

THE 'SHADOW PANDEMIC'

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, rates of family, domestic and sexual violence have increased across the country and globally. For many women and their families, staying at home means staying in a place of danger, where:

- victim/survivors and perpetrators spend more time together;
- there are fewer opportunities for victim/survivors to reach out and seek help and support;
- additional stressors, such as job losses, family disruptions, financial strains and health concerns, may increase the severity or frequency of violence;
- there are fewer eyes on children who are at risk of experiencing or witnessing violence;
- people who are worried about being a 'burden' on the health system or contracting COVID-19 are less likely to seek medical help after experiencing violence; and
- more time is spent online, where women experience high levels of abuse.

Some women, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women experiencing financial distress, and women with disability, face specific barriers to accessing support that are exacerbated during the pandemic.

Victim/survivors of violence and specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services have reported COVID-19 is being used by perpetrators as a tactic for further control or abuse. For example, they may:

- withhold necessary items such as food, medicine, hand sanitiser or masks;
- spread misinformation about COVID-19 or the restrictions to control or frighten people;
- tell someone they have COVID-19 and are not allowed to leave home; and
- threaten or prevent people from seeking appropriate medical care.

In May, the Australian Institute of Criminology surveyed 15,000 women about their experience of family and domestic violence during the initial stages of the lockdown.



One in seven women in a relationship experienced some form of violence or coercive control from a partner.



Two thirds (65.4%) of women who experienced violence from a partner experienced it for the first time or said it escalated.

36.9%

of women who experienced violence or coercive control said that, on at least one occasion, they wanted to seek advice or support but could not because of safety concerns.

WHAT CAN UNIVERSITIES DO?

A university may be one of the only places where many women can safely receive trustworthy and regular information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Universities can:



Reinforce messages that violence is unacceptable. Everyone has a right to feel safe, access medical support and maintain social connections, and there is no excuse for violence. Universities can educate their communities about the many forms that family and domestic violence can take, including abusive and controlling behaviours like social isolation, financial control, monitoring and surveillance, and denying choices around contraception.

Raise awareness that specialist family, domestic and sexual violence services are essential services and remain open. Services continue to provide advice, help or support, and a safe place to stay for people who need it, including people on temporary visas. People won't be fined for leaving their home to get help.



The Australian Government has launched the [Help is Here](#) campaign in partnership with supermarkets, GPs and shopping centres to send a message that violence is not acceptable at any time, and provide information on where people can access support. [Materials and resources](#) are available for everyone to use, including [targeted resources](#) for culturally and linguistically diverse audiences, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences.



Increase visibility of university policies and practices to support staff and students affected by family, domestic and sexual violence, including appropriate safety and security measures, flexible work or study arrangements, and family and domestic leave.

Keep up connections with people online or over the phone, if it is safe to do so.

Colleagues, family and friends play a vital role in supporting people and helping them access support during these periods. Think about secure ways to communicate and consider using an agreed code word or signal for when someone might need help or need the police.



Consider asking closed questions ('Are you alone?') to check whether it's safe to continue the call. It may be possible to provide advice and information about available supports even if the victim/survivor is unable to talk.



Continue their long-term work to prevent violence against women and promote gender equality.

SUPPORT

Help is available if you, or someone you know, is experiencing violence. If you are in danger right now, contact police on Triple Zero (000). For information, support and counselling, contact 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or visit 1800RESPECT.org.au. This service is free, confidential and open 24 hours a day.