

## Covid-19, Violence and Addiction

*As countries implemented lockdown measures to stop the spread of the pandemic, violence against women intensified dramatically*

### Statement by Dianova International

Even before the pandemic, violence against women and girls had reached outrageous proportions. Globally, 243 million women and girls were abused by an intimate partner in the past year, while less than 40 per cent of domestic violence survivors report it or seek help.

As countries implemented lockdown and quarantine measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus, domestic violence intensified, with some countries reporting up to five-fold increases in calls to helplines.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravates vulnerabilities that primarily affect women who use drugs, in a context of heightened isolation and stress. It is therefore essential that harm reduction and treatment services, and domestic violence services be supported more adequately by authorities.

### **Heightened gender-based violence...**

The data collected by various international agencies (1) last year 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 reported a sharp increase in cases of violence, especially against children and women.

The lockdown measures imposed to deal with the expansion of the pandemic appeared to have granted greater freedom to abusers (2). Various reports indicated 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 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 last year.

## **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 the pandemic continues this figure is likely to increase.

## **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 in most countries. 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 LGBTQI+ persons for themselves, but it should involve all people, including men.

## **Addiction and gender-based violence**

According to a United Nations progress report (7), 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 (8). 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.

### **A vulnerable population: women who use drugs**

Women who use drugs accumulate vulnerabilities and as such, they are more likely to experience violence than other women. In a time of pandemic that results in increased isolation and stress, these vulnerabilities can only be exacerbated.

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.).

## References

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