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Domestic Violence and COVID-19 - The 2020 Lockdown in France

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4.3. France

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Covid-19 measures

On 16 March 2020, the French Government announced confinement measures to combat the COVID 19 pandemic. Although the aim of this decision was to protect health and lives of all citizens, it immediately caused public authorities and civil society to be concerned about the risk of a domestic violence outbreak. DV stakeholders reacted rapidly because domestic violence was already at the top of the political agenda, as a well-publicised national conference on this issue took place in the autumn of 2019 (the “Grenelle on domestic violence”).

The challenge imposed on DV first-responders by confinement measures was significant. As we know, the strategy of the violent partner is to isolate the victim to better exert his control over her. The forced cohabitation with the perpetrator that the confinement imposed on DV victims made it even more difficult for them to report their situation and to seek for help from support providers than in normal times. At the same time, first-responders from the social sector had to adapt themselves to the imposed "social distancing". Overnight, they were forced to close their face-to-face services and replace them with telephone hotlines and online services, which made it necessary to completely rethink their mode of operation. Whether in the NGO, social, medical or judicial sector, the procedures that victims had to follow to get support became more complex. These difficulties were exacerbated for people in vulnerable situations, such as women with disabilities or migrant women, who do not always have access to digital tools or do not speak French. It took ten days for the Government and the main stakeholders at national level to put an emergency plan in place, which was announced on 25 March 2020, with a series of specific measures to deal with the COVID crises. These measures were aimed both at securing the continuity of the usual services and at implementing new initiatives specifically designed to address the confinement situation.

The main problem that was identified was the social isolation of DV victims. Being confined all day long with the violent partner made it very difficult for them to be in touch with their usual “resource persons” such as friends, family and colleagues, who are usually the first people to whom they can express their distress and needs. This social isolation of victims also hinders the detection of domestic violence by public agencies, such as social services, schools and hospital practitioners. In addition, establishing a trust relationship with a first line responder of the social or health sector became more difficult for the victim, especially for those who had never been in contact with that support provider before.

Therefore, in parallel to maintaining the existing hotline and helpline telephone services, new ways of “silently” reporting and alerting were developed, such as chatting, SMS or email exchanges. In addition, various types of “contact points” were opened in places accessible to the victim, where it was possible for them to report violence and to get in touch with support services and the police.

For example, the main hotline for reporting violence, 3919, was only interrupted for three days. Very quickly, the Orange telephone company managed to provide technical solutions to the 3919-response staff, so that they could continue their activity from their homes. Orange provided them with phones with a hands-free kit and with headsets equipped with microphones, as well as with computers, and made it possible to route 3919 calls to response staff smartphones. The working hours of 3919 response staff were adjusted to the difficulty of working from home and being isolated from their colleagues. Psychological support was offered to them. The confinement was an opportunity for the FNSF (one of the main French DV victims support association), the NGO that runs the 3919 hotlines/helplines, to strengthen its partnership with the LEAs. Direct lines between the hotline staff and Gendarmerie headquarters were set up, making it possible to immediately report urgent situations to the LEAs for possible police intervention. Local and national hotlines/helplines and online services were widely advertised by public authorities, newspapers, TV, and social networks.

New contact points were created, including help points in shopping centres and the possibility of reporting violence in pharmacies. Thanks to partnerships between state agencies, major retailers and NGOs, permanent help points were set up in shopping centres. The first ten help points were created as a matter of urgency in the Paris region, located at the entrances of shopping centres. The initiative was then extended to the whole country. Information posters at the entrance of the shops signalled the presence of these help points. To ensure confidentiality, victims were directed to a discreet and isolated place at the reception desk or at the cash desk. There they were welcomed and taken charge of by an NGO with the support of lawyers, social workers and psychologists. In some stores, the associations were not present, but women could find a telephone and useful contact details. Some of these contact points were managed by LEAs (those of police or Gendarmerie contact points were temporary).

The Ministry of the Interior, with the support of the National Order of Pharmacists, set up in pharmacies an alert system for victims of domestic violence. It gave to DV victims an opportunity to signal themselves to pharmacists who could then, with their agreement, alert the police. If the perpetrator was present, the pharmacist could alert the police using a discreet code (this system has led to 5 arrests). A reflex card, elaborated by the Ministry of the Interior, was distributed by the National Order of Pharmacists. It gives recommendations on the welcoming and orientation of the victim: moving her to a confidential place, gathering information about her, calling the police with her consent, and giving her useful contact information.

Law enforcement agencies adopted a policy of systematic interventions at home following a report. They were also supposed to call at their own initiatives identified victims to ensure a follow-up of their situation. There was a significant increase in police interventions at home on family disputes (48% since the beginning of confinement). This increase reflects the strong mobilisation of LEAs (500 more interventions per day on average). It also shows the increased vigilance of victims and witnesses, who were more prompt and less reluctant to alert the police. However, most interventions at home did not result in penal proceedings due to a lack of evidence of an offence.

Ensuring the safety of women and their children was a top priority for the courts, with the Minister of Justice having put the stress on this issue in both civil and criminal proceedings. Prosecutors were asked to opt for an immediate and firm penal response to DV. Immediate summary trials as well as emergency protection orders had increased in number. The allocation of emergency phones enabling the victim to easily call the police for help was accelerated (Téléphone Grave Danger). The eviction of the violent partner was privileged, with the creation of accommodations for the perpetrators. € 1 million was granted by the government to help NGOs to provide shelter for victims as well as for perpetrators: 20,000 hotel nights were paid this way. The creation of a hotline to help stakeholders to find accommodations for perpetrators and of a helpline for perpetrators have been useful additions to the prevention of domestic violence.

The National Council of Bars (CNB) established a free telephone hotline to provide emergency assistance to DV victims. Volunteer lawyers from the CNB, who could be reached 24 hours a day, informed and advised victims wishing to obtain a protection order or assistance during a correctional hearing, and referred them to a territorially competent lawyer.

Some measures were continued after the end of the first containment and have been used again during the curfew and the second confinement, in particular the extension of the opening hours of the helplines and their work in partnership with the police (systematic transfer of calls for domestic violence).

Official statistics

Police sector

La plateforme de signalement des violences sexuelles et sexistes (PVSS) is a platform is staffed 24/7 by police and gendarmes trained in sexual and gender-based violence. From the start of the confinement, the activity of the arretonslesviolences.gouv.fr (PVSS) reporting platform has increased. Indeed, there has been a clear increase in the number of chats received, particularly those concerning domestic and intra-family violence. Chats were multiplied by a factor of 4.4 and by 17.1 if we only compare the incidents of domestic violence (VIF) to the same period in 2019. Indeed, during the lockdown, VIF accounted for more than half of the interactions handled by the platform's operators: 1,831 interactions out of 3,556, i.e., 51.5% compared with 13.4% (107/801) during the same period in 2019.

119, the national number dedicated to the prevention and protection of children in danger or at risk of being in danger, was much in demand during this period of confinement. It was open 7 days a week and could be reached throughout France (mainland France and French overseas departments and territories). Over the 6 weeks of confinement, the number of calls increased by 35% (compared with an average day), corresponding to approximately 37,000 calls.¹

¹ Data taken from the note from the Interministerial Crisis Unit, "Security and Public Order" Unit, Intra-family violence, 8 May 2020

These include psychological violence (30% of cases), physical violence (20%), child neglect (16%) and violence within the couple (9%). This increase in calls largely consists of reports of psychological violence, which are more difficult to turn into legal proceedings than physical violence.

Throughout the period of confinement, home interventions in the family sphere increased by 42% compared to 2019. This trend was observed from the beginning of the confinement and continued to increase throughout this period. The number of interventions in the family sphere decreased by 34% in the first week of deconfinement compared to the previous week but is still 20% higher than last year.

²

The intra-family violence described here is that which, among the category of intentional assault and battery on persons aged 15 or older, is carried out in an intra-family context. This indicator, which seems to be relevant in these exceptional circumstances, is therefore restricted to this very specific perimeter and does not include violence against minors under the age of 15, homicides, sexual violence or non-physical violence. The figures relating to this indicator are not directly comparable with those of other works or studies on this topic, including those to which the SSMSI contributes.³

The judicial statistics show that of the registered cases of domestic violence 430 have already been tried, of which 70% have been tried in an immediate appearance and 21% in an appearance upon prior admission of guilt (probably upon discharge). On the other hand, more than 600 registered cases were not yet decided by "month year", because the investigation was still ongoing or because of a delay in the entry in the court's processing of the case.

A comparison of these statistics with the same period in 2019 would be neither relevant given the particularity of the jurisdictions' operations during the period of the confinement. The hypothesis of an increase in the number of incidents of intra-family violence during the period of confinement cannot be excluded.

During weeks 12-23 (16 March-1 June 2020), the number of court decisions involving domestic violence decreased by 31% compared to the same period in the previous year. This decrease can be explained by the very strong decrease in the activity of the courts, which were forced to postpone many judgments.

Medical sector

Recourse to emergency services for women victims of domestic violence seem to decrease during containment, the use of health care service, hospital and community medicine decreased. This observation raises the question of a possible avoidance of care with a negative impact on the health of individuals, particularly women victims of violence. In the emergency services, overall activity decreased by 49%, both for non-urgent and urgent care (e.g., for the elderly, for serious pathologies such as strokes, etc.).

² Data taken from the note from the Interministerial Crisis Unit, "Security and Public Order" Unit, Intra-family violence, 8 May 2020

³ Ministerial Statistical Service for Internal Security: "State of delinquency recorded by the police and gendarmerie during the health crisis", URL: <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Interstats/Actualites>

During confinement, the rate of hospitalization (serious violence) did not vary from the pre-confinement period. No significant difference in the severity of abuse between the different periods was observed. The proportion of patients who went to the emergency department on their own decreased in favour of those arriving by ambulance or with the fire department. However, for each year, the low percentage of patients arriving with law enforcement was similar before and during confinement.

Social sector

As a result of the closure of shelters and the slowing of operation of judicial system, the activity of the 131 associations helping victims in the France Victimes network went down by 43% compared to 2019. Between March 17 and May 12, 2020, the network cared for 12,462 victims of domestic violence, compared to 10,913 in 2019. Compared to the same period in 2019, there was a 14.2% increase in the number of victims of domestic violence received, including an 11.8% increase in the number of victims of domestic violence contacting the association for the first time (known as "new victims").

The France Victimes network recorded 10,003 cases of domestic violence (whether prior or contemporaneous with the period), 959 disclosures of threats, 754 cases of harassment, 415 rapes or sexual assaults within couples. While at the beginning of the confinement, statistics on referrals to the France Victimes network were identical to the usual situation, the proportion of victims who filed a complaint decreased after the fourth week of confinement.

Moreover, 45% of the incidents took place before March 17, and 55% of the incidents took place after. While victims of domestic violence mainly expressed fear and tension in their families during the first weeks of confinement, there was a clear increase in the number of incidents of violence after 4 weeks of confinement starting from the 13th of April. Finally, in terms of the types of violence reported, France Victimes recorded 82.4% physical violence, 13.8% psychological violence and 3.9% sexual violence. Of the victims of accompanied domestic violence, 65 percent filed a complaint, compared with 70 percent in 2019.

Interviews for the allocation of Téléphone Grave Danger (TGD) are up sharply compared to 2019 (+132%). While these do not represent an increase in formal complaints, this trend can be observed in multiple countries, and indicates an increased insecurity among victims regarding the impact on the lockdown on the processing of ongoing cases as well as new complaints.

The helpline number 3919 is managed by the National Federation for Women's Solidarity (FNSF).

Applications to 3919 surged from September onwards, the period when the "Grenelle on domestic violence" began.

The National Federation of Information Centers on Women's and Family Rights (FNCIDFF) provided data on the women who were accompanied. There are two types of interviews: individual interviews and coaching interviews. The individual interview is the first interview conducted with the victim. From the second interview onwards, it is referred to as the accompaniment interview.

During the first three weeks of confinement, some CIDFFs noted an increase in requests (compared to the same period the previous year), while some, on the other hand, observed a decrease in requests from the public who were victims of violence. It is therefore difficult to interpret these trends as they vary greatly from one region to another. The assessment at the end of confinement shows a slight decrease (-3.2%) in the number of women monitored for violence within the couple compared to the pre-confinement period (between January 1 and March 16, 2020). The decline was greater for individual interviews (-47%) and support interviews (-31.4%). The large number of interviews from the beginning of 2020 is explained by an exponential increase in requests since the conference Grenelle des violences conjugales in November 2019.

Media reporting

Soon after the lockdown started on March 17th, several feminist NGOs (#NousToutes, Collages Féminicides, etc.) made public statements regarding the increasing risks of domestic violence towards women. These warnings and the emerging numbers were then relayed and amplified by the state secretary for women's rights. Most print media relayed *the French press agency's article*⁴ on the matter. Domestic violence is an important topic in the French media since the Grenelle des violences conjugales between September and November 2019—a series of meetings between the government, administrations and NGOs on how to better fight against domestic violence. The most prestigious French daily, Le Monde, published a series about feminicides along the “Grenelle”. The print and audiovisual media relayed a number of government announcements on free hotlines for women to talk about or report domestic violence, or to find emergency shelter.⁵ The press communicated to the public coded ways for women to discreetly report victimization at the supermarket or at the pharmacy, so as to compensate for the closure of other dedicated venues.

The media reported a large increase in domestic violence reporting, police interventions, and calls to relevant hotlines⁶—the latter especially after the publication of the Miprof official report on lockdown-related domestic violence. The state secretary for women's rights went on the radio⁷ to say that feminicides have seemingly declined during lockdown, plausibly because a lot of feminicides are committed by ex-partners, and the lockdown prevents former spouses to meet. A feminist podcast⁸ delivered the testimony of a hotline worker who said that many women seem to have discovered the true nature of their (abusive) relationship during lockdown. In addition, it was reported that women find ways to call these hotlines unbeknown to their husband, despite his continuous presence at home in sometimes tight apartments.

⁴ https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/03/30/hausse-des-violences-conjugales-pendant-le-confinement_6034897_3224.html

⁵ <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/paris-ile-de-france/paris/grand-paris/confinement-initiatives-venir-aide-aux-femmes-victimes-violences-conjugales-se-multiplient-1809858.html>

⁶ https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/entry/lors-du-confinement-les-appels-pour-violences-conjugales-ont-explose_fr_5f227484c5b656e9b0977268

⁷ <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/il-y-aurait-une-tres-legere-baisse-du-nombre-de-feminicides-depuis-le-debut-de-lannee-selon-marlene-schiappa-3982044>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUsLYKtE5nk>

Expert opinions

In a press release of 31 March 2020, the High Council for Equality (HCE), the national body responsible for evaluating policies to combat partnership violence, gave a positive assessment of the initiatives taken by DV stakeholders to adapt the support provided to DV victims during confinement. The HCE recommended that the new measures developed during the containment period be continued, such as hotel rooms to facilitate the eviction of the violent partner, the possibility of calling hotlines by SMS or the possibility of reporting DV in pharmacies and supermarkets.

The Delegation for Women's Rights of the French Senate produced an information report, adopted on 7 July 2020, which draws an initial assessment of the emergency measures implemented during confinement. This report also recommends that most of the initiatives created during containment should be continued or even expanded. It deplores, however, the insufficient financial effort of the State. A certain number of hotel nights, either for victims or for the perpetrator, have been financed. But by redeploying existing funding, dedicated to domestic violence. These funds are from programme 137 for "Equality between women and men", which is used to finance associations helping victims, on the front line in the fight against domestic violence. It would have been logical, as suggested by the members of the senatorial delegation in charge of the assessment of the period, that the financing of hotel nights for the purpose of assigning aggressors to house arrest should have been covered by the justice budget.