

Covid-19 and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

And she said, "My Brother do not do this ..." 2 Samuel 13:12

The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and attends to the disheartened. Psalm 34:18

In this season of enforced isolation to prevent the spread of Covid-19, there are also fears, which are not at all unfounded, of increased cases of domestic violence. These result from the reality that with enforced isolation, the victimized have limited outlets of escape. Subsequently, avenues for expending evil behaviour towards potential victims by the perpetrator may increase. There have been a spike in reports of violence in China, Italy, and France during the enforced isolation periods. In countries like Colombia, reported cases of femicide tripled; and in Cali, Columbia, 10 women died during the initial 7 days of enforced 'lockdown'¹. We also recognize that enforced isolation can and may affect the mental health of those around us, realizing behaviours that are not normative. Additionally, the well evidenced link between SGBV and HIV as well as unplanned pregnancies has escalated fears that this crisis will result in increased cases of new STIs especially HIV.

However, not all cases of violence and abuse in this season are physical. And the greater threat of sexual violence is that it is not always immediately discernible. Currently, there are online spaces offering free access to porn sites, which suggest that not only is there a demand for porn, but the need for supply to the market could result in increased cyber-sex trafficking and cases of rape and incest.

The World Council of Churches has recognized these dangers and is taking a multipronged approach to assist our member churches and partners to address this concern. At the end of this article are pertinent links addressing sexual and gender based violence in this season. There are several liturgical resources available on the WCC Thursdays in Black page.

Here are some basic considerations if you suspect/know that someone is in an unsafe domestic situation:

- Inquire Discreetly – If you suspect that someone is being victimized at home, be discreet in discerning truth. The victimizer may be close, or the victim may be in denial.
- Engage Directly – Engage the person directly – whether via telephone or internet and establish a trust-based relationship, while affirming your availability for confidences in the process.
- Educate Yourself – Try to identify the nearest shelter or domestic violence hotline; have the information readily available should you need to use it. If you are not an official counsellor or social worker, try to identify one who is available.
- Pray – Pray for the victimized and victimizers and that you (or someone else) may be a source of support or rescue in the moment as required.

If you are a pastor or counsellor who has already established a relationship of trust-confidentiality:

- Connect – Ensure that the lines of communication remain open and secure with the victimized (or the victimizer if you have the influence to talk them out of their actions).
- Check – Keep some kind of record of patterns which may alert you to escalation toward abuse (tone of voice, speech patterns, mood changes etc.). Sometimes, when one isn't able to be direct in reporting the problem, there are clues which can be heard in the speech of the victimized.

¹ <https://bit.ly/3bEAAki>

- Codify – Identify a safe word or phrase or even a tone which signals the need for help. Ensure that it is innocuous enough to be used in a shared space if the person cannot engage in private conversation
- Consistency – Although some random calls are helpful, a set time for calls may ensure that the victimized person may speak privately. Establishing a routine also helps to quickly discern when the pattern is broken.
- Clarity – Ensure that the person understands your desire to help, and that the plan of action is clearly understood. Try to understand the issue before implementing rescue – the victimizer could be armed.
- Counsel – Offer counsel if needed. Encourage the victimized to seek alternate refuge if feasible. AND be ready to help in practical ways – calling hotlines or helplines, initiating rescue, etc.
- Cover – Identify safe houses or shelters which may be open during the crisis, as well as hospitals or police stations, necessary to sudden evacuation should the situation escalate.
- Pray – Pray for transformation in the home and that you are up to helping when the time arises

If you are a parent

- Maintain – Seek to maintain/establish wholesome, positive relationships with your children.
- Motivate – Encourage your child to be their best selves without the need for external influences or affirmation. A child who is enjoying healthy relationships at home is less likely to seek affirmation elsewhere.
- Make friends – Try to know your children’s friends; not in an overbearing way, but to be cognizant of the types of conversations or interests that they may share.
- Measure – Be alert to changes in your children’s behaviour which could be a clue that something is happening.
- Monitoring – Keep abreast of what your child is watching. Predators often engage via social media and seek every opportunity to groom or abuse. Not every ‘friend’ is genuine. Ask discreet or direct questions as needed.
- Mechanisms – Put plans in place to ensure safety during enforced isolation, especially if there is a known predator in the isolative vicinity. Keep phones charged and identify ways to ‘escape’ if the need arises
- Pray – Pray for the safety of your families and children around the world.

If you are a concerned friend, relative, pastor, counsellor

- ❖ Recognize – There are unscrupulous persons who will capitalize on the ‘opportunities’ presented by enforced isolation and increased online communication.
- ❖ Roster – Establish a rhythm of checking in on those who are/may be vulnerable within your sphere of influence
- ❖ Reach – Engage in conversations with the vulnerable, support agencies and law enforcement
- ❖ Register – Share your concerns for their safety with the potential victim and offer suggestions for escape as needed
- ❖ Relate – Where feasible, create relationships with your constituents, including potential abusers, to ensure mental and emotional well-being
- ❖ Pray – Pray for the mental health of all and for the safety of our children, young people, the elderly and persons with disabilities from sexual predators

Prayer

Gracious God,

You are our Peace when we face chaos and confusion.

You are our Comforter, when threatened by situations and circumstances over which we have little or no control.

You are our Healer when we are sick, experiencing physical and emotional pain.

You are our Saviour when we are overwhelmed and feel lost in the throes of life.

You are our Refuge and Strength in times of trouble and despair.

You are our Emmanuel, the Triune God, who abides with us eternally through all the changing scenes of life.

You are our Hope when we are prone to embrace that all life is ruin and in despair.

Gracious God,

You are Love, and Life. Amen

Scriptures for Reflection

- Psalms 13, 22, 23, 27, 34, 42, 46, 66, 91, 121, 139
- Habakkuk 1:1-4
- Isaiah 41

Links to relevant resources

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/get-involved/thursdays-in-black>

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/children-adolescents-and-hiv>

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/covid-19/pray>

<https://www.childhelplineinternational.org/child-helplines/child-helpline-network/>

<https://www.end-violence.org/protecting-children-during-covid-19-outbreak>

<http://cofe.io/MentalHealthReflections>

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-protect-your-familys-mental-health-face-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

<https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr>

https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25725&LangID=E&fbclid=IwAR0BtrEp7xOtFIARx_MRhcdxTyNJCvymIS0eBi55zc8Q4P9QysdtzvZDS3k

<https://t.co/zmSWJjX08s>

https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/03/17/love-and-nonviolence-time-coronavirus?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=email_this

<https://www.restoredrelationships.org/news/2020/03/19/working-home-and-domestic-abuse/>

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25749>

With prayers for a permanent end to sexual and gender based violence

The WCC Covid-19 Response Team



**World Council
of Churches**