

Guidance Note 2: How can activist organizations adapt?

Series on Preventing Violence against Women During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This Guidance Note focuses on how organizations can prepare to best support staff, our communities, and women at increased risk of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Challenges for Activist Organizations

COVID-19 presents many unfamiliar challenges to our organizations, fundamentally disrupting our ability to operate as normal. Staff may experience anxiety, or be unable to work due to increased responsibilities at home, illness, or the need to care for sick family members. Offices and other services, including banks, may become inaccessible (or closed) and insecurity could increase due to diverted security services, fewer people in public spaces, etc. For many VAW prevention organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic is the first experience operating and programming within an emergency context.

Considerations & Creative Problem-solving

The COVID-19 pandemic will challenge many of us to work remotely, rethink our workplans, and develop new ways of interacting with each other and community members. At this time, strong leadership, forward thinking and open and calm communication is critical. While it is impossible to anticipate all of the potential repercussions from COVID-19, proactive planning can help navigate the pandemic in a way that safely sustains programming, while upholding the feminist value of putting people first and supporting staff's overall wellbeing. Share openly about the increased risk of violence against women during this time (see [Guidance Note 1](#)), and provide updated referral information for any available violence and mental-health related services. Additional organizational preparations include the following:

(1) Organizational Safety Planning. Creating an organizational safety plan (or updating an existing plan) for COVID-19 is essential. Consider the following steps:

- Decide how health and other safety risks will be assessed for the office and any community-based work, how relevant decisions will be made, and by whom (e.g., office closures or “essential staff” only, self-quarantine post-exposure, etc.). Apply an intersectional analysis to this decision-making, for example by recognizing that COVID-19 disproportionately affects certain groups (staff living with chronic illnesses or disabilities, women who bear greater child-care responsibilities, staff with fewer financial resources, etc.).
- Schedule regular, more frequent meetings for the management team to remain aware of the unfolding dynamics and make quick decisions.
- Update (and share) current contact information for all staff including their physical location and next of kin contacts. Create an all-staff WhatsApp group or phone tree to quickly communicate updates or urgent information with staff and key community partners, and to share encouraging messages to reduce isolation and strengthen connections.
- Create smaller “Safety Circles”— WhatsApp (or similar platform) groups for staff who live near each other—so they can more easily share security information. Appoint a lead for each group and ensure organizational leadership stays aware of any critical updates.
- Recognize that staff may not have readily available funds/substantial savings. When possible, provide supplementary funds or salary advances, and time off, so staff can buy extra food and supplies.



- Consider organizational cash flow and anticipate needs. Banks may close or be inaccessible; if possible, create an emergency fund held in mobile money that can be distributed electronically if necessary.
- Ensure health insurance policies (and payment) are up-to-date.
- Assess physical security of office equipment, cash and any sensitive information—particularly if the office will be closed for an extended period.

- (2) Transitioning to remote work.** The reality is that many organizations will transition/expand remote work set-ups during COVID-19, which may require new infrastructure as well as support for associated costs. Consider an organizational statement that clearly discusses expectations during this time (e.g., work hours, online approval processes, inclusivity for staff lacking access to personal laptops/smart phones, revised work plans, etc.)—while also acknowledging how childcare (or other caregiving) and emotional stress may affect productivity. If possible, work with IT personnel to help structure this process and select the most appropriate platforms for audio/video conferencing, safe file/data sharing, etc. Investigate options for buying and sending airtime/data electronically to staff.
- (3) Virtual trainings/meetings.** Consider whether planned program activities can be shifted to virtual platforms—including interactive meetings or training. Begin with asking participants how they are doing by demonstrating compassion and solidarity. Add visuals or music to inject some beauty and engage different learning styles, and remember to include your ice breakers and energizers online.
- (4) Collective care.** One of the most powerful manifestations of feminist leadership during COVID-19 is providing a structure for collective care and holding space for staff to express their fears, anxieties, and vulnerabilities. Establish more frequent check-ins (particularly as staff may shift to remote work arrangements), consider regular audio memos from leadership for encouragement, ask staff to share uplifting articles, or suggest self-care practices that can be done from home (see [Guidance Note 3](#)). Remember to reach out to staff who do not have smart phones or computer access with the same messages – they may be the most vulnerable. Consider your wider network of part-time staff, vendors or contractors, and, when feasible, continue payments even if individuals are unable to report for work.
- (5) Solidarity and ally-ship.** During moments of crisis is when we can “walk the talk” of standing in solidarity and being strong allies. Reach out to community members, partners and funders to find out how COVID-19 is affecting their lives and their work, share updates, pool resources, listen and support wherever possible—and provide extra support for partners (or individuals) with more acute needs. This is an opportunity for community building and strengthening our connections and relationships—develop a plan for how to keep in touch throughout the crisis. Consider writing a joint press release or formal statement of solidarity drawing attention to how women and girls, persons with disabilities, LGBTIQ persons, sex workers, individuals reliant on daily wages, and other groups are at increased risk during the pandemic.
- (6) A mental shift.** Ultimately organizational leadership must accept that these are extraordinary times that everyone will navigate in their unique way. Productivity—as commonly defined—will likely diminish, particularly in the early weeks of the pandemic. Leadership can better support staff mental health by accepting this reality and assuring staff that expectations will be flexible during the adjustment period. It is also important to help staff who are able to continue working to focus on different types of work, such as strategic writing, organizing, remote support for partners, etc. As an organization, the ability to be compassionate, flexible and understanding will set a positive tone for collective strength and support.



The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis. Strong organizational leadership can set the tone for a calm response that facilitates sustained VAW prevention programming, strong ally-ship, and emotional and physical safety for staff. Raising Voices stands together in solidarity with all of you during this difficult time.

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