



Covid-19: EU states report 60% rise in emergency calls about domestic violence

Elisabeth Mahase

The BMJ

A 60% increase in emergency calls from women subjected to violence by their intimate partner has been reported in the World Health Organization Europe member states.

Comparing April 2020 with the same period last year, WHO said that online inquiries to violence prevention support hotlines had also increased as much as fivefold. This comes as many countries are in lockdown or are restricting people's ability to leave their homes because of the covid-19 pandemic.

The United Nations Population Fund has warned that continuing lockdowns for six months could result in an extra 31 million cases of gender based violence globally. It added that the pandemic was expected to "cause significant delays in programmes to end female genital mutilation [FGM] and child marriage," resulting in an estimated two million more cases of FGM and 13 million more child marriages over the next decade.

WHO said that governments had a "moral obligation" to ensure that services designed to tackle violence were "available and resourced" and that hotline and online services were expanded to meet increased need.

Urgent action

Speaking at a press briefing on 7 May, Hans Kluge, regional director of WHO Europe, said, "WHO is deeply troubled by the reports from many countries, including Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Ireland, Russian Federation, Spain, UK, and others of increases in interpersonal violence, including violence against women and men, by an intimate partner and against children—because of the covid-19 response."

Kluge said that, before the pandemic, one in four women and one in three children in the European region had experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime.

"This is unacceptable," he said. "Evidence shows that interpersonal violence tends to increase during every type of

emergency. This requires our urgent action. The measures required to prevent the transmission of covid-19 have challenged our ability to prevent and respond to violence when and where it occurs."

Speaking to governments and local authorities, Kluge said that health and social services must be kept running. He also called on communities to "stay in touch, contact and support your neighbours, acquaintances, families, and friends. If you see something, say something."

He shared what different countries were doing to combat the issue. In France, pharmacists can be alerted through code words, and some hotels have been converted into shelters. Meanwhile, Greenland has limited the sale of alcohol to make the home environment safer for children, and in Italy an app has been developed that allows people to ask for help without needing to make a phone call.

Kluge concluded, "With job losses, rising alcohol based harm and drug use, stress and fear, the legacy of this pandemic could haunt us for years. So much related to covid-19 has been unparalleled and is outside our control and understanding . . . Please remember, that violence is preventable, not inevitable."

In the UK the government has said that guidance on household isolation in relation to covid-19 "does not apply if you need to leave your home to escape domestic abuse." It has also provided guidance¹ on what services are available to people experiencing abuse or what to do if you suspect that someone else is experiencing domestic abuse.

1 Home Office. Coronavirus (COVID-19): support for victims of domestic abuse. 14 Apr 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-and-domestic-abuse/coronavirus-covid-19-support-for-victims-of-domestic-abuse>.

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>