



# GENDER ALERT ON COVID-19 AFGHANISTAN



May 21, 2020

## Issue V: Maintaining services for survivors of violence against women and girls during COVID-19

Building on the second Gender Alert on COVID-19, on [Ensuring Access to Services for Survivors of Violence Against Women and Girls](#), UN Women issues this fifth alert to continue to highlight the gender specific impacts of COVID-19 in Afghanistan. This alert provides guidance for service providers operating during the COVID-19 pandemic to continue to safely provide critical services to survivors of violence against women and girls. It highlights the need for service providers to implement strict measures to prevent and mitigate COVID-19 spreading to be able to continue to operate safely and maintain services that are essential for survivors of violence.

This alert concludes with a set of preliminary recommendations for consideration by different stakeholders who are seeking to improve the quality of and access to coordinated and multi-sectoral services for all women and girls. UN Women Afghanistan is committed to advancing the rights of, and meeting the needs of women and girls, including through the COVID-19 crisis. This alert serves to advance this aim, by providing a basis for an informed discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls (VAWG) service provision.

### CONTEXT & EMERGING GENDER IMPACTS

Reports indicate that violence against women and girls (VAWG), particularly domestic violence, has increased during COVID-19. In contexts where movement is restricted, people are confined, poverty and unemployment are increasing, and protection and health systems are weak, women and girls are at greater risk of experiencing gender-based violence. Lockdowns and quarantine measures mean that many women are confined with their abusers, with limited options for seeking help and support.

This is particularly true in Afghanistan, where women have already limited access to essential services. Life-saving care and support to VAWG survivors may be disrupted when front-line service providers and systems, such as health, policing and social welfare, are overburdened and focused on handling COVID-19 cases. Despite lack of data in Afghanistan, emerging evidence shows that, with the COVID-19 crisis, the number of women and girls experiencing violence, more particularly domestic violence, has increased in all provinces of Afghanistan.

However, many women are unable to seek support due to the movement restrictions, disruptions of services, and lack of privacy or freedom to seek help. The strict measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus have raised hurdles and increased risks for people seeking help. Women now have limited opportunities to find privacy away from their abusers and seek help from friends, family, service providers or women's organisations.

Physical distancing and lockdown have significantly impacted the provision of essential health, justice, police and social services for women and girls who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing violence, as highlighted in the second Gender Alert. Other countries have been able to provide remote services using phones or mobile technology. However, in Afghanistan where women's access to mobile phones and internet is limited, remote provision of services is particularly challenging.

## **SPECIFIC AREAS FOR ATTENTION**

### **Maintaining services for survivors of violence**

Considering the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on violence against women, ensuring that women and girls can access VAWG support services is a critical and lifesaving activity. To mitigate the devastating impact of violence on survivors' health, well-being, agency and empowerment and to prevent the reoccurrence of violence, women and girls who have experienced violence need access to services that respond to their multiple needs: health care systems and justice, police and social support services. Service providers need to be able to continue to safely provide survivors with access to quality and coordinated services, including psychosocial support, referrals and relevant information related to their situation. At the same time, maintaining the health and wellbeing of service providers is of critical concern, which presents a challenge to traditional modes of VAWG service delivery. A flexible and adaptive approach is needed to ensure that life-saving services continue to be made available without compromising the safety of service providers and women and girls, and the level of service accessibility, availability and responsiveness. Services to prevent and respond to violence against women need to be expanded and adapted to these new circumstances. Such services should not close at the first sign of COVID-19 as they facilitate life-saving interventions. Rather, they should remain open as long as possible and activities should be adjusted to the emerging risks and leveraged to promote information sharing on COVID-19 among women and girls. Even at the highest risk level, safe one-to-one service delivery should continue, with the necessary safety precautions put in place.

## **Preventing and mitigating COVID-19**

UN Women, in partnership with Colombo Plan has developed guidelines for Women Protection Centers and, in partnership with UNFPA and UNICEF, guidelines for Family Protection Centers, Family Guidance Centers and Women and Girls Safe Spaces. The guidelines are available online:

- [Guidelines for Women Protection Centers operating during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [Guidelines for Family Protection Centers, Family Guidance Centers and Women and Girl Safe Spaces operating during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

The guidelines outline the key prevention measures to be put in place, in addition to regular protocols and standard operating procedures:

- Create a multidisciplinary team with a designated focal point for COVID-19 management.
- Designate a COVID-19 focal point in charge of monitoring public health information and the situation in each Center.
- Liaise with local health authorities for updated and reliable information and guidance.
- Promote remote work, staggered shifts and staff rotation to minimize the number of staff.
- Develop contingency plans for suspected cases, remote work modalities, staff absence, lockdown situations and potential closures.
- Ensure that the referral pathway and list of services available are updated.
- All staff should be provided with the equipment to safely work (personal protection equipment but also mobile phones, mobile phone credit, handsets, laptops for remote work).
- Provide information about COVID-19 and preventive measures to all staff and clients. Staff should receive regular trainings, updates and refreshers.
- Ensure adequate physical distancing: Put in place measures and re-arrange interiors and furniture to ensure that facilities are not crowded and are able to adhere to distancing guidance (1.5 meters distance at all times).
- Clean AND disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least twice a day.
- Ensure proper hand washing before entering the facility.
- Ensure availability of alcohol-based hand sanitizer, disposable tissues and no-touch bins/receptacles in every room.
- Masks: All staff and clients should wear masks at all times, and especially if physical distancing of 1.5 meters between people cannot be ensured. Clients should be provided with masks before entering the facility.
- Provide visual displays of advice on physical distancing,

hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, and general messages on COVID-19 prevention at the entrance and in all rooms of the facility.

- Pre-screening and regular monitoring: staff, clients and residents should be screened for signs and symptoms before entering the facility. In case of suspected cases, people should be advised on where to seek help. For residents of Women Protection Centers, local health authorities should be contacted.
- Facilitate referrals and access to other services as needed, including via a “phone booth”/ phone station to facilitate access to services that may not be available or accessible face-to-face because staff are working from home.

## Specific considerations for VAWG services

### Survivor-centered approach

A survivor-centered approach places the needs and wishes of survivors at the centre of the response. It ensures that support is provided to respond to their multiple needs in an empowering and safe way, and that they are treated with dignity and respect. In the midst of this crisis, survivors need care and support more than ever. It is critical that service providers are able to listen to their concerns and fears and provide support, as well as information about COVID-19. The **safety and wellbeing** of all staff and clients should be prioritized. All the services should continue to be provided through a **survivor-centered approach**, in line with **do no harm principles**:

- Ensure privacy and confidentiality
- Ensure safety and security
- Consider their multiple needs
- Assess risks and vulnerabilities
- Treat the survivor with dignity and respect and without discrimination
- Provide information and respect the right of the survivor to make decisions about examination, treatment and a legal course of action related to VAWG.

### Self-care

The COVID-19 pandemic and the preventive measures in place may affect the mental health and well-being of staff and clients, especially the use of personal protection equipment and restriction of contact, group activities and visitors. Clients and staff should be encouraged to voice their concerns, needs and fears, and to access psycho-social counselling.

### Safety plans

In a crisis, safety planning is particularly critical. A safety plan is a personalized, practical plan that includes ways to remain safe while in a relationship, planning to leave a

relationship, or after a survivor has left. It is important to prioritize early safety planning and regular follow-up with particularly vulnerable clients. Survivors of violence should be supported to prepare for situations of quarantine, lockdown, or “shelter-in-place”.

### Confidentiality and Data Protection

When working remotely and contacting or providing support to survivors of violence over the phone, it is of the utmost importance **to ensure the confidentiality of both staff and clients**. This is particularly true in periods of lockdown, where clients can be confined with their abusers with limited to no opportunities to find privacy away from their abusers and receive or seek support. **Not respecting strict measures to uphold confidentiality could put the client at risk.**

As such, it is critical to ensure safe storage of sensitive documentation including client data. With some staff working from home, consider the safest ways to store documentation without putting anyone at risk. Ensure that data protection protocols are in place and implemented, with paper and electronic file evaluation provisions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

### All Actors:

- Prioritize and ensure that all essential services for survivors of violence remain safely available and accessible, including health care and justice, police and social services.
- Ensure that essential services providers from all sectors, including civil society organizations, have the necessary personal protective equipment to operate safely.
- Support and ensure the strict implementation of the COVID-19 guidelines for Women Protection Centers, Family Protection Centers, Family Guidance Centers, and Women and Girls Safe Spaces to continue to operate safely.
- Promote multi-sectoral coordinated approaches to VAWG service provision at the national, sub-national and local levels.
- Raise awareness about the increased risks of VAWG and services available at the national, sub-national and local level through media, partners, local leaders and community volunteers.
- Ensure support for organisations that provide services to hard-to-reach, remote and/ or vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls who face multiple forms of discrimination.
- Continue to consult, engage and support partners and civil society organisations about their concerns and needs to inform VAWG service provision.

- Update service directories and referral pathways, to reflect changes in available services, informing civil society service providers and key communities about these new services.
- To the extent possible, monitor and evaluate interventions, including safely gathering data disaggregated by sex, age and disability, to help inform efficiency and efficacy of VAWG service provision.
- Promote and ensure access to psycho-social counselling for staff and clients.
- Ensure safety and well-being of survivors who are suspected to have contracted or have contracted COVID-19, and support survivors throughout the process.

#### **Health actors:**

- Follow Afghanistan Gender-Based Violence Sub-Cluster “GBV Guidance Note for COVID-19 Response”.
- Prioritize testing for survivors of violence and their children, particularly residents of Women Protection Centers. If testing is not available, ensure self-isolation/quarantine for any person who has been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.
- Ensure safety and well-being of survivors of violence in health facilities and quarantine centers and ensure they receive all the necessary VAWG services, either in person or remotely, particularly psychosocial counselling.
- Train front-line service providers on how to recognize, respond, protect and refer survivors to appropriate services, as well as training in basic psychosocial counselling and safety planning.
- Establish Women and Girls Desks in all health facilities (clinics, hospitals and quarantine centers), where a trained VAWG case worker can safely and confidentially provide information about COVID-19, counselling and safety planning, and referral to appropriate services.