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## **Call for submissions: COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women**

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović, is following closely the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's right to a life free from violence. As she warned in a recent [statement](#) in 27 March 2020, the efforts to deal with the current health crisis may lead to an increase in domestic violence against women.

As initial police and hotline reports suggest, domestic violence has already surged in many countries, as measures imposing isolation compel a number of women to be kept at home under the same roof with perpetrators, thus exacerbating women's vulnerability to domestic violence, including femicides. The risk is aggravated by fewer police interventions; the closure of courts and limited access to justice; the closure of shelters and services for victims, and reduced access to reproductive health services.

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women wishes to receive all relevant information on the increase of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from civil society, States, National Human Rights Institutions, international organisations, academia and other stakeholders on the following issues:

- 1. To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.**

Violence against women has been on the rise since the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown measures, coined as Circuit Breaker measures, were implemented in Singapore. The Singapore Police Force reported a 22% increase in police reports related to family violence with 476 cases reported from the start of lockdown, 7 April 2020, to 6 May 2020.<sup>1</sup> The acts of violence reported include causing hurt, using criminal force, assault, criminal intimidation and wrongful confinement. This is further exacerbated by the economic uncertainty that may lead to financial setbacks, stress and tension in the family. For the first three months (January 2020 to March 2020), total employment

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<sup>1</sup> Coronavirus: More cases of family violence during circuit breaker; police to proactively help victims. The Straits Times. May 14, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/coronavirus-more-cases-of-family-violence-during-circuit-breaker-police-to>



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registered the sharpest contraction and citizen unemployment rates rose to the highest in the decade (3.5%) as well as a 12% increase in retrenchments for both men and women.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the rise in family violence reports during the lockdown period, there has not been an increase in admissions to the crisis shelters in Singapore compared to before.<sup>3</sup> Not all victims of domestic violence need to stay in the shelters as they can have other accommodation arrangements such as staying with their relatives. They may choose to remain at their homes with safety measures in place, while being supported by a social worker. Seeking the crisis shelter is usually the last resort when it is no longer safe for victims to stay at home.

The lockdown measures have also resulted in greater abusive and exploitative conditions for the live-in foreign domestic workers (FDWs). FDWs are working longer hours with inadequate rest. This is because employers are home at almost all hours of the day, leading to an increase in household and caregiving duties. Complaints of verbal abuse have been on the rise as well because disputes have become more frequent with the increased proximity between employers and FWDs during isolation.<sup>4</sup>

Conditions at home are further worsened with greater scrutiny by employers. FDWs face restrictions in mobile phone usage and mobility which limit them from communicating with their loved ones back home and leaving the house for essential errands such as remitting money.

Furthermore, the adverse financial effect brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the loss of employment, delayed payment of salaries or substantial pay cut for FDWs due to the changes in employers' financial circumstances. For instance, there were FDWs who were terminated by employers and were unable to return to their hometown due to travel restrictions imposed locally and in their home countries.<sup>5</sup>

Having to endure such conditions during lockdown, runaway cases have been on the rise. The Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Social Support and Training

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<sup>2</sup> Singapore Ministry of Manpower, 15 June 2020: Report: Labour Market First Quarter 2020 from <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Labour-Market-Report-1Q-2020.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Safe havens for battered women. The Straits Times. Jun 7, 2020. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/safe-havens-for-battered-women>

<sup>4</sup> Covid-19 And Impact Of Circuit Breaker Measures On Domestic Workers — HOME. May 15, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.home.org.sg/statements/2020/5/15/covid-19-and-impact-of-circuit-breaker-measures-on-domestic-workers>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



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(FAST)<sup>6</sup> reported that the number of runaway cases have more than doubled when lockdown measures were implemented, from 13 in March 2020 to 29 in April 2020.<sup>7</sup> Also, the dedicated shelters for FDWs and agencies' lodging facilities are at full capacity due to a slow turnover rate which means that FDWs who are unable to receive help have to find their own accommodations and maintain their own upkeep in Singapore with no income as they wait to be repatriated.<sup>8</sup>

## **2. Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

For individuals seeking help for issues related to violence, helplines run by the Government, government-linked agencies and civil societies are widely available. There is also a National Care Hotline, a 24-hour catch-all helpline, offering emotional support for all individuals and the trained officers will link individuals up with social service agencies and specialised services if needed.

There has been a significant increase in the number of calls with the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Adult and Child Protective Services. A 14% increase in enquiries was seen in the first two weeks of the lockdown period, compared with two weeks prior to the implementation of the measures. Likewise, the Family Violence Specialist Centres in Singapore saw a 37% increase in the same period of time.<sup>9</sup>

The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)<sup>10</sup> runs a Women's Helpline and in the month of March 2020, the helpline received 641 calls (including

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<sup>6</sup> Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Social Support and Training (FAST) founded in 2005, is a charity supported by the Ministry of Manpower in Singapore and is an approved Instituted of a Public Character (IPC).

<sup>7</sup> Coronavirus: More maids running away during circuit breaker, say advocacy groups. The Straits Times. May 18, 2020. Retrieved 12 June 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/coronavirus-more-maids-running-away-during-circuit-breaker-say-advocacy-groups>

<sup>8</sup> Covid-19 And Impact Of Circuit Breaker Measures On Domestic Workers — HOME. May 15, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.home.org.sg/statements/2020/5/15/covid-19-and-impact-of-circuit-breaker-measures-on-domestic-workers>

<sup>9</sup> COVID-19: MSF keeping 'close watch' on domestic abuse cases as more reach out for help over circuit breaker period. CNN. April 23, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/covid-19-msf-domestic-abuse-violence-cases-circuit-breaker-12671330>

<sup>10</sup> Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) is Singapore's leading women's rights and gender-equality advocacy group. It was founded in 1985 and works to identify and eliminate gender-based barriers through research, advocacy, education, training and support services. AWARE embraces diversity, respects the individual and the choices she makes in life, and supports her when needed.



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messages, emails, walk-ins and referrals). In April 2020, 125 of the 596 calls (including messages, emails, walk-ins and referrals) were pertaining to family violence which was a 112% increase over family violence calls compared to 59 calls in April 2019.<sup>11</sup> A total of 752 calls (including messages, online chats, emails and referrals) were received in May 2020 and this was a 137% increase in family violence calls and 436% increase in emotional and psychological distress calls compared to May 2019.<sup>12</sup> The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME)<sup>13</sup> has also seen a 25% increase in the number of calls to their helpline for domestic workers since the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown regulations on 7 April 2020.<sup>14</sup>

The Centre for Domestic Employees (CDE), an initiative of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)<sup>15</sup>, runs the largest shelter for FDWs in Singapore and manages the greatest number of FDW cases amongst all NGOs. CDE saw a doubling of helpline calls received in the past few months and 30% of overall calls during the COVID-19 period are related to off-days arrangements, remittance services and employment conflicts. The 24-hour helpline service are manned by case officers who are able to converse in the native languages of the FDWs.

Furthermore, the healthcare sector in Singapore (approximately 80% are women) being in the frontline of this battle against COVID-19 provides various means of mental wellness support via hotline services as well as peer support services. An estimated 90,000 healthcare workers have access to these services as a form of support system to help the women workers manage the stress of coping with COVID-19 at the work-front as well as managing their families.

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<sup>11</sup> AWARE launches chat service to better support survivors of abuse and violence. AWARE. May 8, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/05/aware-launches-chat-service-to-better-support-survivors-of-abuse-and-violence/>

<sup>12</sup> AWARE Helpline saw record calls in May, with 137% increase in family violence and 436% increase in emotional and psychological distress over 2019. AWARE. June 25, 2020. Retrieved 29 June 2020, from <https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/06/aware-helpline-saw-record-calls-in-may-with-137-increase-in-family-violence-and-436-increase-in-emotional-and-psychological-distress-over-2019/>

<sup>13</sup> The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) is a Singapore-based charity founded in 2004. HOME is dedicated to empowering and supporting migrant workers who find themselves victims of human rights violations and suffer abuse and exploitation.

<sup>14</sup> Covid-19 And Impact Of Circuit Breaker Measures On Domestic Workers — HOME. May 15, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.home.org.sg/statements/2020/5/15/covid-19-and-impact-of-circuit-breaker-measures-on-domestic-workers>

<sup>15</sup> The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) is a national confederation of trade unions as well as a network of professional associations and partners across all sectors in Singapore. NTUC's objectives are to help Singapore stay competitive and workers remain employable for life; to enhance the social status and well-being of members and people; and to build a strong, responsible and caring labour movement.



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Generally, there has been an increase in the numbers of calls across the various social service agencies and related services. While some might only notice a slight increase in calls pertaining to family violence, such as in the case of the Singapore Muslim Women's Association (PPIS)<sup>16</sup>, it may be attributed to the regular check-ins by the caseworkers on families with domestic violence records which had potentially circumvented domestic violence from occurring. Domestic violence cases may also be under-reported as victims in the local Malay-Muslim community may choose not to report.

**3. Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?**

Victims of domestic violence can be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation and explore alternative living arrangements that would keep them safe. Victims may choose to stay with relatives or a crisis shelter and social workers can help make the necessary arrangements.

**4. Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?**

Shelters in Singapore are open and available. There are four crisis shelters funded by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) that provide temporary refuge to women and their children who are victims of domestic violence. For instance, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO)<sup>17</sup> runs a shelter which remained open during COVID-19 and its operations have not been affected with staff on site, including counsellors.

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<sup>16</sup> Singapore Muslim Women's Association or Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura (PPIS) founded in 1952, is a non-profit organisation focused on services for women, family and children. PPIS focuses on working with women of all ages in carrying out their multiple roles in society. PPIS runs three core community services, namely: Family Services, Student Care and Early Childhood Education (ECE). With 16 centres islandwide, the services work together to provide quality and holistic support as well as developmental programmes for women and their families across the different phases of their lives.

<sup>17</sup> The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) was established in 1980 as the national coordinating body of women's organisations in Singapore. SCWO has more than 50 member organisations, which represent over 500,000 women, and it serves to unite them to work toward the ideals of 'Equal Space, Equal Voice and Equal Worth' for women in Singapore.



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If all the shelters have reached their maximum capacity, there are alternative accommodations such as pre-approved budget hotels and hostels available. There is funding for such alternative accommodations, fully subsidised, from various NGOs, Family Service Centres (FSCs)<sup>18</sup> and MSF.

**5. Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Yes, protection orders are available and accessible throughout the COVID-19 pandemic – the Family Justice Court (FJC) continues to process Protection Orders. Victims of domestic violence can apply for protection orders through a central online system by the FJC - the I-FAMS (Integrated Family Application Management System). Applicants can also approach the Family Violence Service Centres for assistance during COVID-19, with calls or video-conferencing as the main mode of service delivery.

Alternatively, the Family Service Centres' designated representatives can apply for protection orders on behalf of clients via I-FAMS. However, after that, the client still needs to complete the application process at the Family Protection Centre at the FJC within a stipulated period. The draft application will be kept in the system for 28 days until the client is able to attend in person for processing.

**6. What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?**

While the FJC only heard essential matters that are time-sensitive, constitute a threat to life and liberty, and/or involved urgent needs of the family from the period of 7 April 2020 to 1 June 2020 and all other matters scheduled for hearing during that period were adjourned<sup>19</sup>, family violence victims were still able to apply for Personal Protection

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<sup>18</sup> Family Service Centres (FSCs) are based in the community to provide help and support to individuals and families in need. They are staffed by social service professionals. FSCs work closely with individuals and families to help them cope better with personal, social and emotional challenges. FSCs are open to all families and individuals regardless of age, race, language or religion, at different life stages and of various family types.

<sup>19</sup> Coronavirus: Courts to hear only essential and urgent matters. The Straits Times. April 7, 2020. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/courts-to-hear-only-essential-and-urgent-matters>



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Orders (PPOs) through I-FAMS or approach Family Violence Specialist Centres for assistance with the PPOs application via video-link.

However, the stalling of divorce proceedings due to the lockdown measures may continue to put women already suffering from domestic violence in a risky and vulnerable position. Likewise, the closure of the Syariah Court (the Muslim Court that handles family law) during the same period may put victims in unsafe situations.

From 2 June 2020 onwards, the FJC has embarked on a controlled approach to the safe resumption of activities over the next few weeks. The FJC has resumed hearings and hearings have mostly been done remotely through the use of video and teleconferencing.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, for the Syariah Court where services resumed progressively from 2 June 2020 onwards.

Throughout the lockdown period, women are able to still seek free legal advice on issues related to family law, family violence and Syariah Law remotely via the phone or video conferencing offered by community legal clinics.

Women's access to justice can be affected if they are unaware of the resources and services available, unfamiliar with technology or lack the knowledge in navigating the online system. Furthermore, with the COVID-19 measures in place and majority working from home, it would be difficult for victims to access devices and seek help through the phone or online platforms with the perpetrator at home.

**7. What are the impacts of the current restrictive measures and lockdowns on women's access to health services? Please specify whether services are closed or suspended, particularly those focusing on reproductive health.**

Healthcare and medical services were reviewed and those deemed to be non-essential were deferred during the COVID-19 lockdown regulations from the period of 7 April to 1 June 2020.

Obstetric and child delivery services were deemed as essential services and were not deferred. Likewise, for Child Immunization and developmental assessment for 0 to 18 months and Neonatal jaundice screening. However, women services that focus on

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<sup>20</sup> The Judiciary's response to the exit of the circuit breaker" period. May 29, 2020. Retrieved 15 June 2020, from <https://www.familyjusticecourts.gov.sg/docs/default-source/resources/speeches/message-from-cj-on-exit-of-circuit-breaker.pdf>



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preventive health were deemed non-essential and were deferred. Screening was also halted during 7 April to 1 June 2020 and this will lead to a delay in picking up chronic illnesses and even malignancies.<sup>21</sup>

Women may face limitations in accessing named Specialist Doctors' services at their preferred hospitals due to the limitations imposed on healthcare professionals to avoid cross-institutional movements. Additionally, the fear of being exposed to COVID-19 may cause some women to put off seeking medical help for symptoms, especially the older persons who are the most vulnerable.

From 2 June to 18 June 2020, healthcare services which were previously deferred were resumed in a controlled and gradual manner and from 19 June 2020 onwards, all healthcare services will resume with precautionary measures in place.<sup>22</sup>

#### **8. Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.**

With the COVID-19 lockdown regulations in place, victims of domestic violence are isolated at home with their perpetrators 24/7 which makes it difficult for victims to seek help. Victims are cut off from their social support and may feel that they are unable to seek refuge in the homes of their relatives and friends. It would be difficult for victims who are controlled by perpetrators through the use of technology such as mobile phones or Wi-Fi to reach out for help as well.

Work-from-home arrangements are also a barrier for victims to call helplines and related services due to the close proximity with their perpetrators. Victims might feel that there is a high chance of their perpetrators finding out that they have reached out for help. Under normal circumstances, it is already a challenge for victims to seek help and the social isolation measures due to COVID-19, coupled with the fact that victims were not able to head out for school, work or to run errands, makes calling any helplines or reaching out to their family and friends an even greater challenge.

For social workers, the biggest obstacle encountered is the ability to draft safety plans for victims of domestic violence when they are stuck at home with their perpetrators.

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<sup>21</sup> End of circuit breaker phased approach to resuming healthcare services. MOH. May 22, 2020. Retrieved 3 June 2020, from <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/end-of-circuit-breaker-phased-approach-to-resuming-healthcare-services>

<sup>22</sup> Moving into phase two of re-opening. MOH. Jun 15, 2020. Retrieved 16 June 2020, from <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/moving-into-phase-two-of-re-opening>



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The perpetrators might hear their plans and victims would face increased risk of escalation of violence after such interventions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made raising awareness on domestic violence and encouraging victims to speak up a challenge. In a research study conducted by United Women Singapore (UWS)<sup>23</sup>, in collaboration with Ipsos, it was reported that an estimated 72% of abused women are not likely to report and 1 in 4 of the 300 Singaporeans who participated in the study do not consider hitting a spouse as domestic abuse.<sup>24</sup> Give the current situation where many domestic violence awareness activities have gone online, not only is it difficult to educate the public on domestic violence, it would be an even greater challenge to reach out to victims.

It is also a challenge to reach out to those who have little or no access to the internet, social media or are not part of an online community, such as some elderly, low socio-economic groups and FDWs. This poses as an obstacle for organisations and services that provide support to victims of violence against women.

#### **9. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.**

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) formed a taskforce to study the challenges faced by various groups experiencing violence, and identify ways in which the Government can work hand-in-hand with community partners to empower victims to break the cycle of violence.<sup>25</sup> This includes examining how to better support victims when their cases go through the criminal justice system such as strengthening operational processes and enhancing protocols. The taskforce consists of members from Government agencies, the courts

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<sup>23</sup> United Women Singapore (UWS) is a local non-profit organisation that advances women's empowerment and gender equality. The organisation works towards narrowing the gender equality gap through education and raising awareness and advocacy on issues of anti-violence and women's empowerment, with the support of partners from the public and private sectors. UWS has an Institution of Public Character (IPC) status and all donors are able to claim tax relief from their assessable income based on the amount donated, at prevailing deduction rate.

<sup>24</sup> 3 in 10 Singaporeans say they or someone close to them have experienced domestic abuse. Ipsos. December 10, 2019. Retrieved 12 June 2020, from [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-12/press\\_release\\_perceptions\\_of\\_domestic\\_abuse\\_in\\_singapore\\_ipsos\\_uws\\_6\\_december\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-12/press_release_perceptions_of_domestic_abuse_in_singapore_ipsos_uws_6_december_2019.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Saying No to Family Violence 21-Strong Taskforce to Lead National Effort. (2020). MHA. April 23, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/saying-no-to-family-violence-21-strong-taskforce-to-lead-national-effort>



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and community partners such as hospitals, Family Violence Specialist Centres, crisis shelters, and Family Service Centres.

MSF has also set up a 24-hour National Care Hotline to offer emotional support during COVID-19. The hotline is manned by over 300 psychologists, counsellors, social workers, psychiatrist, and public officers trained in psychological first aid.<sup>26</sup> Callers will be linked up with the relevant social service agencies and specialised services if needed. This National Care Hotline operates alongside other specialised service hotlines in Singapore.

Additionally, the Singapore Police Force (SPF) has taken more steps to increase support for victims of domestic violence. The police will refer victims to the nearest Family Service Centre, Family Violence Specialist Centre or any of the crisis shelters, even if the victims do not request for help or shelter. To step up protection, the police will also contact victims regularly to check in on them and to find out if further assistance is needed.<sup>27</sup>

Even if face-to-face services are ceased, Social Services Agencies (SSAs) are whitelisted as essential services and are able to conduct urgent home visits and face-to-face sessions for domestic violence cases. There are greater collaborations between various agencies such as the SPF, Child Protection Services, schools, and Grassroot leaders<sup>28</sup> for a better reach and engagement of women combating domestic violence. For example, in severe cases of domestic violence where it is best for the victims not to continue staying in the same house as their perpetrators, special permissions are granted by the SPF for the women to stay with their relatives during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Social workers have converted to online video conferencing platforms to monitor safely and sight women and children under risky situations. Social workers also leverage on

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<sup>26</sup> National Care Hotline now ready for calls after 300 specialists volunteer to help man the 24-hour hotline. The Straits Times. April 10, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/national-care-hotline-now-ready-for-calls-after-300-specialists-volunteer-to-help>

<sup>27</sup> Coronavirus: More cases of family violence during circuit breaker; police to proactively help victims. The Straits Times. May 14, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/coronavirus-more-cases-of-family-violence-during-circuit-breaker-police-to>

<sup>28</sup> Grassroots leaders are volunteers appointed by the People's Association (PA) to bring the community and government closer, gather feedback from residents, implement the government's social programmes and help to explain government policies to residents to the best of their ability. PA was established on 1 July 1960 as a statutory board of the Singapore Government to promote racial harmony and social cohesion in Singapore.



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the schools' assistance to tap onto Home-Based Learning<sup>29</sup> platforms to sight children and their parents, and for teachers to alert social workers if they notice any unusual marks on the children or unsafe activities happening at home.

Where online methods and check-ins via phone fail to monitor safely, social workers would use home visits as the last resort to sight women and children at risk of domestic violence. Special precautions such as donning the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) are taken before making any home visits.

**10. Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies.**

To combat violence against women, the NGOs in Singapore swiftly responded by finding new ways to reach out to victims and provide information to better provide support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) worked with MSF and MHA to start an online campaign to provide tips and information for those experiencing violence. The domestic violence related infographics and information are circulated on various social media platforms as well as sent to over 60 NGOs that are SCWO's member organisations. This information can reach more than 500,000 women in Singapore.

Local NGOs were also quick to put in place alternatives for face-to-face contact services which had to be discontinued because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

For instance, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), launched a new online text chat service on 8 May 2020 which is an extension of AWARE's long-running Women's Helpline and related services.<sup>30</sup> Women in distress can schedule a 30-minutes appointment to chat with a trained staff or volunteer who will be able to provide emotional support and practical information, make referrals and advise on other

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<sup>29</sup> Home-Based Learning refers to the shift from learning in school to e-learning at home.

<sup>30</sup> AWARE launches chat service to better support survivors of abuse and violence. AWARE. May 8, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/05/aware-launches-chat-service-to-better-support-survivors-of-abuse-and-violence/>



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helpful resources available for women experiencing violence. This chat is an avenue for victims who may not have sufficient privacy at home to call a helpline.

The Society Against Family Violence (SAFV) also launched a new initiative – a Men’s Helplink. As there are increased stressors and anxiety during this COVID-19 pandemic which can be hard for one to control their behaviours, the helplink will connect men with the social service agencies and specialised services in hopes of preventing triggers from escalating to family violence cases.<sup>31</sup>

To combat the gendered impacts brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, AWARE launched the Vulnerable Women Fund to continue to provide support and if possible, expand their services in helping five particularly vulnerable groups of women in Singapore – family violence victims, workplace harassment victims, single mothers, foreign domestic workers and foreign spouses.<sup>32</sup>

Prior to COVID-19, Daughters of Tomorrow (DOT)<sup>33</sup> usually receives 25 to 30 new referrals of women from Family Service Centres or Social Services Offices each month to receive job readiness and skills training, and are bridged to accessible employment opportunities. Due to the pandemic, DOT had around 300 women seeking assistance in the last 2 months. The top 3 concerns highlighted by the women were food security, help to access government schemes and their children’s home-based learning. DOT responded with ad-hoc COVID-19 support measures such as providing once-off grocery vouchers, providing emotional support through the volunteer befrienders’ network and providing guidance on how to access government schemes while loaning out laptops and having it delivered via courier to the women safely in order for them to receive basic training. DOT also helped to link the women up with other community partners and resources who could provide assistance in relation to children’s learning endeavours.

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<sup>31</sup> Coronavirus: Spike in family violence reports prompts group to launch platform for men to seek support. The Straits Times. May 15, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/coronavirus-spike-in-family-violence-reports-prompts-group-to-launch-platform-for-men-to>

<sup>32</sup> How the COVID-19 pandemic affects vulnerable women in Singapore. AWARE. March 31, 2020. Retrieved 28 May 2020, from <https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/03/how-the-covid-19-pandemic-affects-vulnerable-women-in-singapore/>

<sup>33</sup> Daughters Of Tomorrow (DOT) is a registered charity organization in Singapore whose mission is to facilitate livelihood opportunities for underprivileged women, and support them in building financially independent and resilient families. Our beneficiaries are women aged 20 to 60 who are from low-income families who currently face limitations on access to gainful employment due to child-rearing responsibilities, lack of flexibility in employment practices and lack of focused training and skills-enhancement.



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Furthermore, NGOs in Singapore have launched initiatives to help and support victims of domestic violence. For example, United Women Singapore (UWS) started an online fundraising initiative to help raise funds for women's shelters in Singapore which has provided residents seeking refuge as a result of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic with necessities such as toiletries and pharmaceuticals.

To prevent violence and to combat the stress especially faced by healthcare workers during this COVID-19 period to de-stress amidst high-pressure environments, the Healthcare Academy, Health Services Employees' Union and the NTUC Employment and Employability Institute partnered MindFi to offer a mindfulness mobile app which contains a diverse content library of mindfulness activities that can help promote self-care.

**11. Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.**

The COVID-19 crisis has brought about numerous challenges in combating violence against women and in such times, it is imperative to have a public-private-people partnership to raise awareness and help support victims. As the lockdown measures start easing up, the economy begins to open up over the next few months and employees will start returning to work.

Local NGOs have been looking into ways to support victims as employees are heading back to work. For example, UWS will be launching an initiative to help companies implement comprehensive personnel policies to spot the signs of employees impacted by domestic violence and to ensure a safe and supportive workplace environment. This will enable victims to receive support from their employers while continuing to be productive members of the workforce.

Another way is to have victims self-identify themselves as "essential to return to work" which provides a cover for them to leave their home for the purpose of work. It is an op-in process that allows victims to return to work, if she wishes so, and this will not bring about any suspicions and may even allow victims to seek help during work hours. This is because work-from-home is still the default arrangement in Singapore and not all employees will be back at work.

Recognising that workers' livelihoods are at stake because of COVID-19, which may lead to tension within the family, thereby causing violence against women, NTUC



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would be prioritising its efforts to secure the livelihood and enhance the long-term employability of workers, especially women. For example, NTUC (U Family)<sup>34</sup> is supporting NTUC's Employment and Employability Institute (e2i) in the virtual career fair for the Early Childhood (EC) sector to reach out to women who are keen to return to work or are mid-career switchers through NTUC's network of women organizations. NTUC would also be focusing on the healthcare sector. By embarking on such programmes, women as a whole, as well as those in vulnerable groups may be able to contribute to the family's income and increase their capability to have relevant skillsets in the job market.

All submissions should be sent to [yaw@ohchr.org](mailto:yaw@ohchr.org) as soon as possible, and will be received until **30 June 2020**. You are kindly requested to provide your submissions in English, French or Spanish. Kindly indicate if you **do not** wish your submission to be made publicly available.

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<sup>34</sup> U Family, as an initiative of NTUC, is a community supporting families at their different life stages, and connecting women to build strength and realise their potential.