

Covid-19, Violence and Addictions

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravates gender violence and addictions, creating a situation of vulnerability that primarily affects women

Statement by Dianova International

Around the world, lockdown and quarantine measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus are accompanied by negative consequences such as the risk of losing one's job, economic vulnerabilities and psychological health problems related to isolation, loneliness or uncertainty, to name but a few.

Surges in gender-based violence...

Another negative consequence of these measures is the sharp rise in cases of gender violence, particularly in family settings. The preliminary data collected by various international agencies (1) give a very clear picture of the situation: in most of the countries affected by Covid-19, telephone hotlines, police forces and other rescue services report a sharp increase in cases of violence, especially against children and women.

According to some authors, the lockdown imposed to deal with the expansion of the pandemic have granted greater freedom to abusers (2). Various reports indicate a marked increase in cases of gender-based violence in a number of countries. For example, although a drop was observed in the overall crime rates in Australia (3), domestic abuse rates increased by 5%. China reported a three-fold increase in the cases of domestic violence after authorities imposed quarantine (4).

According to a progress report published by UN-Women (5) the UN agency for gender equality and women's empowerment, helplines dealing with violence against women have registered an increase in calls by about one-third in Singapore, Cyprus and Argentina. In the UK, there was a 65% increase in gender-based violence in April, while in France it increased by 30% following the stay-at-home orders imposed in March.

And all other forms of gender violence

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic can exacerbate not only intimate partner (or former partner) violence, but other forms of violence against women and girls. Violence against female health or domestic workers and migrant women is also on the rise. Xenophobia-related violence, harassment and other forms of violence in public spaces and online are more prevalent, with increased risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (6). Some groups of women are the targets of violence through information and communication technologies (ICTs); these groups include human rights activists, women in politics, journalists, bloggers, women belonging to ethnic minorities, indigenous women, LGBTQI+ persons, and women with functional diversity.

Worldwide, 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 are victims of physical or sexual violence by a relative every year, and as lockdown continues, this figure is likely to increase. As Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN-Women said: *“Even before the pandemic, violence against women was one of the most widespread violations of human rights. Since lockdown restrictions, domestic violence has multiplied, spreading across the world in a shadow pandemic”* (7)

Promoting gender equality requires de participation of all

Gender inequalities can increase the risks of men engaging in violence against women while inhibiting women's ability to seek help. Promoting gender equality is therefore an essential element of violence prevention because, through various interventions involving the participation of men, the latter can learn to challenge gender norms, stereotypes and attitudes that promote violence.

Nowadays, men and women are finally equal before the law. Yet this formal equality does not translate into real equality. Depending on their gender, human beings do not have the same prospects and opportunities, whether in the political, economic, cultural, civic, social or family spheres. Depending on their gender, human beings are also not exposed to the same levels of violence.

This is why the fight for equality and against violence should not only be carried out by women for women, or by LGBTIQ+ persons for themselves, but it should involve all people, including men.

Addiction and gender-based violence

According to a United Nations progress report (8), the Covid-19 crisis threatens to push back the limited gains made on gender equality and exacerbate the feminization of poverty and women's vulnerability to violence. Women who use drugs are affected most, with a prevalence of intimate partner violence higher than in the general population.

Research has pointed out a link between substance use disorders and violence against women (9). This link is based on three observations:

- The prevalence of violence experienced by women who use drugs is higher than that of women in the general population,
- The prevalence of violence experienced by women who use drugs is higher than that observed among male drug users,
- Substance use disorders are more prevalent among people who have experienced violence than among those who have not.

Intimate partner violence most often occurs in dominant/submissive relationships, in which the domineering partner exerts a form of control that gradually annihilates women, removing

them away from any potentially helping relationship. This psychological domination anaesthetizes the mechanisms of action which make it possible to break with this situation. This violence has a major negative impact on the well-being of women and children, with serious consequences for their physical and mental health.

Consequences for people who use drugs

As emphasized in the UNODC annual World Drug Report (10), the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic are unprecedented, and while it is too early to determine its consequences, lessons can be learned from earlier crises. Following the 2008 crisis, many people who use drugs switched to cheaper synthetic substances and patterns of use shifted to injection. At the same time, governments cut addiction-related budgets.

This would be dramatic because, in these times of pandemic, people who use drugs are (for many) particularly at risk due to their poorer health (chronic diseases and other conditions that can weaken the immune system), their social and economic situation (often associated with homelessness) and other factors, such as social isolation, stigma and criminalization.

Many marginalized people who use drugs have limited or no access to housing, work and social reintegration solutions. Urgent action is therefore needed to avert a humanitarian crisis. As stated by the UN expert on the right to health, *"Populations that use drugs are vulnerable and should be recognized as a high-risk group in order to mitigate the spread of the pandemic"*.

A crisis that primarily affects women

Within this high-risk group, women who use drugs accumulate vulnerabilities. It is estimated that around one third of people who use drugs are women. They are more likely to experience violence than women in the general population. This phenomenon is likely to be exacerbated by pandemic-related increased isolation and stress.

Lastly, it should be noted that women with substance use disorders (and even more so when they are also victims of violence) face many obstacles in accessing, staying and engaging in treatment or harm reduction programmes. These barriers are due to the stigma they face and the lack of a gender perspective in the design and implementation of these programmes. Therefore, there is an urgent need to rethink addiction treatment programmes and implement services that effectively and comprehensively address the needs of these women through a gender- and children rights-based perspective.

The need to mainstream gender in addiction treatment services

One of the key elements in gender sensitive addiction services is that they specifically address the issue of gender-based violence as an initiating or aggravating factor of substance use disorders. Violence and drug use form a complex relationship which needs to be addressed in a holistic rather than fragmented manner. Within male-dominated environments, where gender aspects are not taken into account, women who experience gender violence and

substance use disorders find it difficult to address this problem effectively. The lack of gender perspective is an obstacle in their search for improved health and well-being, which is contrary to the principle of social justice.

Call to action

In this context, Dianova calls on the various national authorities to address the specific vulnerabilities and needs of women who use drugs and to take gender-based violence into account. According to Dianova, the assistance and support measures intended for them should be based on the following elements:

- Addiction services (science based prevention, treatment and harm reduction programmes) should be recognized as essential social and health services in order to ensure appropriate support from authorities.
- Mainstreaming gender in existing structures for social reintegration, harm reduction, addiction treatment and prevention: existing structures and programmes are not gender neutral, i.e. they are designed from an androcentric perspective. Mainstreaming this perspective makes it possible to directly address gender-based violence through a wide range of services, including comprehensive addiction treatment programmes that address not only addiction, but also other important aspects, in conjunction with other services, including: housing, legal assistance and vocational training. Coordination with services for women victims of violence is key.
- Establish at the institutional level the conditions for effective comprehensive care for women who use substances and experience violence: adaptation of existing resources or creation of specific resources, training of counsellors and institutional stakeholders (police, emergency services, etc.), essential assistance services (housing, etc.).

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