

Guidance Note 4: How can VAW prevention programs adapt?

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

This Guidance Note offers ideas for how violence against women (VAW) prevention organizations can safely continue program activities and mitigate COVID-19 specific risks for women.

COVID-19 Challenges for VAW Prevention Programming


COVID-19 poses many safety risks for staff, organizational partners, and community members working to prevent violence against women. For many settings, it is likely that community mobilization activities will need to be suspended or substantially adapted during this time. Before continuing with any programming, it is essential to comprehensively assess potential risks in order to determine safety and feasibility. Consider the following questions:

- *Are VAW specific services open and accessible for women experiencing violence?*
It is unsafe to open conversations about violence if there exist no options for supporting women who disclose they are currently experiencing violence, or are fearful for their own safety.
- *What legal restrictions have been placed on public gatherings and movement?*
It is important to abide by all COVID-19 directives or guidelines announced by your government, as these are designed to reduce the spread of the virus and keep the public as safe as possible.
- *Does programming increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission?*
Even if no formal directives have been declared, if there are any COVID-19 cases in/nearby your communities it is vital to practice social distancing (e.g., maintaining at least two meters distance at all times).
- *Can community members prioritize and continue to engage in planned activities?*
Discuss how COVID-19 related factors—e.g., additional household and family care responsibilities, emergency meetings at work, emotional stress, etc.—may impact your community and the time they have available for programming, as well as their ability to access public transport if required.

Considerations & Creative Problem-solving

Some VAW prevention organizations may choose to redirect their programming activities towards mitigating the immediate risks to women in violent (or potentially violent) relationships, while others will continue their social norm change and other prevention efforts in ways that reflect current realities. Below are ideas for adjusting your VAW prevention programs during the COVID-19 crisis.

- (1) When safe to do so, continue with prevention programming.** Depending on the stage of the pandemic in your communities, it may be possible to continue your VAW prevention activities with extra care and caution, or to move forward with some adjustments (e.g., smaller group sizes, measures to maintain social distancing, shifting content to virtual platforms). Many community members will be at home, and a break from COVID-19 information may be a welcome relief. However, keep in mind that it is now more important than ever to use positive, aspirational materials, include information about referrals and support services, and avoid highly sensitive or provocative content, as women and men may have limited support to process difficult topics during the pandemic.



(2) Update referral directories. Learn what phone-based and physical services—including national hotlines—are/will be available during the crisis and update your referral list accordingly (e.g., note whether usual services remain available, if there are new service providers or modalities being offered, etc.). For providers offering remote services, ask how they are approaching confidentiality and/or if they are using any “silent solutions” (e.g., providing survivors with a number/code that they can enter if they are unable to vocalize their situation for fear of further danger and escalation of violence). Share this information with colleagues, partners, activists and others.

**Note that response services including post-rape and other medical care, psycho-social counseling, legal intervention, provision of safe shelter, etc. require specific expertise, and are best provided by response organizations with a specific mandate and experience to provide these services.*

- (3) Direct outreach to women known to be at risk.** Mobilize your organizational networks (including community activists, leaders, staff, and partners) to check-in with women who are known to be in violent relationships or have specific risks, either by phone or in person (while social distancing). While only trained providers should offer formal services, direct outreach can help mitigate social isolation and provide critical support. For example, you can talk with women about how best to stay safe (see Box 1). Make plans on how to follow up, and—most essentially—let her know she is not alone.
- (4) Create virtual groups.** Use WhatsApp, Facebook or other available platforms to create groups for activists and community leaders, women’s coalitions, individuals participating in your programs, and/or other groups your organization normally engages with in-person. Use these virtual forums to provide factual information about COVID-19, discuss creative strategies for practicing self-care during this crisis, identify specific needs (and volunteers to provide assistance), share messages of solidarity and hope, and more generally to strengthen connections and mitigate feelings of isolation. Depending on the platform, text, audio and/or video may be available. It is also important that content is moderated for safety.
- (5) Encourage acts of solidarity.** Ask community members about a meaningful way to demonstrate solidarity and a group commitment to prevent violence against women. For instance, as most community members will be in/near their homes, they may consider lighting a candle each evening, or hanging a handkerchief on their door.
- (6) Inspire family activism.** Distribute copies (if safe)—or share electronically—any program materials (posters, community conversations, quick chats, posters, games, etc.) that foster discussions or personal reflection on issues critical to VAW prevention within their families. Choose positive, simple images and content that are uplifting and focus on positive family dynamics (e.g., mutual respect, care, intimacy, support, etc.).
- (7) Use mass media channels.** Consider whether it is feasible to shift community-based programming to a media format. For example, community dramas can be acted out on media or radio, community conversations can be hosted on TV talk shows, public speakers can discuss key topics, etc. (see Box 2).
- (8) Engage in social media activism.** Online activism can be a powerful tool for deepening the analysis of gender power inequality as the root cause of violence against women. In addition, memes and posts can be used to highlight the specific risks that COVID-19 poses for women—including an increase in violence.
- (9) Advocate for an appropriate government response that prioritizes women’s safety.** If your organization has an advocacy program or is part of a feminist coalition, consider developing a joint statement demanding that the government’s response to COVID-19 prioritizes women’s and girls’ rights and specific needs during the pandemic. Include a call for additional government resources for any VAW hotlines or remote services, emphasizing that such options can be life-saving for women (as an example, refer to the [Feminist Policy Statement to address COVID-19](#) developed by the Feminist Alliance for Rights).
- 

BOX 1: Safety planning discussion points for women experiencing (or at risk of) violence

*Prior to lockdown/stay-at-home orders:

- Is there a safe place where you (and your children) can stay away from a violent partner/father, such as a nearby friend, neighbor or relative, a maternal home in the village, a shelter, a religious institution, etc.?
- Are any organizations providing financial support for travel, emergency services or to stock-up on food?
- Are there any weapons in the home that can be removed?
- Is it possible to obtain/hide extra money?

* During lockdown orders:

- Is there a trusted neighbor who you can ask to remain vigilant of any disturbances from your home?
- Can you pack a small bag with essential papers, money, medications, and extra clothes in case you need to leave in an emergency?
- Where could you (and your children) go for safety in an emergency?
- Who can you call for emotional support?
- Is there anyone (friend, religious or community leader) who can call / talk to the person using (or threatening to use) violence?

** Always check that it is safe to talk before starting the discussion, and be prepared to change topics in case of any interruptions.*

BOX 2: Ideas for radio and other media

In collaboration with any media partners, adapt (or develop) content to promote safety and activism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Explore opportunities for call-in/remote participation, and aim for positive, creative formats:

- Openly share and discuss how COVID-19 is affecting women (see [Guidance Note 1](#)) and call on government to address these risks in the response strategy (for example by giving explicit permission for women to access services, resourcing national VAW hotlines, etc.).
- Emphasize the need for leaders, neighbors, family members and friends to stay vigilant for violence against women—particularly during lockdown periods.
- If home is not safe for some women, suggest identifying other places to stay as early as possible.
- Share contacts for any available hotlines, on-line or in person support for survivors. Recognize and celebrate providers for the critical role they are playing during the pandemic.
- Discuss the possibility of COVID-related stigma, and how this is unjust and places everyone in the community at greater risk.
- Send messages of solidarity and hope, while also acknowledging that more difficult emotions (anger, grief, loss, sadness) are to be expected—and accepted—during this time.
- Call for companies (e.g., hotels, mobile phone companies, grocery stores, etc.) to support women at risk or experiencing violence, for example with accommodation, airtime, products/services, etc.
- Encourage self-care and small acts of kindness towards others (see [Guidance Note 3](#)).



The COVID-19 pandemic intensifies risks of violence for women, and also complicates many prevention activities requiring community or group engagement. However, as a community of activists and organizations, there are positive steps we can take to continue our violence prevention efforts and mitigate emerging risks for women. These efforts can help all of us navigate the pandemic with greater safety, solidarity and resilience—without losing sight of our vision for supporting safe communities where all women can live dignified lives, free from violence.

Suggested Citation: Raising Voices (2020) *Guidance Note 4: How can VAW prevention programs adapt?* Series on Preventing Violence against Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Kampala, Uganda.

