519>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



There is a considerable gender gap in access to ICT and online resources worldwide and in Asia and the Pacific. Globally, the percentage of men using the Internet is 58.3 per cent while the percentage of women is just 48.4 per cent. In the Asia-Pacific region, these statistics are 54.6 per cent and 41.3 per cent, respectively.<sup>38</sup> While the digital divide may shield some women from digital violence, it may also put those who come online during the pandemic at greater risk. Users who are less experienced with ICT, who tend to be women due to the digital gender gap, are more vulnerable to harassment. Despite the digital divide in access and use of ICT services, women are coming online during the pandemic out of necessity. As schools, workplaces and social lives are transitioned to the digital world, there are more opportunities for perpetrators to harass and assault online. Furthermore, due to decreased access to physical support services during lockdown measures, victims of VAW may turn to online resources for support and thus be placed in an even more vulnerable position. If women are afraid to use online resources for fear of being harassed, they may lose out on opportunities to work, learn and socialize from home.<sup>39</sup> Bringing more women online and reducing the gender gap in Internet access is a potential positive result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but measures must be put in place to protect women from entering a harmful environment.

## B. Triggers for perpetrators

In addition to more frequent exposure to VAW from lockdowns, care responsibilities and increased Internet use, women are at greater risk during the Covid-19 pandemic due to amplified financial stresses and alcohol consumption, two known triggers for violence. These factors have the potential to induce long-term effects on VAW rates.

### 1. Added stress of the pandemic

Unquestionably, the Covid-19 pandemic is straining the world's economy as unemployment figures rise worldwide. Given the large proportion of Asia-Pacific workers who are employed by the informal sector – 64.1 per cent of working women and 70.5 per cent of working men in the region are employed in the informal sector<sup>40</sup> – official figures for job losses may underreport the pandemic's economic impact. A survey by UN Women in Asia and the Pacific found that informal job losses have ranged from 25 to 56 per cent and those in the formal sector have been working fewer hours since the pandemic began.<sup>41</sup> The accompanied reduction in household income creates financial stress that may further increase the incidence of VAW in both the short and long term.

The strain caused by unemployment can lead to increased VAW by introducing uncertainty and shifting power imbalances within the household. Broadly speaking, job loss leads to financial and psychological stress.<sup>42</sup> These stresses may be exacerbated by a lack of adequate social protection in the region, especially for informal workers. Feeling as though there is no way to control the pandemic, or even the household's financial situation can provoke assertion of power through violence.<sup>43</sup> In general, academic literature on the effect of unemployment on VAW has found that IPV increases with male unemployment rates, but decreases with female unemployment due to a “backlash effect,” which implies that women entering the labor force threatens male superiority, resulting in increased violence in the home.<sup>44</sup> Thus the impact of job losses on VAW may be difficult to tease out, but the household stress caused by reduced income is highly likely to increase violence.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>; ITU's classification of the Asia-Pacific region is different from ESCAP's classification.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_626831.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> <https://data.unwomen.org/resources/surveys-show-covid-19-has-gendered-effects-asia-and-pacific>

<sup>42</sup> (Bhalotra et al.)

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-prevention-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3049>

<sup>44</sup> (cite [Bhalotra et al](#), [UKaid VAWG Helpdesk Research report](#), and [Peterman et al](#))



The economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic may be long-lasting and the continued lack of job opportunities eventually will pull many people into poverty. The World Bank estimates that between 88 million and 115 million people globally could slip into extreme poverty in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, with almost half of them living in South Asia.<sup>45</sup> This negative economic outlook has potential to significantly increase rates of VAW because poverty is a main predictor of VAW.<sup>46</sup> Any increase in poverty will be long-lasting and therefore may have long-term negative effects on the incidence of VAW. Furthermore, child marriage is most prevalent among poor families in South Asia,<sup>47</sup> so higher poverty may compound upon school closures and further drive up the rate of child marriage. As discussed in the previous section, child marriage is also associated with domestic violence.

Another long-run consequence of the pandemic-induced economic downturn is reduced interpersonal bargaining power for women. As more women lose their jobs, which tend to be concentrated in the informal and service sectors that are hard hit by the pandemic, they may become more financially dependent on male partners or family members.<sup>48</sup> Economic bargaining power within a relationship often plays a role in women's ability to leave an abuser. If the economic recovery is slow, there may be a lasting effect on women's labor force participation and economic empowerment, which in turn may lead to a long-run increase in rates of VAW.

## 2. Increased alcohol consumption

Alcohol consumption is often cited as a precursor to abusive behavior and particularly to IPV.<sup>49</sup> There are a number of reasons why the Covid-19 pandemic may increase alcohol consumption. Drinking is often used as a coping method in stressful situations which, as described above, is a hallmark of the pandemic. Not only are many people under financial and psychological stress, but the very fear of contracting the virus is stressful. Uncertainty about health and economic prospects therefore are likely to increase the number of people turning to coping mechanisms such as alcohol. As the pandemic adds stress to daily lives it also increases the likelihood that women will experience violence at home.

Not only does the pandemic increase the risk of IPV through triggering greater alcohol consumption, but also by keeping the danger close to home. Closed bars and restaurants may force more people to drink at home, adding to the danger women face living with an abuser. To proactively counter alcohol-induced VAW and to prevent large in-person gatherings, some governments, including India, issued a temporary ban on liquor sales as a part of their lockdown measures.<sup>50</sup> Whether these measures have resulted in less domestic violence remains to be seen.

## C. Limited support

The final component of the “perfect storm” the Covid-19 pandemic creates for VAW is the inability of victims to seek help.<sup>51</sup> With health services overwhelmed from virus-related cases and support centers closed to in-person visits, women's ability to seek safety is limited.

### 1. Access to support, security and legal services severely reduced

In the scramble to contain the novel coronavirus and reduce its transmission, governments issued orders requiring that all businesses and services deemed “non-essential” be temporarily shut down. Not all governments designated women's support centers as essential, leading to a decrease in the number of centers open to receive victims fleeing their homes.

<sup>45</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-effect-new-data>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/end-violence-against-women/2014/poverty#:~:text=Poverty%20can%20increase%20violence.,living%20in%20the%20wealthiest%20quintile.>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/3051/file>, pg. 3

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/coronavirus-covid-19-family-violence-abuse-women-self-isolation-12575026>

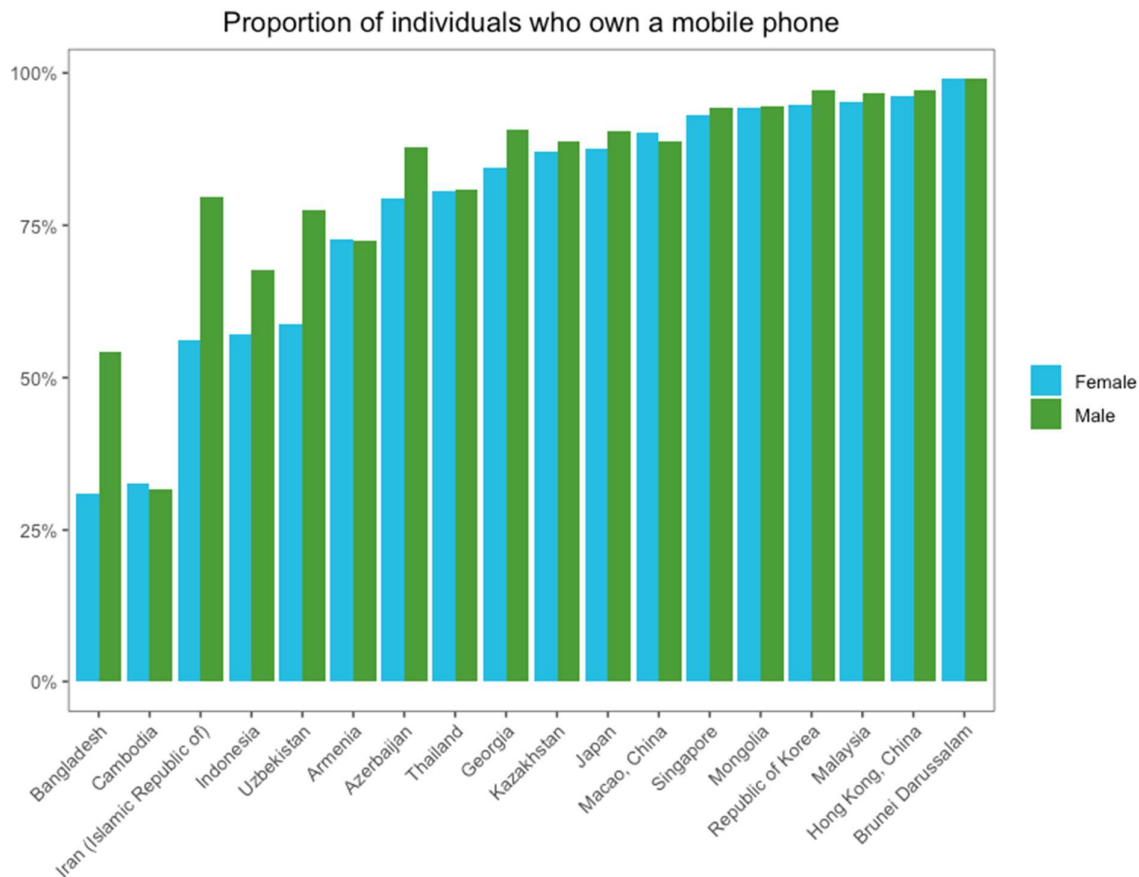
<sup>49</sup> [https://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/world\\_report/factsheets/fs\\_intimate.pdf](https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/factsheets/fs_intimate.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> <https://news.trust.org/item/20200505191710-1niva/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-supporting-%E2%80%98trapped%E2%80%99-domestic-violence-victims-during-covid-19-pandemic>



While some centers have maintained a remote presence, with helplines and virtual counseling available, these are not a substantive replacement for in-person services. The aforementioned gender gap in access to internet, which also exists for mobile phone ownership, may make it impossible for some women to use digital or phone-based support services.<sup>52</sup> As shown in the graph above, women’s mobile phone ownership is as low as 30.9 per cent. Women may also face increased supervision at home, limiting their freedom to seek help over the phone or internet without repercussions.



Source: The ITU ICT SDG indicators, most recent year available (accessed 16 July 2020).

For those support centers that have been allowed to remain open, social distancing measures have reduced their capacity.<sup>53</sup> Centers are forced to turn away women seeking shelter from domestic violence because they do not have enough space to safely house them. In some cases, shelters are unable to accept support seekers if they have not self-quarantined or cannot provide negative Covid-19 test results.<sup>54</sup> The logistical issues presented by public safety concerns related to the pandemic severely reduce women’s access to support and may cause victims of VAW to remain in their home with their abuser because there is no feasible alternative.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/make-prevention-and-redress-violence-against-women-key-part>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/moscow-hotel-hosts-domestic-violence-survivors-as-abuse-cases-soar/a-53693748>



Not only are social services for women experiencing domestic violence reduced, but police and legal services are also unable to attend to cases of VAW. Police may be more invested in maintaining stay at home orders than protecting victims of violence, or women may be scared to report their abusers without the privacy to do so or a viable alternative living situation.<sup>55</sup> Court proceedings that would typically occur in person have been reduced under lockdowns, making it difficult for survivors of violence to seek justice.<sup>56</sup> The combined reduction of support, security and legal services during the pandemic reduces women's ability to escape dangerous situations.

## 2. Emergency health services preoccupied with pandemic

Women who have experienced violence severe enough to require medical care are unable to access emergency health services that are overwhelmed by Covid-19-related cases.<sup>57</sup> Inundated emergency rooms and hospitals limit critical care for VAW victims and physical and mental support for survivors.<sup>58</sup> In addition to the unavailability of medical services, government services and civil society organizations have, in some cases, needed to redirect funds normally earmarked for VAW prevention and support to immediate Covid-19 relief.<sup>59</sup> Coupled with the reduced access to support, security and legal services, the inability to seek medical help makes women experiencing violence especially unsafe during the pandemic.

Not only does unavailability of medical services further limit women's options when seeking violence-related help, but it may also impact critical routine and reproductive health and family planning services. Reduced access to medical services provided by the state or civil society will invariably result in decreased screenings for signs of VAW, reduced access to contraceptive and sexual health services and difficulty retrieving medical reports that may be required for referrals or legal action.<sup>60</sup> The negative effects of the pandemic on women's health are manifold.

## 3. Stigma of reporting violence during the pandemic could have lasting effects

Often, reporting of violence is limited because of the stigma associated with having experienced sexual violence. Given that so many barriers stand in the way of women reporting violence during the pandemic, women are unlikely to immediately report incidents of violence. With the delay in opportunities to seek support, cultural and societal norms surrounding VAW may stop women from ever reporting pandemic violence, leading to long-term effects on women's economic empowerment.

There are cultural values attached to "women's purity" that, if a woman reports sexual violence perpetrated against her, may result in additional shame from her family and the community.<sup>61</sup> The reasons described herein for increased rates of VAW, coupled with the additional factors limiting women's ability to report incidents quickly, may cause fewer women than usual to report their abusers. As these incidents remain unreported during the pandemic, the likelihood that they will be reported once the lockdowns and virus abate is quite low due to this stigma.

The fear of experiencing violence outside of the home such as in the workplace or in public spaces leads women to adopt strategies of avoidance.<sup>62</sup> For example, this may mean women choose to stay home instead of entering the labor force. In turn, with limited opportunities to generate income, women's ability to become financially independent is severely stunted, limiting economic empowerment. Higher rates of VAW during the pandemic may thus make women wary of entering public spaces and have long-term effects on gender equality.

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/03/submission-un-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-its-causes-and-consequences>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision-en.pdf?la=en&vs=0>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/make-prevention-and-redress-violence-against-women-key-part>

<sup>58</sup> [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision-en.pdf?la=en&vs=0>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/pandemics-and-vawg-april2.pdf> pg. 14

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X17303534#s0005>

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



## IV. Responses to and prevention of violence against women

As is clearly laid out in the Beijing+25 Review, VAW is “rooted in historical and structural inequality and unequal power relations between men and women.”<sup>63</sup> To address these structural inequalities, the declaration recommends “transforming negative gender norms, discriminatory social attitudes, and adverse social and cultural patterns of conduct.”<sup>64</sup> As such, prevention-related responses should address these persistent inequalities. Among the recommendations made to eliminate VAW in the Beijing+25 Review are: codifying commitments to gender equality and the illegality of VAW, creating policies to prevent and eliminate VAW while ensuring gender-responsive investigation of accusations, establishing services and programs to address victims of violence and abuse and creating national machineries to promote gender equality.<sup>65</sup> This section describes some of the ways governments and international organizations have gone about preventing and reducing VAW in the pre-pandemic context. Regular guidance from the World Health Organization on preventing GBV includes the following:<sup>66</sup>

- Reducing childhood exposure to violence
- Teaching safe and healthy
- Strengthening economic support for families
- Challenging social norms that promote male authority over women
- Offering bystander empowerment and education
- Eliminating gender inequalities in employment and education
- Creating protective environments
- Additionally: patient-centered medical care, therapeutic interventions, housing programs and legal services

Measures already taken within Asia and the Pacific to reduce and prevent VAW prior to Covid-19 complications include introducing or strengthening dedicated legislation on VAW (done by 31 countries from 2014-2019), services for survivors of violence (29 countries) and strategies to prevent violence (19 countries).<sup>67</sup> Some highlights include:

- Enacting an anti-catcalling ordinance in Quezon City, Philippines. This ordinance led to a national law against sexual harassment in public spaces.<sup>68</sup>
- Creating awareness and changing attitudes among men and boys to prevent violence. CHVEN -- Men Against Violence in Georgia, does exactly this.<sup>69</sup>
- The Republic of Korea’s Digital Sexual Crime Victims Support Center provides counseling, investigation, legal and medical assistance to victims of digital violence.<sup>70</sup>
- In 2018, New Zealand passed the Domestic Violence – Victims Protection Bill that allows victims of domestic violence to take paid leave while they transition to a safer home environment.<sup>71</sup>
- The Women’s Protection Center in Afghanistan is a network of 11 shelters that provide refuge, medical, legal and psychological services to survivors of violence.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/AP\\_Beijing25\\_Declaration%26Report.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/AP_Beijing25_Declaration%26Report.pdf), pg. 13

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> [https://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/sexual/en/](https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/sexual/en/)

<sup>67</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Review\\_of\\_progress\\_%28ENG%29.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Review_of_progress_%28ENG%29.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> (ibid, [UN Women](#))

<sup>70</sup> ([+25 review](#))

<sup>71</sup> ([the Guardian](#))

<sup>72</sup> [https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2019/06/unw\\_annual-report-2018-r12.pdf?la=en&vs=1341](https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2019/06/unw_annual-report-2018-r12.pdf?la=en&vs=1341)



- The “My City, My Rights” campaign in New Delhi, India collaborated with businesses to create “sexual harassment free zones” and an app to collect safety data along roads and in railway stations.<sup>73</sup>

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments and organizations may find themselves limited in implementing typical responses to VAW. It is therefore important to devise creative policy interventions to provide help and services to those at risk. Forming new responses to VAW requires first having some idea of the extent to which violence has been rising in Asia and the Pacific during the pandemic. For limited data to corroborate the theoretical basis describing increasing rates of violence, the best sources currently are media reports.

## V. The Covid-19 pandemic and violence against women in Asia-Pacific

Given the difficulty of measuring VAW regularly, data collection on the subject is especially difficult during the pandemic. As such, much of the outcry over the shadow pandemic is based on preliminary data collection done by UN Women and volume of calls to hotlines or anecdotal evidence reported by the media. This section covers what quantitative and qualitative evidence has surfaced so far to demonstrate that Asia-Pacific is experiencing an uptick in VAW and IPV. The section also documents some of the measures taken by governments and civil society organizations in the region to prevent and reduce further incidence of VAW.

### A. Collecting data on violence against women during COVID-19

In May 2020, UN Women published an overview of how to rapidly assess VAW during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, they describe the shortcomings of using administrative data such as calls to helplines and caseloads at shelters. There are opposing forces that are affecting the use of these services: in some instances, an uptick in such services is seen due to increased VAW for all the reasons already expressed above. In other instances, there may be a decline in service usage due to women’s reduced ability to leave the household or make a call undetected. Considering these limitations, UN Women recommends using data from rapid surveys to glean a more accurate picture of VAW during the pandemic.

Unfortunately, in the context of the pandemic it is also difficult to collect survey data, despite its higher quality than administrative data. For health and safety reasons face-to-face interactions must be limited, reducing the ability to conduct regular surveys. Completing electronic surveys may place women at risk if they are closely surveilled. Thus, UN Women recommends that any surveys be completed with the utmost care for ensuring respondents’ safety and reducing any distress, using properly trained interviewers, and having support services readily available.<sup>74</sup> Large organizations such as UN Women and other agencies may have the capabilities to train interviewers appropriately and conduct such a survey, but many governments and smaller CSOs do not have the capacity to do so, especially during the pandemic.

Given the risks of survey data collection during the Covid-19 pandemic and logistical constraints, it is advisable to instead use existing service use data where it can be found. These data must be analyzed with a degree of skepticism but can still be helpful for identifying geographical regions where VAW may be most affected by the pandemic and effective policy responses. The next section describes VAW in Asia and the Pacific during the pandemic by pulling from reports of service-use statistics and anecdotal evidence in the media.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/05/impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision>





## B. Evidence of increased violence against women in Asia-Pacific

While incidents of VAW and reports of increased service usage are not readily available for every ESCAP member State and associate member, this section synthesizes data found through media reports in the region. A full list of these articles is available in the appendix.

There is a clear trend of heightened volume over domestic violence helplines throughout the region. Media from at least six countries have reported these increases: Singapore, Malaysia, India, Fiji, Samoa and Russia. Reported increases in call volumes range from 33 per cent to doubling. There was one report from a CSO-operated hotline in India of a decline in call volumes. Comparisons across reports of calls to helplines should be taken lightly. Some articles calculate per cent changes by comparing call volumes across years, while others compare across weeks within the same month. Considering the competing factors on call volume – volumes could decline if women are constantly under supervision – these numbers may reveal only part of the increase in VAW.

Similarly, numerous articles show an increase in the number of domestic violence cases that shelters and women's organizations are handling. Such reports have been collected from media outlets in seven countries: Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Australia, Tonga and China. One article indicated a tripling of cases being handled during lockdown. Multiple reports indicate that many of the reported cases of domestic violence are perpetrated by first-time offenders. This may indicate that pandemic conditions are driving partners to levels of aggression they have personally never before reached.

The incidence of digital violence appears to have increased as a result of increased Internet use during the pandemic. In Pakistan, calls to a helpline for digital harassment almost tripled as the pandemic worsened and the majority of reports were made by women. Similarly, in the Philippines, four times as many cases of online sex abuse against children were reported March 2020 through May 2020 as compared to the same time frame in 2019.<sup>75</sup> This demonstrates predatory online behavior towards vulnerable populations. Reports of online and ICT-facilitated violence may be unavailable or undercounting incidents because this is an emerging form of VAW so the infrastructure for reporting and handling it may not yet be in place in many countries and localities.

Although the media reports used to compile this section are mainly from the Southern region of ESCAP's purview, this is not an indication that VAW poses no threat in other areas of Asia-Pacific. In fact, the silence from victims whose plight continues undetected may be more concerning than reported increases in VAW. It can safely be assumed that women are facing increased risk in all corners of the world as their movement is limited and they have fewer opportunities to seek support. With this negative outlook for women and girls, it is prudent to ask how governments and society can help to mitigate the prevalence of VAW and provide support for victims during the pandemic.

## C. Support and prevention efforts in Asia and the Pacific

Several United Nations agencies have issued guidance for governments and CSOs to consult when responding to VAW amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the constraints imposed by lockdowns and health concerns, these guidelines generally emphasize spreading awareness of services via social media or word of mouth and expanding capacity of in-person services such as shelters to allow for social distancing and increased volume.<sup>76</sup> This section summarizes examples of how authorities and civil society organizations in the region have approached the issue, complemented by a more detailed list of efforts in the appendix. At the local level, countries and CSOs have been taking innovative approaches to improving access to support under these restrictive circumstances.

Efforts to facilitate reporting instances of VAW have been characterized by creative use of social media. For example, hashtags are being used to spread awareness of the rising prevalence of VAW and to automatically provide information about support services. One of the most important facets of responses to VAW during the pandemic is spreading

<sup>75</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PI\\_STC\\_BecauseWeMatterPolicyBrief-FINAL.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PI_STC_BecauseWeMatterPolicyBrief-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> (UNFPA, UN Women, UN Women).



information widely about available services, changes in their operating hours, and new services. Social media is an excellent way to disseminate such information. However, not everyone has access to social media platforms, and so another way of disseminating vital information is through mobile applications. For instance, the ‘Stand Up Against Violence’ app was recently launched in India. The app lists contact details of State and non-State agencies, service providers, and activists who can assist women victims of domestic abuse. The drawback to using social media for this purpose is that women may have limited access to internet or phones, or may be discouraged from using them due to experiences of digital violence.

In order to circumvent the constant supervision some women face when they are trapped in the same house as their abuser, some organizations are creating coded signals that can secretly act as a call for help. In India, the Red Dot Initiative asks women to use a red bindi as a distress signal, and in Kazakhstan shop owners are warned about a code phrase, the pronunciation of which signals the incidence of domestic violence and the need to inform the police immediately. Similarly, code words may be used over helplines so women can call for help without giving themselves away. These coded initiatives rely on both dissemination of information, so women know to use them, but also a level of secrecy so their abusers remain unaware of the signal.

Still other efforts to curb the shadow pandemic involve expanding support services for victims and survivors in both traditional and non-traditional ways. Traditional methods include the creation of new helplines to offer greater level of telephone and Internet support, special training of police officers on VAW, or expanding funds available to shelters and counseling services. Some non-traditional measures taken in the region thus far include repurposing an empty hotel in Moscow to provide extra rooms to shelters and police performing checkups on women who had reported domestic violence prior to the pandemic. Expanding services directly addresses the issue of reduced support for VAW.

## VI. Policy recommendations

This section presents a list of policy recommendations for addressing VAW during the Covid-19 pandemic in Asia and the Pacific. These recommendations take into consideration the advice provided by other agencies and the actions already undertaken in numerous member States. Recommendations also pull from examples of policies enacted outside of the Asia-Pacific region.

### ***Designate VAW support and women’s health services as “essential”***

When undertaking quarantine measures that restrict people’s movements substantially and close down sectors of the economy, support services for VAW should be designated as essential. Allowing in-person operations to continue with safety measures in place may be crucial to women who are forced to flee their homes due to violence. Similarly, women’s routine health services such as family planning and reproductive health should be considered essential. These measures require policymakers to consider gender-specific issues when crafting their response to the pandemic.

### ***Expand awareness within and access to law enforcement and the justice system***

Police and law enforcement should be trained to provide exceptions to strict lockdowns for those seeking escape from domestic violence. Incorporating law enforcement agencies into the response to VAW is crucial to create an environment in which women feel safe reporting their abuse. Police could be trained to identify fleeing victims and provide them with a direct line to support services. Additionally, the justice system can take measures to improve access to fast remediation and protection. Some examples include virtual legal advising services, extending protection orders for survivors of violence and requiring the abuser, rather than the survivor of violence, to leave home.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>



### ***Expand shelter capacity by repurposing unused buildings***

To account for overrun shelters and closed facilities, crisis support centers should partner with hotels and schools. These large buildings could be used to expand capacity of shelters because they are mostly empty during lockdowns. It is important to have extra space for survivors of violence not only because demand may increase, but also to allow space for quarantining newcomers and safe social distancing. This requires coordination among CSOs, local government and local businesses.

### ***Eliminate stigma and other barriers to reporting violence***

One reason women do not report their experiences of violence to authorities or refrain from seeking help is the stigma attached to breaking the private boundaries of the home. As recommended by UN Women, governments should be sure to engage with communities (not just women) to combat negative gender power imbalances and stereotypes that drive the perpetuation of VAW.<sup>78</sup> Removing the stereotypes around reporting violence may increase the number of women who seek help and can chip away at the entrenched power imbalances that facilitate violence in the first place.

### ***Develop innovative methods for reporting violence***

Various alternative methods for reporting violence and seeking support should be available to women who cannot leave home for help. Social media is a useful tool for creative reporting methods that can also be used to challenge stereotypes and discrimination through thoughtful messaging.<sup>79</sup> In addition to media-facilitated reporting methods, physical signals such as the Red Dot Initiative and code words on helplines are examples of innovative ways to allow women to escape detection by perpetrators and safely seek support.

### ***Increase ICT skills training for women***

The risks that women face when transitioning to digital workplaces and remote schooling are in large part due to less experience in the virtual world. Courses and manuals are already being developed to improve women's knowledge of privacy and digital security.<sup>80</sup> Given women's limited access to internet and ICT prior to the pandemic, quick disbursement of these training materials may help bring them up to speed so they can better limit their exposure to online harassment.

### ***Support violence prevention methods***

While the aforementioned policy recommendations focus on providing support to victims of violence, prevention measures should not be forgotten during the pandemic. Services for mental health and substance abuse should be provided during lockdowns. This type of support may help to relieve some of the household stressors that often trigger incidents of violence. Government economic support programs such as cash transfers for unemployment benefits should also be prioritized in order to relieve the financial stresses that lead to psychological stress and possible physical altercations.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-prevention-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3049>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-prevention-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3049>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=2519>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



### ***Encourage partnerships between governments, CSOs and international organizations***

The policy recommendations listed here require collaboration between local government, national government, CSOs and international organizations. The UN should provide expert support and forge partnerships with government to ensure the safety of public spaces and services, work with the private sector to facilitate support for employees experiencing violence and assist CSOs with service provision to survivors. Governments should enlist the services of CSOs and international organizations to reduce their burden during the Covid-19 pandemic. While preventing VAW should remain a government priority throughout the pandemic, leaning on CSOs and international organizations is necessary during this time.

## **VII. Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates the theoretical ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic may contribute to higher rates of violence against women and provides preliminary data supporting this theory. There are three main avenues along which the pandemic fosters violence: (1) increased exposure to perpetrators, (2) triggering environments for abusers and (3) limited or overrun support services. Incidents of intimate partner violence and digital violence are particularly likely to rise during lockdowns and remote work and school. The theoretical basis for increased VAW appears to be turning into reality, as shown by the media reports compiled in this paper that indicate higher than usual volume of calls to violence helplines and domestic violence caseloads across the Asia-Pacific region. The combined factors contributing to greater rates of violence run the real risk of backtracking on any progress that has been made in the region over the past 25 years, despite the vocal commitments of governments to reducing VAW.

While the theoretical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for VAW paint a bleak picture, this can be used as an opportunity to create innovative policy responses to VAW and preventative measures that may last beyond the global health emergency and reduce VAW in the longer term. Governments and CSOs should focus on greater communication and information access, creating methods for victims of abuse to contact help without facing retaliation from their abusers, and building out the capacity of support services like crisis centers and shelters. Centering women's wellbeing and gender equality in policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic can mitigate the shadow pandemic.



## A1. Data note on violence against women in Asia and the Pacific

At least one previous publication has noted the prevalence of violence against women in Asia and the Pacific to be as high as 50 per cent, or 1 in 2 women experiencing physical or sexual violence in the last 12 months.<sup>82</sup> This statistic is likely misrepresented. The highest rate of IPV in any country in the Asia-Pacific region within the past 12 months is 47.6 per cent, or approximately 1 in 2 women. However, the lowest rate in the region is only 4.9 per cent, or 1 in 20 women. Therefore, summary statistics, such as the average rate of IPV experienced in the last 12 months, would be useful to represent the IPV rate of the entire region. ESCAP calculates regional/sub-regional aggregates or indicators only if data is available at least for the two-thirds of the total regional population.

## A2. Media Reports of violence against women in Asia and the Pacific

Country	Category	Description	Source
Australia	Caseload	A study that surveyed family violence practitioners found the number of first-time violence reports had increased for 42 per cent of practitioners. Additionally, around 60 per cent of practitioners believed the Covid-19 pandemic has increased VAW.	<a href="#">the Age</a>
Bangladesh	Caseload	A survey of 27 out of 64 districts conducted by human rights organization, the Manusher Jonno Foundation, in April found that 1,672 women and 424 children reported experiencing domestic violence for the first time during the lockdown. These new incidents were widely accredited to the stresses of Covid-19.	<a href="#">DW</a>
China	Caseload	Hubei province reported a threefold increase in domestic violence cases during the lockdown.	<a href="#">Dev Policy blog</a>
Fiji	Helpline	The national domestic violence helpline saw a jump in calls over the duration of the lockdown, increasing from 87 in February to 187 in March and 527 in April.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>
India	Helpline	From March to May, the National Commission for Women recorded a doubling in GBV complaints when compared to 2019 (from 607 to 1477).	<a href="#">The New Indian Express</a>
India	Helpline	A Delhi-based CSO, Jagori, saw the number of calls to its helplines for VAW drop by 50 per cent in the same time period.	<a href="#">The Hindu</a>
Indonesia	Caseload	The Indonesian Women's Association for Justice Legal Aid Institute saw the number of cases referred to the National Commission on Violence Against Women triple within the first two weeks of the lockdown.	<a href="#">Eco Business</a>

<sup>82</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/1\\_S2\\_ESCAP.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/1_S2_ESCAP.pdf)



Kazakhstan	Reduced services	Lockdown led to cancellation of court sessions and cases of violence are adjourned.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>
Malaysia	Helpline	Women's Aid Organization, the country's largest service provider for domestic violence survivors, saw no immediate increase in domestic violence reports but was expecting high volume following the end of lockdown once women are able to escape surveillance.	<a href="#">Eco Business</a>
Malaysia	Helpline	From February to March, the Women's Aid Organization reported a 44 per cent increase in calls and inquiries.	<a href="#">The ASEAN Post</a>
Myanmar	Caseload	Akhaya women Myanmar, an organization focused on empowering women ( <a href="#">Akhaya website</a> ), reported a measurable increase in cases of domestic violence during the first two weeks of the country's lockdown.	<a href="#">Myanmar Times</a>
Pakistan	Digital violence	The Digital Rights Foundation in Pakistan reported an increase in complaints from January and February of 2020 to March and April of 189 per cent with their Cyber Harassment Helpline. Of these complaints, 74 per cent were made by women.	<a href="#">Twitter</a>
Philippines	Digital violence	Four times as many cases of online sex abuse against children were reported from March 2020 to May 2020 as compared to the same time frame in 2019.	<a href="#">ReliefWeb</a>
Russian Federation	Helpline	The ANNA Center for the Prevention of Violence reported their calls to a nationwide helpline for women had increased 74 per cent from February to May.	<a href="#">DW</a>
Samoa	Helpline	Call to helplines have increased 150 per cent compared to the same time last year.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>
Singapore	Helpline	The Singapore Association of Women for Action and Research helpline reported a 33 per cent increase in family violence-related calls this February over February 2019.	<a href="#">CNA</a>
Sri Lanka	Caseload	A hospital in Colombo reported a "worrying" increase in domestic violence incidents.	<a href="#">Daily Mirror</a>
Tonga	Caseload	The women's crisis center recorded a 54 per cent increase in the number of incoming cases during the lockdown period.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>



### A3. Measures taken in Asia and the Pacific to reduce violence

Country	Category	Description	Source
Australia	Expanded services	Australia earmarked \$150 million in pandemic relief funds to go towards strengthening support for domestic violence services. A further AU\$20 million was announced for the legal assistance sector to be used to assist those dealing with domestic violence.	<a href="#">PM Australia</a> <a href="#">UN Women</a>
Australia	Expanded services	An Australian program is providing mobile phones and \$30 credit to women and giving domestic violence survivors the ability to connect with support services.	<a href="#">UNDP</a>
Bangladesh	Helpline	A national hotline for human rights abuses is being set up.	<a href="#">UNDP</a>
Brunei Darussalam	Expanded services	The police force has been provided with special training on violence against women in the context of COVID-19.	<a href="#">UN</a>
China	Social media	On the social media platform Sina Weibo in China, the <a href="#">#AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic</a> hashtag has been used to link to online resources and promote awareness of domestic violence during Covid-19.	<a href="#">BBC</a> , <a href="#">UN Women</a>
Fiji	Expanded services	Through concerted advocacy and advance planning, crisis centers were designated essential services during lockdowns.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>
India	Signals	The Red Dot Initiative in India, started by an organization called the Women Entrepreneurs for Transformation (WEFT), uses signaling to show discretely when a woman is at risk of violence in her home. Women experiencing domestic violence can signal with a red bindi to neighbors, shopkeepers, or in an image to the WEFT helpline to call for help.	<a href="#">DW</a>
India	Expanded services	Police in Odisha, India implemented a program to check on women who had filed reports of domestic violence prior to lockdown measures.	<a href="#">The Guardian</a>
India	Helpline	Police in Uttar Pradesh have designated a hotline for domestic violence victims that is operated by female police officers. Advertisements for this hotline feature a message to women that they must “suppress corona, not their voice.”	<a href="#">News18</a>



India	Social media	The Government of Maharashtra launched a web app 'Stand Up Against Violence', which lists contact details of resource persons and activists who can assist victims are listed. It includes mobile numbers of State and non-State agencies, service providers and women movement groups to respond to domestic violence at a subdistrict level.	<a href="#">The Leaflet</a>
Kazakhstan	Signals	Potential victims, owners of grocery stores, vendors, and pharmacies are warned about a code phrase, the pronunciation of which (including by phone) signals the incidence of domestic violence and the need to inform the police immediately.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>
Regional	Social media	Twitter, in consultation with UN Women, launched the #ThereIsHelp campaign, which provides automatic notification of helplines and other services when a user searches for terms associated with VAW. This has so far been launched in Thailand, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Viet Nam.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>
Russian Federation	Expanded services	A hotel in Moscow has partnered with the women's crisis center KitezH to provide free rooms for women fleeing domestic abuse during lockdown measures.	<a href="#">DW</a>
Tonga	Expanded services	Through concerted advocacy and advance planning, crisis centers were designated essential services during lockdowns.	<a href="#">UN Women</a>