

Committee: Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Committee (GA3)

Topic: Combating the rise of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Personal Introduction

Dear delegates,

My name is John Andreadakis and I will be serving as co-chair of GA3 in this conference. I am 17 years old, I attend Leonteios School of Athens and I have been doing MUN for a little over two years now, which has been a truly amazing journey. MUN is the perfect place when it comes to getting informed about current affairs, improving your social skills, meeting like-minded people and creating some unforgettable memories. I am very excited for this conference, and I cannot wait to meet you all this fall.

Yours truly,

John Andreadakis

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Topic Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly taken a toll on societies around the globe. This unprecedented situation has influenced the economy, the educational system, the way people make a living, and even interpersonal relations. The virus-inflicted pandemic came with another, less obvious one: the 'shadow pandemic' of domestic abuse. During this time period, calls to domestic abuse helplines in Europe have increased; in contrast, calls to similar hotlines in the U.S.A. have significantly



decreased, interpreted by experts to be a result of lacking safe spaces within the home and time to carry out said calls, due to quarantine measures.¹ With the main victims being women, children and people belonging to minority groups, and global leaders prioritizing the fight against COVID-19 over the one against domestic abuse, the abuse faced by these victims is being perpetuated.

The sudden increase in domestic violence incidents has been attributed to the most popular measure against COVID, namely long lockdowns. People are forced to remain in their homes for prolonged periods of time, which in turn leads to unfamiliar and often dangerous situations. Studies have shown that domestic violence cases always rise when families spend more time together, with holidays being a key example.² As more and more countries began going into lockdown, a pattern of rising domestic violence cases was detected. Domestic abuse victims are forced to spend countless hours with their abuser. Similarly, the continuously worsening financial status of marginalized people during the pandemic renders them more prone to being unable to escape their abusive households, due to the former usually being financially dependent on the latter. This situation has been acknowledged by global leaders and bodies, with the Secretary General of the United Nations António Guterres clearly stating: “I urge all governments to put women’s safety first as they respond to the pandemic.”

¹ Evans, Megan L. “A Pandemic within a Pandemic - Intimate Partner Violence during Covid-19: NEJM.” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 7 July 2021, www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2024046.

²Deutsche Welle. “Lockdowns, Christmas Holidays and Domestic Violence: A Dangerous Mix: DW: 29.11.2020.” *Deutsche Welle*, www.dw.com/en/lockdowns-christmas-holidays-and-domestic-violence-a-dangerous-mix/a-55762710.



Definition of key terms

Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse, often referred to as "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence," can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone.³

Coercion

The use of force to persuade someone to do something that they are unwilling to do.⁴ This can include rape, or any form of pressure an abuser may apply to their victim in a domestic setting.

Hotline/ Helpline

A special direct phone connection for emergencies.⁵ There are both local and International Hotlines, which aim to address a victim's situation immediately. There are many hotlines dedicated to domestic abuse victims, many of which have been reporting constantly growing numbers of calls.

³ "What Is Domestic Abuse?" *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse.

⁴ "The Definition of Coercion." *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/coercion.

⁵ "The Definition of Hotline." *Cambridge Dictionary*, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hotline.



Transitional Housing

Transitional housing programs offer victims a housing option and supportive services—including counseling, childcare, transportation, life skills, education and/or job training—for up to 24 months. It is a safe, affordable option that empowers survivors to begin rebuilding their lives after fleeing abuse. Transitional housing programs give survivors the time and services they need to achieve goals for long-term safety and stability. Without these programs, survivors may have no other option than to return to their abuser’s home or face homelessness.⁶

Emergency Shelter

The initial, immediate phase of crisis recovery development; a type of physical structure used to accommodate people in the immediate aftermath of a crisis or disaster situation; accommodation for actual or potential disaster victims seeking quarters outside of their own permanent homes for short periods: hours in many cases, overnight at most.⁷ These do not constitute a long-term solution for fleeing victims, rather a way of commencing their escape.

⁶ Rogers, Courtesy of Laura L., et al. “Transitional Housing Programs and Empowering Survivors of Domestic Violence.” *The United States Department of Justice*, 20 Jan. 2021, www.justice.gov/archives/ovw/blog/transitional-housing-programs-and-empowering-survivors-domestic-violence.

⁷ Boano, Camillo, and William Hunter. “Emergency Shelter.” *Encyclopedia of Natural Hazards*, 21 Jan. 2016, link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-1-4020-4399-4_117.



Background Information

Causes of the “Shadow Pandemic”

Working from home

The vast majority of employed people worked from home during the pandemic, which in turn meant that families & people living together spent much more shared time. This, in conjunction with the added stress of the pandemic, aggravated any pre-existing tensions in households, in many cases leading to domestic abuse.

Online Education

When discussing child abuse, teachers are by far the most likely to spot any signs of domestic abuse in a child’s appearance or behavior. Since the worldwide application of lockdown measures, the majority of schools consequently shut down as well; as a result, children in abusive households were more prone to domestic violence, without anyone (e.g. a teacher) interfering.

Enabling “dormant” abusers

In order to adequately address the issue, it is vital to grasp that the pandemic has not created more abusers, but has instead enabled many to carry out abusive actions and go unnoticed; their abusive behaviours are further inadvertently supported by governments due to circumstances. For example, an abuser prohibiting their victim from leaving their home alone is much easier in a quarantine setting.

Unstable incomes & the overburdened social security systems of states globally

The main course of action following the fleeing of an abusive household involves finding an alternative place to stay (at least temporarily) and taking legal action against the abuser, such as filing for divorce. During the pandemic, unemployment has risen significantly. More specifically, the Congressional Research Service reports that during April 2020 the unemployment rate reached an



unprecedented 14.8 in the U.S.A, the highest since the service began collecting data in 1948⁸. Additionally, social security systems are currently facing COVID-related crises, with other issues being neglected. As a result, victims of domestic abuse are rendered helpless, as they lack the two most fundamental requirements to escape their abusers.

Exacerbated abusive practices

Many abusers express minimal abuse under normal circumstances, which albeit equally harmful and condemnable is usually less harming for the victim, until they escape. However, common abuse practices such as isolation from friends and family, constant surveillance and corporal violence are extremely facilitated in a secluded environment similar to one a quarantine provides, enabling abusers to intensify their abuse.

Domestic Abuse and Response Mechanisms

Inability of the victims to reach out

One of the first steps a victim of domestic abuse must take to leave their abusive environment is to reach out. Hotlines dedicated to domestic abuse, the police, or even medical personnel are some of the main bodies which can instruct the victim, in order to help them safely escape. However, during the pandemic, victims are in continuous contact with their abusers, thereby being unable to reach out to one of the aforementioned entities. Moreover, being forced to stay at home means that any possible scars, bruises or visible signs of abuse will not be noticed by others, who may be able to help.

⁸ Falk, Gene, et al. "Unemployment Rates During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Congressional Research Service*, 2021, crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46554.



Lack of preventative measures taken by the State before lockdowns were enforced

The COVID pandemic surprised people worldwide, and governments across the globe were expected to come up with effective solutions quickly. This meant that officials had little to no time to consider the long-term consequences of the measures they chose to implement. Lockdowns were an easy way of effectively minimizing the number of new cases, leading multiple governments to enforce them. This caused a domestic abuse crisis which could have been addressed before such measures were applied.

Fleeing abusive environments

Lack of dedicated shelters

COVID-19 restrictions affected the majority of services across the globe, with social security ones being hit the hardest. In an attempt to eradicate all possible spaces which could act as COVID hotspots, a lot of shelters closed down, leaving victims with nowhere to escape to from their households.

Inability of the victims to stay at their close relatives

Even after vaccinations have allowed for an ease of COVID restrictions, staying at relatives still remains perilous and many relatives (or victims themselves) avoid cohabitations, for fear of contracting or transmitting the virus. With shelters closing down and relatives being unwilling to house victims, the latter are trapped in their abusive environments.

Major countries and organizations involved

India

According to the findings of a pair of researchers in the Asian Journal of Criminology, the already widespread issue of domestic violence in India was inflamed after lockdowns were imposed, with the two main causes being unemployment and



alcohol abuse, while the lack of adequate policing and transportation restrictions further worsened the issue.⁹

Mexico

47%¹⁰ of the female population in Mexico has experienced at least one form of domestic abuse in their lifetime. The COVID-19 pandemic has only aggravated the situation, with hotlines reporting a 300% increase in calls during March and April of 2020¹¹, relative to the same period in 2019.

Russian Federation

Despite a general lack of documentation, domestic abuse is an extremely serious issue in Russia. The law does not define nor combat domestic abuse, with the Russian government viewing it as a “family matter”. There have been incidents of extreme violence being reported to the police and them never arriving, as well as a general negligence of the issue.

Spain

Gender-based abuse has risen dramatically during the lockdown in Spain, with calls to hotlines increasing by 15% and the number of women reaching out for help online, through emails or social media, by a whopping 700%¹². According to Carmen

⁹ Krishnakumar, Akshaya, and Shankey Verma. “Understanding Domestic Violence in India During COVID-19: a Routine Activity Approach.” *Asian Journal of Criminology*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2021, pp. 19–35., doi:10.1007/s11417-020-09340-1.

¹⁰ Carolina Mayen Huerta, University of Melbourne. “COVID-19 and Mexico's Domestic Violence Crisis.” *Pursuit*, The University of Melbourne, 6 June 2021, pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/covid-19-and-mexico-s-domestic-violence-crisis.

¹¹ “Violencia De GÉNERO EN TIEMPOS DE COVID-19.” *CIDE INFORMA SOBRE PANDEMIA COVID-19*, 2020, www.cide.edu/coronavirus/2020/05/11/violencia-de-genero-en-tiempos-de-covid-19/.

¹² “Women Killed in Spain As Coronavirus Lockdown Sees Rise in Domestic Violence.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 28 Apr. 2020, www.theguardian.com/global/development/2020/apr/28/three-women-killed-in-spain-as-coronavirus-lockdown-sees-rise-in-domestic-violence.



Benito, president of the Women’s Association Against Abuse, the number of women calling was so overwhelming, that hotline operators began losing track of the number of victims calling. While partner-on-partner murders have decreased, experts claim that this is occurring due to the fact that victims do not try to escape as easily, as a result of financial difficulties.

United Kingdom

When the first lockdown in the UK was announced in March 2020, charities such as Women’s Aid highlighted the increased risk of harm and isolation for those affected by domestic abuse. In April 2020, the Home Affairs Committee stated that there was “evidence that cases are escalating more quickly to become complex and serious, with higher levels of physical violence and coercive control.” The UK actively drafted, and implemented, new legislation to combat the rise in domestic violence, namely the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

United States of America

According to a report of the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice (NCCCJ), published in February 2021, the number of domestic abuse incidents in the U.S.A has risen by 8.1% during the pandemic.¹³ "Our analysis confirms the initial fears we had at the outset of the pandemic," Alex Piquero, chair of the University of Miami department of sociology and lead author of the analysis, states, while he mentions that he expects this number to rise. The NCCCJ is urging policymakers and researchers to prioritize understanding the impacts of the pandemics and providing additional resources for domestic violence prevention as well as services for survivors.

¹³ Bailey., Charlotte. “NCCCJ - Impact Report: COVID-19 and Domestic Violence Trends.” *National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice*, 24 Feb. 2021, covid19.counciloncj.org/2021/02/23/impact-report-covid-19-and-domestic-violence-trends/.



ABAAD

ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality is a UN ECOSOC accredited organization that aims to achieve gender equality as an essential condition to sustainable social and economic development in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. Their pillars of work include policy development, ending violence against women, empowering survivors of abuse, taking humanitarian action and strengthening civic and public sectors. During COVID, ABAAD has developed internal case management guidelines to provide crisis phone counselling and emergency support services via phone. It has moreover been providing community-based awareness sessions on COVID-19 and psychosocial support sessions via conference calls. They are also closely working with government stakeholders including the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Public Health to unveil their national emergency response plans.¹⁴

UN Women

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.¹⁵ More specifically, they have been consistently cooperating with local governments in impoverished or disadvantaged areas, with a view to providing humanitarian and financial aid to women facing hardships.

¹⁴ "Projects." ABAAD, www.abaadmena.org/projects.

¹⁵ "About UN Women." UN Women, www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women.



Timeline of events

<u>3 September 1981</u>	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is adopted by G.A. resolution 34/180.
<u>31 December 2019</u>	First COVID-19 case reported to the WHO, as an unknown cause for pneumonia.
<u>March 2020</u>	Lockdowns start being enforced globally as a means of addressing the ongoing pandemic.
<u>March 2020</u>	A rise in calls to domestic violence-related hotlines is observed internationally.
<u>March 23 2020</u>	The U.K. goes into lockdown, with the government claiming “Only “existing sources of advice and support” would be available for domestic abuse victims.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Addressing the issue on a per-case basis

In some cases, local and International NGOs, such as ABAAD, intervene and attempt to alleviate victim’s daily issues on a per-case basis. That entails setting up more hotlines, while simultaneously updating existing ones; this is done in order to avoid operators being overwhelmed by the number of calls, thereby providing more effective help to the victims. Moreover, some governments, such as the government of the U.K. have allocated funds towards the relief of survivors which once again acts not as a preventative measure, but rather as a one-time solution.



Combating the issue on a large scale

Drafting new policies

Certain states have actually drafted and implemented new policies which aim to act both as preventative and as active measures against domestic abuse. Setting as an example the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 of the UK, it is obvious that defining domestic abuse (something which several countries have not yet officially done) while also clearly stating ways to combat it in terms of legal and humanitarian support, is a positive step against the “Shadow Pandemic”.

Relevant UN Resolutions, Events, Treaties and Legislation

The Istanbul Convention

This treaty, adopted by the Council of Europe in 2011 is an essential document which actively strives for the elimination of all forms of violence against women. It is a comprehensive document that takes measures towards the prevention and the elimination of abuse, including domestic abuse.¹⁶

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

This document, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 is one of the most fundamental frameworks that actively protect the rights of women and strive to achieve gender equality. Despite its focal point being discrimination against women rather than the violence they face, some of the elements it incorporates, e.g., the prohibition of sexual exploitation of women, can be applied in domestic abuse incidents.¹⁷

¹⁶ “Text of the Convention.” *Istanbul Convention Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention.

¹⁷ “Text of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.” *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm.



Domestic Abuse Act 2021

This framework was adopted by the government of the UK in 2021, in response to the steadily growing number of incidents of domestic violence. It effectively addresses the issue at hand, by recommending solutions towards preventing and eliminating domestic abuse in the UK.¹⁸

Possible solutions

Victim Support

When discussing ways to combat domestic abuse, one vital aspect is the provision of relief for its survivors. This is especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, where measures such as financial support, providing shelter and hotlines for the victims trying to flee, as well as online resources on how to safely escape are of prime importance. Moreover, assigning legal officials to specifically deal with such cases can significantly accelerate the process of a victim escaping.

Infrastructure

Legislation alone cannot pragmatically reduce the numbers of domestic abuse incidents. It is crucial that the necessary infrastructure for victims to escape their households or receive help is in place. Such infrastructure includes adequate internet access, so that the victims can communicate non-verbally with operators in a quarantine environment, as well as shelters, transitional housing, hospitals & legal aid.

¹⁸ "Domestic Abuse ACT 2021." *Legislation.gov.uk*, Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/contents/enacted.



Training officials

In many cases of domestic abuse, the inability of legal or medical officials to deal with a victim correctly can prove destructive to a victim's well-being. It is essential that police officers, medical personnel, hotline operators and all persons coming in contact with a fleeing victim, or victim in danger, are properly trained to avoid any further complications.

Raising awareness

Raising awareness is often overlooked as a measure that does little to actually combat any issues being discussed. In this case however, raising awareness could not be more vital. In a plethora of cases, the victim has managed to escape their abuser solely due to the intervention of an external factor, such as someone noticing visible signs of abuse. By educating the general public on what abuse looks and feels like, an individual recognizing abuse and reporting it becomes a much more likely scenario.

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