



FREEDOM FROM FEAR  
M A G A Z I N E

THE DAY  
WE DISCOVERED  
OUR FRAGILITY

AND OUR  
STRENGTH





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## Overcoming the Challenges of COVID-19: Finding Strength in Shared Values

by Antonia Marie De Meo, Director of UNICRI

2020 began as many years have begun before: with traditional New Year's celebrations, reflections on our blessings, and resolutions to improve ourselves and our communities. Our lives continued forward, consumed by daily activities of family and work. And then, one day in February or March, depending on where we live, we woke up to discover a changed world. Global news programs were replete with coverage of a mysterious new virus: COVID-19. Viruses, as science tells us, are tiny particles observable only through microscopes, and yet the COVID-19 virus has completely changed daily life as we know it, in every corner of the globe.

Northern Italy, where UNICRI is headquartered, was the first epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western world – a red zone of infection and fear. The Italian population, and all the staff of UNICRI living in Italy, have been deeply touched by the devastating impacts of the virus. The sense of trauma and loss in the population is palpable, especially when people speak about lost loved ones and the prohibition in Italy, as an interim emergency measure, against holding funerals to honor and mourn the dead.

In the midst of the chaos and uncertainty of our changed world, on 30 March 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, appointed me the new Director of UNICRI. I have the honor to succeed Ms. Bettina Tucci Bartsiotas, who led UNICRI with integrity, fairness, and kindness since 2018. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, my onboarding to UNICRI was delayed until early July, when I could finally travel to Turin to assume my responsibilities. It is a surreal time to move to a new country and start a new post, as introductions, briefings, and meetings are held through online platforms and speeches are delivered alone to a computer screen, with little ability to see or interact with participants.

None of us will ever forget this challenging time in our lives or the repeated pleas for self-isolation, mask-wearing, and hand-washing. Our response as individuals, organizations, and institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic is a testament to our shared values. We may reflect on how we spent this time: Did we listen to and respect the science? Did we modify our behavior to show that we care for one another and humanity at large? Did we reach out in solidarity to vulnerable people and communities? Did we take advantage of the opportunities, both in the quiet spaces of lockdown and self-isolation and with the latest technological advances and innovations?

The response of UNICRI and its partners is a resounding, “Yes!” Together with the United Nations family in Italy and elsewhere, UNICRI reacted rapidly to the pandemic, cancelling activities and enacting strict telecommuting measures to keep staff safe and to contain the spread of the virus in our communities. Staff have motivated each other and shown care and concern for one another: they exemplify both dedication and humanity. While the manner in which we work has changed, the work did not stop. UNICRI reformulated its methodology and refocused its priorities, including how to address the new needs of our partner countries, ensure continuity of activities, and contribute to the United Nations’ global crisis response.

During the pandemic we have doubled our efforts to enhance knowledge and capacity and to raise awareness about the impacts of the crisis on crime prevention, criminal justice, human rights, and vulnerable populations. UNICRI’s work is particularly relevant now to assist the international community in dealing with the unprecedented challenges to public health, the economy, and social and political stability around the world.

In keeping with its United Nations mandate, UNICRI has been closely monitoring the role of terrorist and criminal groups during this rapidly evolving global crisis, and it has prioritized support to Member States through research and training in important areas such as:

- Support to vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular regard to prevention and mitigation of gender-based violence and support to families in promoting healthy lifestyles and youth resilience;
- Malicious use of social media and cyber-attacks by non-state actors that are negatively impacting government strategies to mitigate and contain the effects of COVID-19;
- Countering radicalization and prevention of violent extremism, particularly through youth empowerment and addressing radicalization in prisons;
- Use of Artificial Intelligence to build capacity of law enforcement personnel in detecting and investigating criminal offences and organized crime trafficking, with particular regard to trafficking in persons; and

- Management of the global COVID-19 crisis to ensure the safety and security of the public at major sporting events and of tourists engaging in the tourism sector.

Along these lines, this issue of UNICRI's Freedom From Fear (F3) magazine addresses the collateral effects of COVID-19 impacting criminal justice, namely, the growing influence of organized crime and terrorism and the rise of violence against and exploitation of women and children. It is significant that more than half the articles in this edition are authored by UNICRI staff, who took advantage of telecommuting to share their expertise and research. I wish to commend all the authors and the Ghent University for exhibiting their commitment to research and innovation during these challenging times.

I further take this opportunity to thank the World Health Organization (WHO), and all its dedicated staff around the world, for their leadership during this unprecedented public health crisis. The role of UNICRI and its partners to promote criminal justice and prevent crime necessarily requires an evidence-based approach, and WHO has been instrumental in focusing public attention on the scientific and medical facts.

The COVID-19 virus knows no boundaries. It is laying bare weaknesses and vulnerabilities in even the most powerful countries and the richest families, while the vulnerable among us suffer the most. Nothing is remote anymore. We are all connected: our economies, our security, our health, and our futures. The achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals in its 2030 Agenda is critical to the world's collective recovery from the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic. United Nations programmes implemented in the past, for example, in response to the Ebola crisis, are now mitigating the deadly effects of COVID-19; African countries, indeed, are better able to respond to the public health crisis and to counter zoonotic diseases. The important activities UNICRI has implemented over the past decade with the European Union and 61 countries to mitigate biological risks within the framework of the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Centres of Excellence risk mitigation initiative (EU CBRN CoE) are now contributing to reducing the total number of COVID-19 victims because partner countries are already united to achieve the common objective of combatting biological threats.

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic is a "human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis." Nationalism, racism and xenophobia, abuses of power, and oppression by criminal and extremist groups are all on the rise. Applying the shared values of the United Nations, UNICRI and its partners are committed to countering COVID-19's direct and indirect acceleration of human rights violations, crime, armed conflict, inequality, and de-development. As showcased in this edition of F3, our expertise in research, training, and the dissemination of information based upon sound research and innovation, is a force for positive change and hope as together the world emerges from the most significant challenge of our times.

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# Coronavirus as a burning glass for digital risks?

■ by Thomas-Gabriel Rüdiger

The digital space represents a global interaction and communication sphere for all people. In this sphere children connect with young people and adults across almost all countries, cultures and age groups. The constant improvement and implementation of automatic translation programs, for example in social media, also means that language barriers in the digital space are becoming increasingly blurred. This evolution, which is actually to be welcomed, promises at best the emergence of a kind of Internet-based global society, but it also presents a dark side. Criminology assumes that many forms of crime - regardless of the respective national criminal law - typically arise from interaction between people. There are few arguments to argue against the fact that this is not the case on the Internet - which actually makes it the first truly widespread and global crime scene in the world. Children, too, are a natural part of this educated global scene (or space) and are thus exposed to the digital forms of crime that go hand in hand with it. At the European level, children aged 9-16 spend an average of 167 minutes each day online (Smahel et al. 2019). In Germany alone, 97 percent of minors aged 12 and over



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use the Internet several times a week (Feierabend et al. 2020). Children are also intrinsically confronted with the digital risks of this area. These risks range from cybergrooming and sexual harassment in social media and online games, to the confrontation with extremism and violent content, to risks such as cyberbullying and stalking (cf. Bötticher 2020; Gabriel 2020; Rüdiger 2020). Almost 25 percent of children in the European Union who use the Internet have already reported having had at least one negative online experience in the past year (Smahel et al. 2019). The U-25 study from Germany

even speaks of minors perceiv- ing the Internet as a culture of injustice (Borchard et al. 2018).

“ ***At the European level, children aged 9-16 spend an average of 167 minutes each day online*** ”

In such a culture, breaking the norms is therefore more common than complying with them. It is precisely the omnipres- ent transgression of norms on the web, whether through hate speech, sexual harassment or

even just daily phishing emails, that leads to a kind of digital transparency of crime (Rüdiger und Bayerl 2020). This indicates that the risk of a breach of standards on the web is ap- parently low, which further lowers the inhibition threshold for committing a crime. In this context, one can speak of the so-called broken web phenom- enon (Rüdiger 2018). Conse- quently, these are not national phenomena, but rather the re- sults of the globality of this dig- ital space, which differ at most in their respective national criminal law classification, but not in the way that they exist as a phenomenon. As early as



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2017, as many as 63 countries worldwide made cybergrooming, i.e. the online-based initiation of the sexual abuse of a child, punishable in one form or another (ICMEC 2017). Despite the obvious globality of the risks children in this topic are confronted with, there are no global social protection measures. Rather, it is not uncommon that the only protection that is considered useful is to increase the media competence of children. This is also understandable, as it is a mechanism that can be implemented nationally with relatively few resources, promising success for the protection of the child population itself. At the same time, however, society must consider how children whose parents are not willing or able to teach them these skills can also be protected. Interestingly enough, the results of the EU-KidsOnline study for Germany point to a rather opposite effect of media competence. According to this, especially children with a high level of digital com-

petence also showed high confrontation figures with digital risks (Hasebrink et al. 2019).

One reason could be that children with high level skills are more likely to be exposed to the digital space unsupervised than those without these skills. In this case, social protection and the creation of a secure digital space seem to be essential.

The current coronavirus crisis seems to reflect a kind of burning glass for digital risks in general, but for children in particular. Due to the global quarantine measures, it can be assumed that all age groups are spending and have spent more time online. From a criminological point of view, it must be assumed that the lack of an effective counter-strategy also leads to a corresponding increase in crime, simply because, on the one hand, potential offenders spend more time online and, on the other hand, children can encounter problematic content more often (EUROPOL 2020).

Signs of this negative development are already emerging. The number of reports to Europol of child abuse deregistrations by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children increased tenfold from February to March 2020 (EUROPOL 2020). According to a survey by GDATA, general cyber-attacks in Germany are said to have risen by 30 percent in the same period (Berghoff 2020). Even though there has been not only an increase in digital crimes, but also in crimes in the area of domestic violence and domestic sexual offences, there is a particular lack of uniform, transnational counter-strategies. It will only be a few years before it becomes fully apparent what effect this has had on the development of crime during the crisis worldwide. However, one lesson from the coronavirus crisis must be that if people spend more time online, digital crime will also increase. A global digital space without physical borders also calls for a serious discussion for glob-

al prevention and repression strategies to counter this situation, as a kind of burning glass on this problem.

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# Cyber-crime during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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■ by Adil Radoini

The pandemic of COVID-19 and the imposed lockdown, has led to more people to be confined at home with many more hours to spend online each day and increasingly relying on the Internet to access services, they normally obtain offline.

The dangers of cyber-crime have been there for many years, but the increase in the percentage of the population connected to the Internet and the time spent online, combined with the sense of confinement and the anxiety and fear generated from the lockdown, have provided more opportunities for cybercriminals to take advantage of the situation and make more money or create disruption. It is important to note that some more vulnerable segments of the population, such as children need to spend more time online for services such as schooling. This seismic change in how we live our lives and use the Internet has prompted a proliferation of e-crimes.





Common cybercrime techniques, such as phishing, have seen a spike. Phishing is the fraudulent practice of inducing individuals to reveal personal information, such as passwords and credit card numbers through fake websites or emails. New data gathered by Google and analyzed by Atlas VPN, a virtual private network (VPN) service provider, is shedding more light on the scope of this. According to the report, in January, Google registered 149k active phishing websites. In February, that number nearly doubled to 293k. In March, though, that number had in-

creased to 522k - a 350% increase since January.<sup>1</sup>

“  
***The pandemic of COVID-19 and the imposed lockdown, has led to more people to be confined at home increasingly relying on the Internet***  
 ”

Countries all across the globe are reporting an increase in cybercrime during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in Italy, the Polizia Postale, which is the law

enforcement branch in charge of the cybercrimes, reported several kinds of scams and frauds<sup>3</sup> that came in the form of ads, emails, fake websites, but also through phone calls and messages. Cybercriminals are capitalizing on the anxieties and fears triggered by the pandemic, using malware, such as viruses, worms, trojan horses, ransomware and spyware, to invade, damage, steal or cancel personal data on personal computers. Stolen data can then be used for different malicious purposes, including accessing bank accounts and blackmailing the victims in exchange of

1 <https://atlasvpn.com/blog/google-registers-a-350-increase-in-phishing-websites-amid-quarantine/>

2 <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/Preventing-crime-and-protecting-police-INTERPOL-s-COVID-19-global-threat-assessment>

3 <https://www.commissariatodips.it/da-sapere/per-i-cittadini-e-i-ragazzi/internet-rischi-e-minacce/index.html>

ransoms.<sup>4</sup> A “Corona anti-virus” software has also been flagged to the Italian law enforcement authorities. The application, BlackNet Rat, promises to protect the user’s device from coronavirus, but instead, it breaches the computer’s security and takes control of the computer, effectively enabling the criminal to remotely control it.<sup>5</sup>

A sharp surge of fake or inappropriate drugs and medical equipment sold at a very high price to allegedly cure the Coronavirus was recorded on an increasing number of websites well-designed by criminals<sup>6</sup>. In connection to this, an increase in the trafficking of counterfeited products sponsored through emails and website, including hygiene items and facial masks, was recorded. Also, the Italian Police reported that in some cases legitimate crowd-funding campaigns to collect money in support of health institutions, under huge pressure during the past weeks, were deviated to alternative

criminal pockets through fake websites.

“***legitimate crowd-funding campaigns to collect money in support of health institutions, under huge pressure during the past weeks, were deviated to alternative criminal pockets through fake websites***”

Another common scam taking place on the web in this time of lockdown are promises<sup>7</sup> of fake investment opportunities. This phenomenon has gone global and both INTERPOL and the United Nations<sup>8</sup> have warned of specific online frauds such as this linked to the COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> In the United Kingdom, an increase in scams and attacks targeting businesses has also been witnessed. For instance, emails pretending to relate to the government’s new grant scheme

have stolen money or downloaded ransomware<sup>10</sup>.

Financially motivated hackers have in fact been profiting from such feelings of uncertainty to target businesses and specifically retool existing malicious programs, such as ransomware -which is a type of malicious program used by hackers to take control of files in an infected system - and then demand large payments to recover them<sup>11</sup>. For example, companies such as Cognizant, an information technology service provider, reported that it was hit by a “Maze” ransomware cyberattack, which is a specific attack involving hackers threatening to release information on the internet if the target company fails to pay<sup>12</sup>.

On a similar note, with regard to attacks against other key organizations and infrastructure actively dealing with the virus response, INTERPOL’s Cybercrime Threat Response Team has also warned of cybercriminals using ransomware to hold hospitals and medical services

4 [https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/coronavirus\\_reati\\_truffe\\_online\\_ultime\\_notizie-5111692.html](https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italia/coronavirus_reati_truffe_online_ultime_notizie-5111692.html)

5 <https://www.techradar.com/news/corona-antivirus-infects-victims-with-malware> and <https://www.commissariatodips.it/notizie/articolo/coronavirus-blacknet-rat-distribuito-tramite-falso-corona-antivirus/index.html?fbclid=IwAR13sai7vB5-eBSRopHb-0wqBqOX24i8hvhz3YOR06toRUMYVj6k3iVOcpc> and <https://www.dqindia.com/cyber-crimes-surge-coronavirus-era/>

6 <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/rise-of-fake-%E2%80%98corona-cures%E2%80%99-revealed-in-global-counterfeit-medicine-operation>

7 <https://www.scamwatch.gov.au/news/warning-on-covid-19-scams>

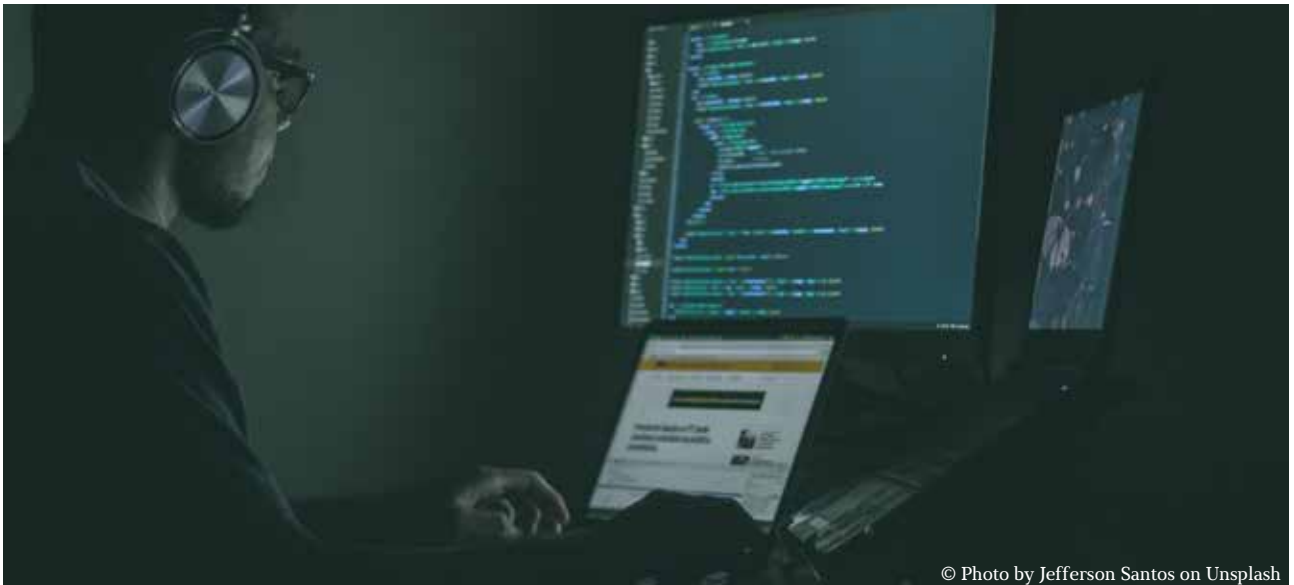
8 UN health agency warns against coronavirus COVID-19 criminal scams: <https://www.uneca.org/stories/un-health-agency-warns-against-coronavirus-covid-19-criminal-scams>

9 <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/INTERPOL-warns-of-financial-fraud-linked-to-COVID-19>

10 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/uk-coronavirus-scams-online-doorstep-200414220652029.html>

11 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-cyber-corporations/hacking-against-corporations-surges-as-workers-take-computers-home-idUSKBN21Z0Y6>

12 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cognizant-tech-cyber/cognizant-hit-by-maze-ransomware-attack-idUSKBN2200YA>



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digitally hostage, preventing them from accessing vital files and systems until a ransom is paid<sup>13</sup>. Several countries have registered cyber-attacks from unknown hackers at the expense of national health institutions, extremely critical infrastructures during the time of a pandemic. In Italy, on 1<sup>st</sup> April, a cyber-attack was conducted against the Spallanzani Hospital,<sup>14</sup> a center of excellence in the research on the coronavirus. A week earlier, also the Spanish Police has issued a warning that the entire computer system of Spain's hospitals was being targeted in a cyber-attack by a ransomware that targets enterprise and

government agencies.<sup>15</sup> During the same week, also the World Health Organization (WHO) has been attacked.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, the lockdown has also significantly increased concerns about vulnerable persons online. While **children**, for instance, are greatly benefiting from e-schooling, they are equally more exposed to threats coming from the internet:<sup>17</sup> file-sharing abuse, inappropriate content, and the grooming of children for sexual purposes are some of the dangers their parents should be aware of in these challenging times. The elderly, who usually rely on offline shopping

and have now to purchase what they need from the internet, equally find themselves more exposed to cybercrime.

Another side-effect of the protracted lockdown has been a growing demand for pornography. The industry has seen an increase in the number of users, but also concerns are being raised about vulnerable categories being pushed into exploitation, including drug addicts and children trafficked by families in need.<sup>18</sup>

Although the risk of being attacked will remain, some mitigation measures may help users and employers. For the users, it

13 <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/Cybercriminals-targeting-critical-healthcare-institutions-with-ransomware>

14 <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/155e84aa96b6ae8096181274>

15 [https://murciatoday.com/cyber\\_attack\\_threatens\\_spanish\\_hospital\\_computer\\_systems\\_1367723-a.html](https://murciatoday.com/cyber_attack_threatens_spanish_hospital_computer_systems_1367723-a.html)

16 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who-hack-exclusive/exclusive-elite-hackers-target-who-as-coronavirus-cyberattacks-spike-idUSKBN21A3BN>

17 <https://globalinitiative.net/crime-contagion-impact-covid-crime/>

18 *Men's Health*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.menshealth.com.au/coronavirus-pornhub-spike-in-traffic-free-premium-membership>.



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is recommended to be very vigilant about phishing emails and websites, practice good cyber hygiene, use only trusted wi-fi networks and consider adopting a password manager to help to avoid using the same password for multiple websites. It is also important to use double channels of communications with counterparts before transferring sensitive data or downloading a file from an email that may contain malware.

Sending an SMS, a WhatsApp message or making a quick call to make sure that the sender is a colleague or friend can prevent a cyber-attack. Rather than immediately clicking links in emails, it is advisable to look for information from trusted websites. Regarding the collective conference calls, which are being used more frequently, it is important to be mindful of sharing screens or sending screenshots that may contain

sensitive information. Employers can, among other things, make sure a secure remote access to the organization's files is set up, provide the right security capabilities<sup>19</sup> and ask employees to avoid working with their personal computers.<sup>20</sup> Finally, it is recommendable that they provide employees with appropriate courses to enhance their cyber-security knowledge.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/covid-19-cyberattacks-working-from-home/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/03/will-coronavirus-lead-to-more-cyber-attacks>



# How organized crime is expanding during the COVID-19 crisis

■ by Marco Musumeci and Francesco Marelli

Over the last century, organized crime has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to rapidly adapt to mutated social, political and economic conditions. While in some cases this adaptation was the result of a reactive response to improved legislation targeting their interests, in many others it was ignited by the pursuit of new possibilities for economic profit. Examples in this sense include how quickly criminal groups adapted to new scenarios created, for instance, by geopolitical changes, the integration of global markets or the generalized use of the world wide web as a marketplace for a variety of licit and illicit goods and services.

Considering the current health and economic crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, a question arises with regards to the effects, direct or indirect, that it may have on criminal strategies and, in particular, whether the pandemic is opening new scenarios for organized crime. With the aim of obtaining a clearer view of the situation, UNICRI has been closely monitoring the role of organized crime during the pandemic, collecting information and discussing find-



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ings with a series of key partners. The preliminary results of our activities, which will be presented in a Report later in 2020, show a worrisome scenario, where organized crime has been capable of fully exploiting opportunities created by the COVID-19 crisis. In this article, we will consider three main areas of interest for criminal organizations, each one progressively presenting a different level of challenges for both the governmental and law enforcement response: 1) new opportunities and markets; 2) the infiltration into the legal economy; and 3) the control exercised over the territory.

The analysis of UNICRI, conducted in relation to the first area of interest, demonstrates

the impressive capacity and rapidity that criminal groups have to quickly grasp any profit possibility created by new or mutated conditions. This is the case, for instance, of what happened with regards to shortages of crucial medical devices and of medical products in general, which has been experienced with the alarming surge of new cases since the outbreak. Following the aftermath of the pandemic, when the virus was spreading rampantly in many countries, it was almost impossible for citizens to purchase protection masks and hand sanitizers. Shortages in these products represented an opportunity for criminal organizations to step in and infiltrate these markets. Taking advantage of the shortages in the supply of

essential goods, criminal organizations have infiltrated the medical supply chain, offering the most essential medical supplies and protective equipment.

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***Organized crime has been capable of fully exploiting opportunities created by the COVID-19 crisis***

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Several cases registered in different countries and regions of the world demonstrate that criminal groups are capable of rapidly setting up a production and distribution strategy for these goods, which are very often substandard and that, in the case of protective masks, do

not offer any protection at all. This modus operandi leverages on the experience, established collaborations and trade channels owned by criminal organizations dealing in the trade in counterfeit products. These actions have seen consumers as a primary target, offering them products by infiltrating into local shops or through online sales. However, organized crime is also operating at a different and higher level of infiltration. In this regard, cases show that criminal groups are targeting public biddings for protective masks, hand sanitizers and even ventilators, in an attempt to infiltrate a higher level of the medical products' distribution chain. Recently, an individual, who was convicted in the past for financial crimes, won the public procurement contract for the supply of 7 million masks to Consip, an entity of the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance. On 9 April the financial police arrested an entrepreneur: the contested crimes are disturbing of auction and swindle. The procurement contract was also issued by Consip and envisaged the supply of 24 million masks for a total value of 15,8 million.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, the criminal scheme involved business facilitators and legitimate companies. These cases are of particular concern, considering

that the products were oftentimes substandard and not effective. They show how quickly criminals are capable of reacting to new opportunities and that wherever and whenever there is a gap, organized crime is ready to step in.

“***Criminal groups are targeting public biddings for protective masks, hand sanitizers and even ventilators***”

For what concerns the second area of interest, organized crime infiltration into the legal economy, the current economic crisis created by COVID-19 is greatly facilitating the possibilities that criminal groups acquire direct or indirect control and ownership of legitimate companies. Entire economic sectors, including tourism, manufacturing, food processing and catering are greatly hit by the crisis and a recent report of the International Labour Organization has underlined its devastating consequences for employment: the epidemic is expected to wipe out 6,7% of working hours equivalent to 195 million of full-time workers (in Europe 7,8%). ILO has estimated that 3,3 billions of people are currently affected

by the partial or full closure of activities.<sup>2</sup>

The financial crisis and the potential bankruptcy of several enterprises, shops and economic activities, may represent further opportunities for organized crime to penetrate and infiltrate the legal economy. Results from our analysis show that cases have already been registered where criminal groups are approaching entrepreneurs facing financial difficulties to purchase their activity or to offer them a loan. In both cases, organized crime directly aims at obtaining control of economic activities since previous case analysis conducted in this area showed that repaying the loan to the criminal group will become impossible and entrepreneurs will be forced to alienate property or control of their company to a crime group affiliate or strawman. A recent case in Italy shows how organized crime is already applying this strategy, where more than 100 people were investigated by the police on accounts of usury and extortion targeting economic activities facing a crisis after the lockdown.<sup>3</sup>

Previous analysis also demonstrated that, through this strategy, organized crime has been able to exercise direct or indi-

1 <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/consip-turbativa-d-asta-fornitura-24-milioni-mascherine-arresto-AD0XSEJ>

2 [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_743036/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_743036/lang-en/index.htm)

3 [https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/05/20/news/usura\\_100\\_denunce\\_bari-257161552/](https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/05/20/news/usura_100_denunce_bari-257161552/)



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rect control over key economic activities in fragile sectors, including the food distribution chain and the food processing and manufacture. It is expected that criminal groups will try to profit at the maximum from these prospects, infiltrating sectors that have a high potential of becoming strategic after the pandemic by responding to potential food or other commodities' shortages created by lockdowns and economic crisis in different parts of the world. Owning or controlling legitimate stakeholders of the production and distribution chains in these sectors, will give criminals the possibility to maximize profits also by directly inserting into the legitimate distribution substandard products and

raw materials, creating further risks for the health and safety of citizens.

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***The current economic crisis created by COVID-19 is greatly facilitating the possibilities that criminal groups acquire direct or indirect control and ownership of legitimate companies***  
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The third area of interest for criminal organizations is the reinforcement of their pres-

ence and control in the territory. A number of organized criminal groups have traditionally attempted and succeeded in maintaining the monopoly of control of illegal activities at the local level, by imposing protection on all types of economic businesses and corrupting local political institutions. To enforce this form of territorial control, these criminal groups often need to build the image of a sort of “state within the state”, able to provide aid and support to the local community and, at the same time, discourage any form of criticism and dissent through intimidation and violence.

In this regard, the COVID-19 crisis represents an excellent



opportunity to reinforce this rhetoric and promote the false idea that, in the moment of emergency, criminal groups can replace the government and perform its role. In the last months in Latin America, and especially in Mexico, Italy, South Africa, Japan and other countries, there have been several episodes in which criminal organizations have provided groceries and cleaning products in support of local populations. For example, one of the daughters of El Chapo, the historical leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, distributed groceries with her father's image to senior citizens in Guadalajara, Jalisco.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Gulf Cartel distributed aid packages containing food and sanitizers in Tamaulipas, placing in each box a sticker that indicates the name of the cartel and of its leader.<sup>5</sup>

As part of this communication strategy, these criminal groups have used social media to publicize their "services". Mexican cartels have posted on social media pictures while they were distributing aid packages. In another instance, after distributing food in a neighbourhood of Palermo in Sicily, the brother of a drug-trafficking leader appealed others on Facebook to follow his example. When a journalist reported the news in an Italian newspaper, the brother of the criminal emphatically responded on Facebook that "the State does not want us to do charity because we are Mafiosi" and then he threatened the journalist.<sup>6</sup>

Behind this sudden philanthropic vocation, there is business. For some types of organized criminal groups that are traditionally linked to a specif-

ic geographical area, the control of the territory remains their main strength and source of power. It is through territorial control that they will try to take advantage of the coronavirus crisis to infiltrate the medical supply chain, penetrate the legal economy, gain access to national resources and, in general, influence post-COVID-19 policies for their own benefit. As put by the Head of the Italian National Anti-mafia and anti-terrorism Directorate, Federico Cafiero De Raho, social consent is part of their plan of expansion.<sup>7</sup>

The largest effects of this threat might be seen after the health crisis, when the actual impact of organized crime strategy will be more visible. In the meanwhile, we need to closely monitor the situation and stay vigilant.

## ■ The Authors

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-face-of-mexico-charity-drug-lord-el-chapo-11587391200>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52367898>

<sup>6</sup> [https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/04/08/news/il\\_fratello\\_del\\_boss\\_su\\_fb\\_orgoglioso\\_di\\_essere\\_mafioso\\_giornalisti\\_peggio\\_del\\_coronavirus\\_-253480726/](https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/04/08/news/il_fratello_del_boss_su_fb_orgoglioso_di_essere_mafioso_giornalisti_peggio_del_coronavirus_-253480726/)

<sup>7</sup> [https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2020/04/06/news/cafiere\\_de\\_raho\\_i\\_clan\\_sfrutteranno\\_l\\_emergenza\\_per\\_mangiarsi\\_l\\_economia\\_-253334622/](https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2020/04/06/news/cafiere_de_raho_i_clan_sfrutteranno_l_emergenza_per_mangiarsi_l_economia_-253334622/)



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# Evolution from a social animal to a virtual animal?

## Using New Tech and AI Responsibly During and Post-COVID-19 Crisis Period

■ by Irakli Beridze and Maria Eira

“*Man is by nature a social animal*” proclaimed Aristotle. This characteristic has made us organize into complex hierarchical societies where individuals are interdependent to satisfy basic necessities. Although we all know that social distancing is the most effective way to contain the spread of coronavirus, this is something biologically unnatural for humans.<sup>1</sup> In this health emergency, many governments have decided to impose strict measures to limit social interactions to an absolute minimum. Lockdowns, limitations of movement of people and closure of borders have all been necessary measures for the good of societies.

<sup>1</sup> Winder, I. C. & Shaw, V. (2020, Mar 25). Coronavirus: experts in evolution explain why social distancing feels so unnatural. The Conversation. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-experts-in-evolution-explain-why-social-distancing-feels-so-unnatural-134271>



***Some governmental entities turned to emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) for support in unique and innovative ways***

To this end, law enforcement agencies and security services were tasked with the difficult responsibility of imposing social isolation to protect people. They have found themselves thrust into the middle of an unparalleled situation, playing a critical role in halting the spread of the virus and

preserving public safety and social order in the process. For some, the answer to control our instinct of socialisation was to increase surveillance globally. To achieve this complex mission, some governmental entities turned to emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) for support in unique and innovative ways, namely through digital tracking and physical surveillance technology.

At the time of writing this article,<sup>2</sup> digital tracking measures, that include the use of mobile location data to track citizens and their contacts, have been introduced in 30 countries.

Additionally, at least 9 countries are using advanced physical surveillance technologies, including facial recognition cameras equipped with heat sensors, surveillance drones and extensive closed-circuit television (CCTV) networks. With the number of deaths increasing at an alarming rate, we can assume that in the coming days, weeks and months we will most likely see more countries adopting these measures, and more AI and related technologies come to the fore.

However, governments around the world using or considering to use these approaches must ensure that they are

<sup>2</sup> Woodhams, S. (2020, Apr 20). COVID-19 Digital Rights Tracker. Top 10 VPN. Retrieved from <https://www.top10vpn.com/news/surveillance/covid-19-digital-rights-tracker/>



proportionate, necessary and legitimate during these unprecedented times. While the application of technology can play an important role in seizing the reins during this crisis, we must not forget that its use can raise very real and serious human rights concerns that can undermine the trust placed in the government by communities. Human rights, civil liberties and the fundamental principles of law may be exposed or damaged, if we do not tread this path with great caution. In a public statement on 24<sup>th</sup> Feb-

ruary to the UN Human Rights Council,<sup>3</sup> the UN's Secretary-General António Guterres acknowledged that "*The digital age has opened new frontiers of human welfare, knowledge and exploration. Yet new technologies are too often used to violate rights through surveillance, repression and online harassment and hate. Advances such as facial recognition software, robotics, digital identification and biotechnology, must not be used to erode human rights, deepen inequality or exacerbate existing discrimination.*"

As we recommended in a recent article,<sup>4</sup> to avoid infringement of human rights, law enforcement agencies around the world should opt to use the following steps in accessing and utilising data:

1. **Data anonymisation:** Instead of identifying individuals and their contacts, some countries are collecting anonymized data to study the movement of people in a more general manner. This option still provides governments with the ability to

3 Guterres, A. (2020, Feb 24). The Highest Aspiration: A Call to Action for Human Rights. Geneva, Switzerland, UN Human Rights Council. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-02-24/secretary-generals-remarks-the-un-human-rights-council-the-highest-aspiration-call-action-for-human-rights-delivered-scroll-down-for-all-english>

4 Beridze, I. & Minevich, M. (2020, Apr 2). Using AI responsibly to fight the coronavirus pandemic. TechCrunch. Retrieved from <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/02/using-ai-responsibly-to-fight-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>



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track the movement of large groups but minimises the risk of infringing data privacy rights. However, governments should also guarantee that data sets cannot be “de-anonymised.”<sup>5</sup>

2. **Purpose limitation:** Personal data that is collected and processed to track the spread of the coronavirus should not be reused for another purpose. National authorities should seek to ensure that the large amounts of personal and medical data are exclusively used for public health reasons. This is a concept already in force in Europe, within the context of

the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)<sup>6</sup> that can serve as a foundation to develop global best practices on the use of data.

3. **Knowledge-sharing and Open Data access:** To fight this novel virus, data and research findings should be shared between international key stakeholders in the community, including the public and private sectors, and civil society organizations. Similar to some science institutions and universities, the World Health Organization (WHO) is gathering the latest international scientific

findings and knowledge<sup>7</sup> on an open access COVID-19 database.

4. **Time limitation:** Governments should provide a clear timeline to the use of these tracking tools and clarify what will be the end of the data collected during this period. Alternatives have suggested storing personal data for a limited period of time.<sup>8</sup> Although the end of this pandemic seems very far away at this point in time, it will come to an end. And when it does, national authorities will need to scale back their newly acquired monitoring capabilities.

5 Pegg, D & Lewis, P. (2020, Apr 13). NHS coronavirus app: memo discussed giving ministers power to ‘de-anonymise’ users. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/nhs-coronavirus-app-memo-discussed-giving-ministers-power-to-de-anonymise-users>

6 GDPR, Recital 54. European Union. Retrieved from <http://www.privacy-regulation.eu/en/r54.htm>

7 World Health Organization. Global research on coronavirus disease (COVID-19). United Nations. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>

8 Simula. (2020, Mar 27). ENG: Simula is working with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. Retrieved from <https://www.simula.no/news/eng-simula-working-norwegian-institute-public-health>



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During this time of great need, humanity's inherent instinct for socialisation can be dangerous. The coronavirus pandemic has led to several innovative uses of new technology that could play a major role in curbing the effects that this instinct could have on our global health and well-being. It is important, however, to not let consideration of fundamental principles and rights be set aside.

At the same time, it is equally important to empower citizens by keeping them updated with relevant and reliable information, self-motivating the population to cooperate with the public authorities. Building trust in science, politics and

media may avoid the need for strict monitoring and opens the door for free self-responsible communities.

“ ***Governments should provide a clear timeline to the use of these tracking tools and clarify what will be the end of the data collected*** ”

All those employing such powerful technologies have an enormous responsibility in their hands. It is a responsibility that can very much shape the freedoms of the future of our

society. Wired through millions of years of evolution to be social creatures, citizens also have the responsibility of following social restriction measures and adopting virtual alternatives of connection. Arguably, the pandemic may also be contributing to humanity taking the next step in its evolution, moving from a “social animal” to a “virtual animal” as we explore alternatives that can fulfil our nature as social creatures. Should our new post-COVID-19 world be characterized by increased digitization and accelerated automation, which is highly likely, the importance of using technology responsibly becomes even more essential.



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### UNICRI Centre for AI and Robotics

UNICRI established a specialized Centre for AI and Robotics in The Hague. The Centre is one of the few international entities dedicated to specifically looking at AI, robotics and related technologies vis-à-vis crime prevention and control, criminal justice, rule of law and security. It assists national authorities, in particular law enforcement agencies, to

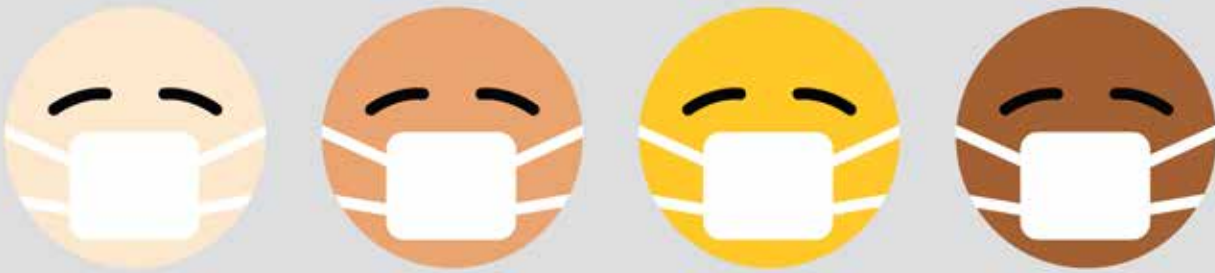
understand the opportunities presented by these technologies and, at the same time, to navigate the potential pitfalls associated with them. Working closely with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), UNICRI has set up a global platform for law enforcement, fostering discussion on AI, identifying practical use cases and defining principles for responsible use. On the last topic, a ‘toolkit’ for responsible

AI innovation by law enforcement is being elaborated that will contain valuable guidance and support for law enforcement in developing, deploying and using AI in a trustworthy and lawful manner. Soft law approaches such as this toolkit can make a valuable contribution to AI governance, particularly in the law enforcement domain where the use of this technology is truly an edge case.

### ■ The Author

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# The principles of equality and non-discrimination under viral attack:

## Stigma, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic

■ by Odhran McCarthy and Sophie Van De Meulengraaf

The principle of equality – the belief that all human beings are born free and equal – along with the correlated prohibition on discrimination are foundations of society. Equality is one of the most basic aspects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a pillar on which the United Nations (UN) was founded in 1945. Yet, following the emergence of the coronavirus in December 2019, this long-established fundamental human right is being increasingly threatened. Indeed, as the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes,





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observed, “COVID-19 is not just a health issue; it can also be a virus that exacerbates xenophobia, hate and exclusion.”<sup>1</sup>

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***Equality is one of the most basic aspects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights***  
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Prompted by the confirmation of the first cases of COVID-19 in China, *Sinophobia* – or anti-Chinese sentiment – is on the rise, with Chinese nationals and, broadly speaking, Asian communities across the globe

being increasingly stigmatized and targeted in coronavirus-related racist and xenophobic acts, involving both verbal and physical assaults.<sup>2</sup> Worryingly, this has even been labelled by some as a normal or ‘common’ reaction to the situation in which the world finds itself at the beginning of this new decade. Cries of ‘China virus’ have, for instance, been heard in streets and physical assaults, targeted vandalism, the denial of entrance to bars and restaurants, and the refusal of rides by taxi drivers have all been reported. This Sinophobia is not always harmful in an immediately obvious way, but it does serve to augment and reinforce

existing prejudices against Chinese, as well as broader Asian culture, and can contribute to driving apart communities at a time when a united front is the key to fighting the spread of the virus.

All that being said, Chinese, and those of Asian origin in general, have not been the only victims of stigma, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and discrimination during the pandemic. In somewhat of an unexpected turn of events, the instances of the very same behaviour are beginning to appear against individuals of African and European origin throughout Africa and Asia, as concerns over

1 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25757&LangID=E>

2 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/13/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide#>



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a possible second wave of the pandemic grow. The pandemic has also seen pre-existing stigmas against minority groups fortified, for instance against the Roma and Sinti communities, while anti-semitism and anti-muslim sentiment has reared its head, in particular with respect to protests and manifestations organized by far-right extremist groups in Europe and North America.

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*The pandemic has also seen pre-existing stigmas against minority groups fortified*

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Regardless of who the victims are, the rise of such incidents has been widely condemned. The United Nations Secre-

tary-General António Guterres has said that the COVID-19 pandemic is a “human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis.”<sup>3</sup> He has emphasized the need to remember that ‘the threat is the virus, not people’<sup>4</sup> and accompanied this with a global appeal to end hate speech.<sup>5</sup> In a joint statement, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Miguel Moratinos, and the Special Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, equally expressed concern and condemned all forms of stigma, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and discrimination. The Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, described such stigmatization as ‘the most dangerous enemy’<sup>6</sup> and its Emergency Committee

issued a statement advising all countries to be mindful of the principles mentioned in Article 3 of the International Health Regulations, that states that their implementation shall be with full respect for the dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms of persons. The International Health Regulations are an internationally binding agreement between 196 countries, including all Member States of the World Health Organization, committing them to work together for global health security.

Fortunately, some countries have taken action, demonstrating that an even in response to a global crisis, established values and principles can be embraced. For instance, in Spain, cooperation launched between the Spanish Council for the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-08/appeal-address-and-counter-covid-19-hate-speech>

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/drtedros/status/1233445856428331009><https://twitter.com/drtedros/status/1233445856428331009>



Elimination of Ethnic or Racial Discrimination and verification platforms seeks to counter the spread of coronavirus-related fake news and hate speech about the Roma community on social media,<sup>7</sup> while in the City of Lausanne, Switzerland, an information point has been set up to respond to the needs of migrants on a variety of issues related to the pandemic, including racism.<sup>8</sup> In New York, the City's Commission on Human Rights organizes free educational workshops for the public on their human rights and obligations under the law, in particular in communities facing heightened levels of discrimination and harassment.<sup>9</sup> It has

also just recently announced a public education campaign to distribute information in local media, online and in public places aimed at addressing the problem and encouraging victims to report cases of discrimination or harassment.<sup>10</sup>

International organizations have also been active. The International Organization for Migration, for example, launched a campaign on social media in Mexico to inform citizens about the importance of avoiding hate speech and xenophobia during the COVID-19 emergency.<sup>11</sup> The United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect

has also released a comprehensive guidance note which provides guidance to Member States, civil society, media and other relevant actors such as religious and civil leaders and influencers for addressing and countering COVID-19-related hate speech. This guidance serves as a complement for its overarching Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech.<sup>12</sup>

“ **Full respect  
for the dignity,  
human rights  
and fundamental  
freedoms of  
persons** ”

7 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/overview\\_of\\_covid19\\_and\\_roma\\_-\\_impact\\_-\\_measures\\_-\\_priorities\\_for\\_funding\\_-\\_23\\_04\\_2020\\_docx.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/overview_of_covid19_and_roma_-_impact_-_measures_-_priorities_for_funding_-_23_04_2020_docx.pdf)

8 <https://en.unesco.org/news/whom-bell-tolls-solidarity-migrants-lausanne>

9 <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cchr/community/covid19-events.page>

10 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/nyc-launches-100000-effort-combat-anti-asian-discrimination/story?id=70830974>

11 <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-launches-social-media-campaign-mexico-prevent-discrimination-during-covid-19-pandemic>

12 <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>

On an individual level, many members of the public have turned to social media in a similar attempt to spread awareness and bring a halt to incidents of hate, with the *#IoNonSonoUnVirus* hashtag trending on social media in Italy throughout the crisis, while *#IAmNotAVirus* has been introduced in Anglophone countries and *#YoNoSoyUnVirus* in Spanish-speaking countries. In the Netherlands, the *#IkChinees* was introduced by the Chinese community, encouraging the people to order food at Chinese restaurants, take a selfie and share it on social media using the hashtag.

Although all extremely positive examples and messages, much remains to be done to preserve the integrity of the principles of equality and non-discrimination and to fight back against stigma, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and discrimination.

First and foremost, it is important that leaders, whether political leaders or community leaders, or even social media influencers, are not silent on this, no matter the sensitivities that may surround some aspects of limiting the freedom of expression. Those with a voice that carries, must set the example of good behaviour, unequivocally repudiating stigma, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and discrimination of all kinds – not only COVID-19-related –

and putting in place and implementing policies to address it.

“***Much remains to be done to preserve the integrity of the principles of equality and non-discrimination***”

In addition to speaking out, several other actions are fundamentally needed at this time of crisis. This notably includes fact-based information and awareness-raising national campaigns targeting the public to undercut mis- and disinformation and the provision of guidance and specialized training for national authorities and civil society organizations to ensure that those with a role in the protection and vindication of rights have the capacity to address the problem. These will be effective tools against discrimination and xenophobia. At the same time, when organizing actions in the community, it is important to remember that both the communities that propagate hateful messages and the victimized communities themselves must be actively engaged.

Finally, technology merits mentioning. In recent years, several major social media and Internet companies, such as Google and Facebook, have

been using artificial intelligence to monitor, analyze and remove racist, xenophobic and hateful content online.<sup>13</sup> While this in itself raises its own challenges, in particular in terms of both privacy and freedom of expression, the potential of the technology is noteworthy. In this regard, discussions should be had, bringing together bright minds from the public sector, industry and academia, to explore and weigh up the risks and benefits of relying on technology in this regard.

“***It is important to remember that both the communities that propagate hateful messages and the victimized communities themselves must be actively engaged***”

These are just some steps that can be taken, but it is certainly not all that can or should be done. While the pandemic has seen an unsettling rise in stigma, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and discrimination, it has not been the cause of it. The pandemic has fuelled pre-existing and deep-seated prejudices in society. The ongoing protests and demonstrations for racial equality following the death of George Floyd in the United States in May

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-ai-hate-speech-improves-unclear/>



of this year are further testament to this and serve to underscore that, even when this pandemic passes, efforts must be made to double down on stigma, hate speech, xenophobia, racism and discrimination, rooting it out from society.

Human rights violations against vulnerable populations, including hate crimes, have been identified by UNICRI in its Strategic

Programme Framework as one of the major threats or challenges it seek to address. Investigating and reporting racism, hate crime and hate speech online has been an issue UNICRI has worked on for several years, delivering training courses for law enforcement agencies, legal professionals, statutory bodies, employers, trade unions, nongovernmental organizations and others, and organ-

izing workshops on hate speech and hate crime prevention strategies and actions. More recently, in cooperation with the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, UNICRI has been exploring hate speech and violent extremism as driving factors leading to violence and atrocity crimes.

## ■ The Authors

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**Sophie van de Meulengraaf** is an intern at UNICRI in The Hague, where she supports the research and daily activities of its Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics. She holds a Masters in 'International Relations: Global Conflict in the Modern Era' from Leiden University and has studied Liberal Arts and Sciences at University College Maastricht. Prior to joining UNICRI, Sophie interned at the Permanent Representation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations in Vienna and at the United Nations University - Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT) in Maastricht.



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# Covid-19 pandemic and illicit drugs

■ by Alessandra Liquori O'Neil

## Lessons from Italy

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, no clear evidence has emerged of a significant decrease in the supply of drugs at the global level, including in Italy, even after the quarantine was extended to the entire country.

At the beginning of the outbreak, there were reports on both organized criminal groups and consumers stockpiling drugs to ensure availability on both ends. After a number of countries declared lockdown, difficulties in obtaining chemical precursors by criminal groups pointed to a possible slowdown in the availability for some types of drugs.

As the pandemic kept extending in both severity and geographical space, an adaptation of supply dynamics to the new scenario emerged, with varying characteristics. Decreased mobility and the limitations to public life imposed by quarantines made criminal activities more visible and as a consequence, most drug selling was reported to be moved to online or home delivery, or to designated places. Substances, mostly cocaine and heroin, were reported to be cut so



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that the stock could last longer, while various methods were reported as being disguised by street dealers to circumvent quarantine measures, from carrying drugs in shopping carts (only supermarkets were allowed to stay open), using taxis to avoid police checks on private vehicles, and using public transportation for “quick selling on the go”.

Globally, while it is difficult to project the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on illicit drug markets, it is not unreasonable to presume that in the short period an increase in the prices will manifest – demand will still be there, while modalities to distribute in any large quantity may be impacted. As with most markets, legal and

illegal, this could be complicated by the pandemic’s unpredictable evolution and by the shift in the interest of criminal groups for more lucrative, and easily accessible, markets, especially those connected to the Covid-19 emergency response. During quarantine, while petty crime rates have decreased by up to 70%, organized crime has been turning greater attention to legal markets. For instance, law enforcement and anti-mafia agencies have warned about trafficking of masks and other health protection equipment, as well as the cash acquisition of hard-hit businesses, allowing criminal enterprises to facilitate money laundering.

In other instances, for example in Mexico, organized criminal

groups have been reported to offer food and other consumer goods to disadvantaged groups, and particularly hard-hit communities, in order to engender community support.

A temporary decrease in the demand for recreational drugs might be projected as a consequence of home confinement as well as due to the economic shutdown, and related reduced income. In light of this, a temporary fall in prices for main recreational drugs could be predicted. Notwithstanding this, organized criminal groups will likely use the pandemic as an opportunity to stockpile and resell at higher prices when the crisis is over, or least when certain restrictions are lifted.



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Globally, governments have continued to take measures to reinforce police operations and international cooperation against drug trafficking and organized crime in general. Seizures of drugs have continued both nationally and in the context of international police operations. In February, Italy has promoted an international meeting of Heads of police forces to exchange best practices on anti-narcotic operations.

“ ***Organized criminal groups have been reported to offer food and other consumer goods to disadvantaged groups*** ”

### **People who use drugs (PWUD) – People with drug use disorders (PWDUD)**

Home confinement during a health emergency might increase feelings of anxiety and fear, that may constitute vulnerability factors for the onset of mental health conditions. Symptoms might be exacerbated in PWUD and PWDUD who could already be affected by psychiatric and physical comorbidities. Such scenario might in turn increase not only drug related risk behaviours but also additional vulnerability to Covid-19 mortality, due to a compromised immune system. During the Covid-19 pandemic, overdoses did not diminish in Italy, and indeed in some parts of the country, they reportedly an increase, a clear sign that drugs remained regularly available.

With regard to treatment services, while public drug treatment services seemed to undergo some difficulties in ensuring continuity of service to their patients, therapeutic communities seemed to offer a more viable model to cope with the Covid-19 emergency and the consequences of quarantine. Risk reduction services increased their distribution of safe injecting tools, such as syringes and needles, and many self help groups organized their meetings online in order to retain patients. In some cases, the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a catalyst for some drug users to stop using the substance and to access rehabilitation.

In prison, deaths caused by illicit substances or OST overdoses were reported during a series of riots that erupted after





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the government restricted external visits for fear of creating or worsening infections rates, particularly within overcrowded incarceration facilities.

UNICRI has been supporting Member States in addressing drug use problems for more than 25 years, with programmes spanning from training on drug prevention and treatment addressed to professionals, promoting gender responsive drug policies, building capacity of national administrations to counter illicit drugs and the implementation and exchange

of tools to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and best practices among professionals and policy makers. Over the years, research reports have included studies on the functioning of drug markets, and on the economic and human costs of addiction to the criminal justice system. Alternatives to incarceration for minor drug related offences has been another research area where UNICRI has developed evidence-based research which has included focuses on juvenile justice. More recently, UNICRI is carrying out a research study with

the aim to identify good practices for family-oriented interventions to support healthy lifestyles and prevent drug use among youth.

“ *Therapeutic communities seemed to offer a more viable model to cope with the Covid-19 emergency and the consequences of quarantine* ”



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## Conclusions and Recommendations:

1. Official law enforcement and credible media reports indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has not prevented drug traffickers from continuing to carry out their illicit businesses. This reflects a high degree of organizational flexibility by organized criminal groups, capable of adjusting their illegal business models even in the face of such a sudden and global crisis. International

co-operation among law enforcement, investigative and judicial organizations is paramount to counter illicit drug markets and the involvement of organized crime groups.

2. Member States should ensure that plans for a quick and efficient transition to continuity of care during emergencies are in place, particularly for those suffering from drug addiction or who are affected by drug use disorders. Such plans should include reinforcing safety and security

measures for staff in drug treatment services, ensuring low-threshold and risk-reduction services, take-home opioid substitution medication programmes, home visits or calls, virtual psychological support platforms and help-lines, medication and equipment supply via pharmacies, public awareness campaigns to help ensure that the population is informed about such services, with particular regard to vulnerable groups such as sex workers, prisoners and the homeless.



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## Media outlets

Direzione Centrale per i Servizi Antidroga,  
Ministero dell'Interno

Direzione Nazionale Antimafia e Antiterrorismo,  
Ministero della Giustizia

Direzione Generale per la Prevenzione  
Sanitaria, Ministero della salute

EMCDDA “Implications of Covid-19 for people who use drugs and drug use providers” March 2020

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/plan-prepare-respond.html>

WHO Coronavirus disease 2019, Country and Technical advice ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int))

EUROPOL How criminals profit from the Covid-19 pandemic, March 2020

INTERPOL “Dealers using food delivery services to transport drugs during Covid-19 lockdowns, April 2020

UNODC and WHO International Standards for the Treatment of Drug Use Disorders, March 2020

## ■ The Author

**Alessandra Liquori O’Neil** joined the United Nations in 1989, working with the United Nations Development Programme. In 1993 she joined UNICRI, the United Nations Institute mandated to assist Member States in research and training on crime prevention and justice administration. Since then, she has developed capacity building projects with a focus on protection of human rights with particular regard to vulnerable populations. Over the years, Ms. Liquori’s programme portfolio has included projects on the protection of the rights of women, alternatives to detention for substance users, access to health and social services for vulnerable populations (including inmates) and ethics and legality of biomedical research. Mrs. O’Neil holds an MA in Humanities from the University of Rome. Since June 2014, she is also responsible for the UNICRI Liaison Office in Rome.



# Domestic violence – the shadow pandemic of Covid19

## Effects of policy measures on vulnerable population

■ by Elke Klaassen

To prevent the spread of Covid19, many governments have been taking strict measures such as closing borders, imposing nationwide lockdowns and setting up quarantine facilities. While these measures may ensure that social distancing is followed seriously, they may have indirect effects on the economy and adverse effects on the well-being of people, especially the vulnerable population.

To help governments make data-driven policy decisions to effectively deal with pandemics like Covid19, [Omdena](#) provided an enabling platform to Artificial Intelligence (AI) experts, data scientists, and domain experts so that they could study the effects of Covid19 policy measures on the vulnerable population. This article describes the results of one of the many facets of this challenge, which focused on the impact of Covid19 on domestic violence.

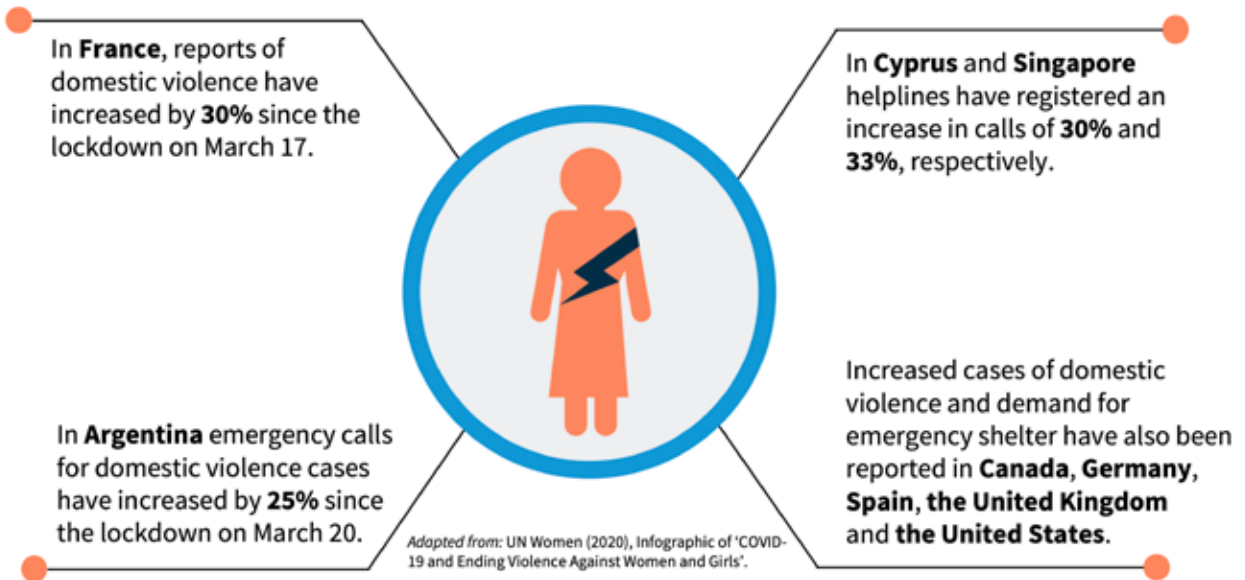


Fig. 1 Infographic on Covid19 and domestic violence adapted from the [UN Women](#).

The goal of this task was to get a better grip on domestic violence and gauge the scale of the problem. To this end, different data sources were used - including news articles, policy data, mobility trends, and domestic violence search rates. The results indicate that the problem of domestic violence could be much bigger than indicated by some of the key figures mentioned in the news. Further, restrictions on movement and strict enforcement of lockdowns may have further amplified the issue. It can be said that domestic violence is a shadow pandemic and it is integral to understand the gravity of the problem, and ensure redressal and support to survivors and vulnerable populations.

### Domestic violence – a growing shadow pandemic

The [UN Women](#) recently labeled the increase of violence against women as '*a growing shadow pandemic*'. As a consequence of Covid19 policy measures, many victims find themselves in proximity to their abusers due to lockdown measures. The world is witnessing a sharp rise in the number of helpline calls and domestic violence reports, as illustrated in the infographic in Fig. 1. This highlights the pressing need to reflect upon the pre-existing and growing incidence of domestic violence and sensitizing organisations and communities at the grassroots level to provide help and support.

### The shadow pandemic's size— news coverage

The news is replete with reports and cases of domestic violence and its surge during the pandemic. In the beginning of March, the increase in the domestic violence in China received coverage in the news. [In the Hubei Province the number of reported cases had tripled in February, compared to the same period last year.](#) Weeks later, similar articles appeared from all over the world.

To get a first grip on gravity and spread of this shadow pandemic, a dataset of about 80,000 Covid19-related news articles was used. This dataset was created using [GDELT](#) to query relevant articles and [news-please](#)



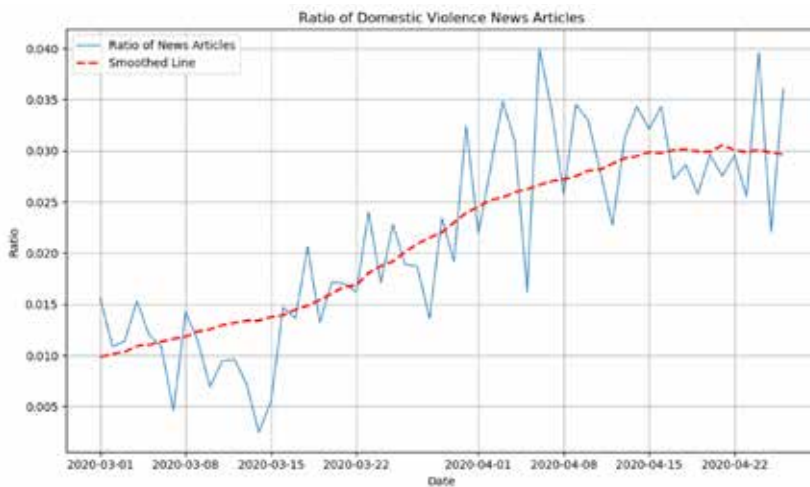


Fig. 4 Domestic violence-related news articles relative to Covid19 related news articles.

icity measures taken in 152 countries (accessed on May 8, 2020).

- **Mobility data:**

[Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Reports](#), indicates the percentual changes in mobility patterns in 132 countries (accessed on May 8, 2020). The data is relative (*\_rel*) to the mobility patterns between January 7 and February 7, 2020. To limit stochasticity, a moving average (*\_ma*) filter of 7 days (1 week) was applied.

- **Search data:**

[Google Trends](#) data, indicates the search trend of a certain topic over time (accessed on May 8, 2020). To get the percentual change (*\_rel*) in search rates, this date is made relative to a baseline period as well (January 3 - February 13). To remove stochasticity a moving average filter (*\_ma*) of 14 days

(2 weeks) was applied to the Google Trends data.

The analysis focuses on countries that are present in all three datasets, and that have sufficient [Google Trends](#) data available. The condition of having data available for at least 50% of the considered time period (January 3 - May 8) was imposed. This ensured that the analysis was expansive and included a total number of 53 countries.

The search trend data is considered to be relevant for studying the scale of the problem in situations where one is in search of help, has access to the internet, and has a certain level of trust in societal organizations to be able to offer help. Evidently, the last two conditions are not met in different countries to the desired level across the world. This is, amongst others, reflected in the [Human Development Data](#) - for example, the % of the

(female) population that has access to the internet. Hence, the results should be considered with these conditions, caveats, and nuances in mind.

Further, the use of search rates has a clear advantage. The victim's quest for help and receiving help is expected to consist of several steps; and more courage is required for every succeeding step that needs to be taken. The most basic step might be to browse the web for ways to deal with and seek help for domestic violence. Hence, search rate data might reflect the scale of the real problem more accurately than the number of domestic violence reports, because the search rate is probably the first step a victim might take in seeking assistance.

### Correlation between policy measures, mobility and domestic violence search rates

The first step in the analysis is to study correlations between the different features in the dataset. To reveal whether there is a mutual relationship or a connection between the variables, a correlation plot is used. The correlation plot for France is shown in Fig. 5. A highly negative correlation (-0.95) between *workplace mobility* and *domestic violence search rates* can be observed. And, as expected, *workplace mobility* highly correlates with the *workplace closing policy measure* that was implemented by the government (-0.98). These

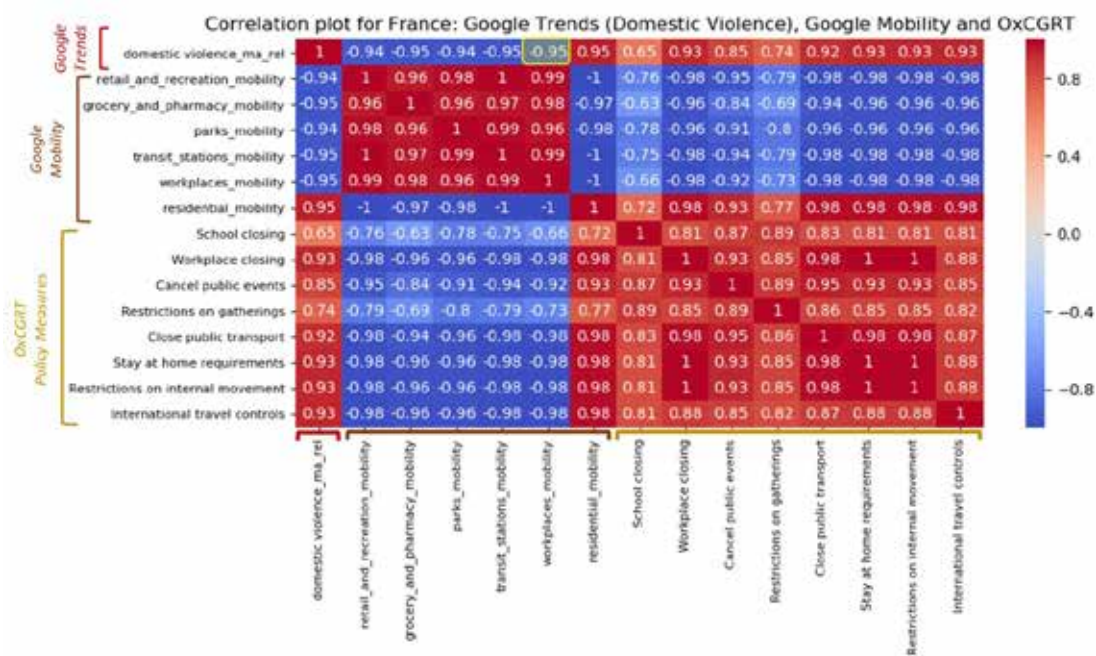


Fig. 5 Correlation plot of the different features of the policy, mobility, and search rate dataset (France).

correlations indicate that with the closing of workplaces workplace mobility decreases, and with the decrease in mobility domestic violence increases.

In Fig. 6, the trend of *workplace mobility* and *domestic violence search rates* is visualized over time. The negative correlation between both variables is illustrated by the decrease in workplace mobility, while at the same time there is an increase in domestic violence search rates. Compared to the baseline, search rates **almost doubled** (100% increase). This indicates that the incidence of searching for information related to domestic violence increased with the decline in workplace mobility and as people found themselves stuck at home.

### Regression models to quantify the effect of mobility on domestic violence search rates

Regression analysis was used to assess the size and significance of the relationship between workplace mobility and domestic violence search rates. The outcome of this analysis is a regression model that indicates the impact of workplace mobility on domestic violence search rates. Regression analysis is a predictive modelling technique used for forecasting, time series modelling, and finding causal effect relationship between variables.

The linear line in Fig. 7 is the illustration of the output of the regression model for the case study of France. The relation-

ship between mobility and domestic violence is significant, and the slope indicates that with every 1% decrease in mobility, domestic violence search rates increase by 1.4%.

The results of the models for the countries in the *top 10* and *bottom 10* are listed. In the *top 10* countries, decreasing mobility correlates with a steep increase in domestic violence search rates. In the *bottom 10* countries, the opposite trend is observed: mobility and domestic violence both decrease at the same time. To further study and explain the results of the different models, the individual plots for the first six in the categories of the *top 10* and *bottom 10* countries are shown in the next section.



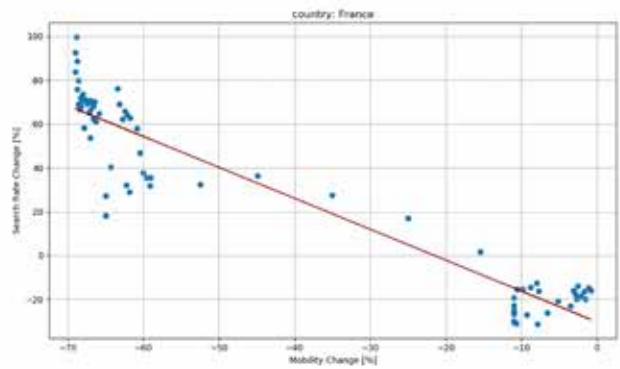
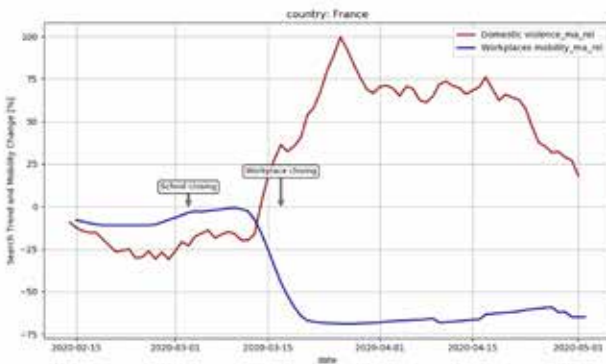


Fig. 6 Policy measures, mobility and search rate trends over time (France).

Fig. 7 Regression model results of the impact of mobility on domestic violence search rates (France).

### Countries illustrating a strong relationship between a decrease in mobility and an increase in domestic violence

The individual figures for the first six among the top 10 countries are shown in Fig. 8. These countries have a strong relationship between mobility decrease and domestic violence increase.

- With the exception of Japan, the peak in search rates has doubled or even tripled in each of the illustrated countries.
- Although the coefficient in Japan is relatively high, the peak in search rate is ‘just’ 60%. This is due to a relatively limited decrease in mobility, likely due to less strict lockdown measures in this country.

country	Coefficient	Pvalue	Significant
Vietnam	-5.79	0.00	TRUE
Japan	-4.99	0.00	TRUE
Germany	-3.37	0.00	TRUE
France	-1.41	0.00	TRUE
Belgium	-0.83	0.00	TRUE
South Africa	-0.72	0.00	TRUE
Hong Kong	-0.72	0.01	TRUE
Italy	-0.65	0.00	TRUE
Ireland	-0.57	0.00	TRUE
Kenya	-0.50	0.00	TRUE

Top 10 countries



Bottom 10 countries

Mexico	0.42	0.00	TRUE
Peru	0.48	0.00	TRUE
Indonesia	0.49	0.00	TRUE
Bolivia	0.51	0.00	TRUE
Philippines	0.61	0.00	TRUE
El Salvador	0.62	0.00	TRUE
Thailand	0.73	0.00	TRUE
Jamaica	0.79	0.00	TRUE
South Korea	0.91	0.05	TRUE
Australia	1.17	0.00	TRUE

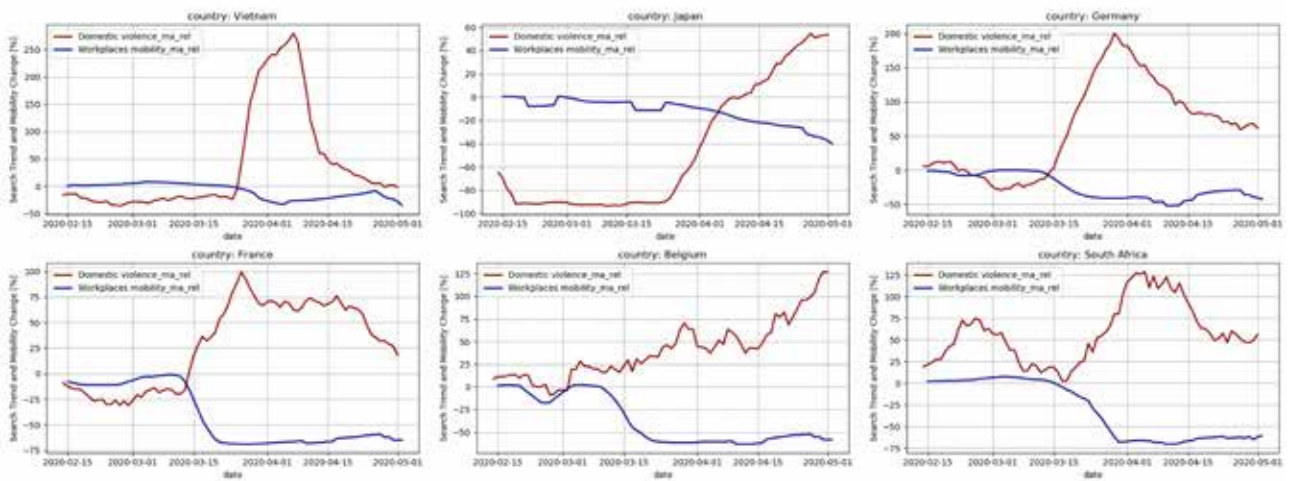


Fig. 8 Mobility and search trends over time, for the top 6 countries with a strong relationship between mobility decrease and domestic violence increase.

- Vietnam stands out with a peak in domestic violence search rates that increased by more than triple of the baseline. The issue of domestic violence in light of social distancing in Vietnam is stressed in [this article](#) as well, stating that the number of people who are in need of shelter has doubled compared to 2018 and 2019.
- The figures for Germany, France, Belgium, and South Africa, clearly illustrate the increasing trend in domestic violence search rate as mobility drops.

### Countries not illustrating a relationship between a decrease in mobility and increase in domestic violence

The individual figures for the final six countries among the bottom 10 countries are dis-

played in Fig. 9 and show a *positive* relationship between mobility and domestic violence.

- First of all, the plot for Australia stands out, which witnessed a high increase in domestic violence towards end of February. The sudden rise in domestic violence in Australia is assumed to be a consequence of the bushfires which occurred around this time. This relationship is also expressed in this article: [‘the bushfires’ hidden aftermath: Surging risk of domestic abuse’](#).
- In South Korea, lockdown measures could be considered to be more targeted instead of strict blanket measures, and this could explain the unique trend displayed for this country as compared to the others.

- For the Philippines, Thailand, El Salvador, and Jamaica, the simultaneous drop in domestic violence search rates and mobility is visible. This does not mean that there have been less domestic violence incidents. There can be various other factors influencing the observed search rate trends. For example, the peaks in search rates in these countries towards the late February / beginning of March could be explained by the (media) attention given to domestic violence in light of International Women’s Day on March 8. there was a large turnout for the different marches that were held that day, both in [Asia](#) and [Latin America](#).

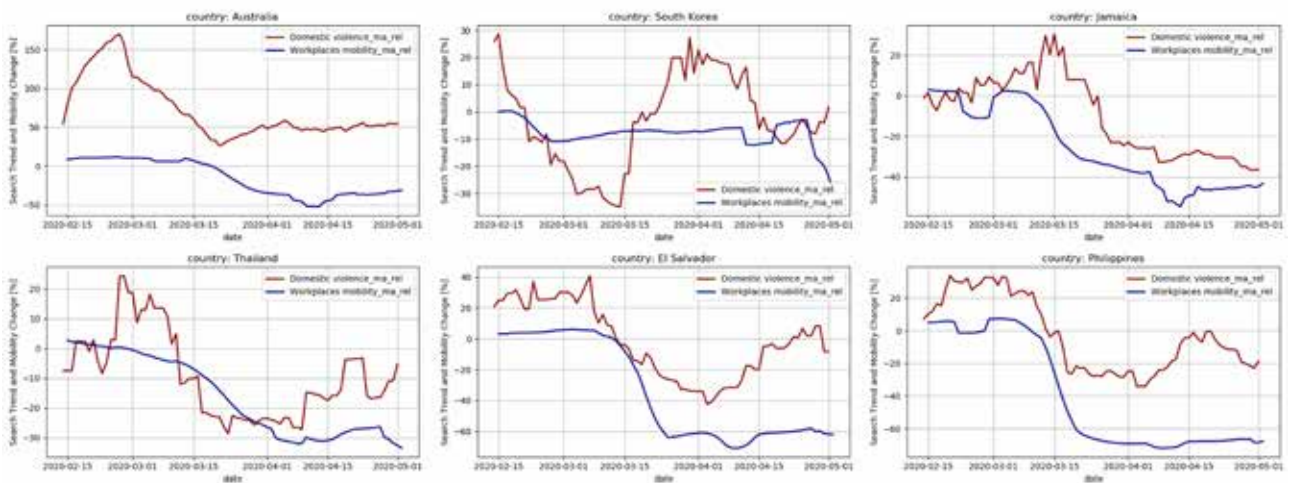


Fig. 9 Mobility and search trends over time, for the bottom 6 countries with a positive relationship between mobility and domestic violence.

## Discussion – action is needed to mitigate the increase in domestic violence

This article studies the impact of the Covid19 global pandemic on domestic violence. The increase in domestic violence can be viewed as the ‘growing shadow pandemic’. This is stressed by the news as well - there is an increasing trend in the number of articles that cover the issue. Some of these articles give insight into the gravity and scale of the ‘growing shadow pandemic’ in summary form. For example, the [Infographic of UN Women](#), shown at the beginning of this article, mentions that in France, Argentina, Cyprus and Singapore domestic violence emergency calls and reports have increased by more than 30%.

## The results indicate that the problem of domestic violence could be much bigger than indicated by some of the key figures in the news

The analysis of Google mobility and search rate trends shows that the effect of lockdown measures on domestic violence, such as the closing of workplaces, can be much higher than 30%. In countries where the inverse relationship between the decrease in mobility and increase in domestic violence is strongest, search rates have doubled, and some more than tripled. A search query could be considered the most accessible step in seeking out help. This could explain why the results in this article indicate that the problem of domestic violence could be much bigger than the previously mentioned key figures.

It is important to note that there are many other factors that can influence the search rates results. The extent to which the search rates may accurately reflect the growing scale of the problem of domestic violence also depends on the situation the countries are in. As stated before, a victim is only expected to perform a search query if she or he has *access to the internet* and a *certain level of trust in societal organizations to be able to offer help*. These assumptions could explain that a strong relationship is found in many European countries in this study.

The aim of this work is to help build awareness on the issue of domestic violence. Although some countries have adopted steps to mitigate the problem, the results clearly indicate that the issue persists. In this light, the [UN recently published a brief](#) with ‘recommendations



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to be considered by all sectors of society, from governments to international organizations and to civil society organizations in order to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, at the onset, during, and after the public

health crisis with examples of actions already taken’.

### Credits – Omdena AI pandemic challenge

The work presented in this article is part of a dedicated task

of the [Omdena AI pandemic challenge](#). This work would not have been possible without the help of all team members. Special thanks to [Albina Latifi](#) for all efforts related to the news articles analysis and topic modeling.

### ■ The Author

**Elke Klaassen** is an experienced data scientist in the energy domain. She has a multidisciplinary background, with a BSc degree in Innovation Sciences. During her MSc and PhD studies she specialized in the energy transition, and the integration of renewable generation into the electricity grid. She likes to consider the broader context and consider problems from a system perspective. And, by doing so, make project results understandable by using data visualization techniques to explain (complex) models and their outcomes.



# Covid-19 pandemic and gender aspects

■ by Alessandra Liquori O'Neil

The year 2020 marks two important landmarks in gender equality achievement: the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, and the 20th year of implementing Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic caused cancellation and postponement of many important international meetings, including a shortened version of the 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, but it is also risking to heavily jeopardize the progress made over recent years.

Vulnerable populations are hardest hit victims of any pandemic, not only in terms of mortality, but also in terms of deepening the social, political and economic divide and exponentially increasing their negative consequences.

Among vulnerable populations, those affected by gender-based discriminations might be the ones paying a highest price for the consequences of the pandemic, due to their subordinate position in society. The social lockdown may increase isolation and aggressive behaviours by



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violent partners and the economic downturn might make it difficult to maintain opportunities for decent work. With the closure of schools, efforts to ensure access to education for girls might be put aside, and in some cases abandoned entirely, while programmes for prenatal, maternal and child health also may be overshadowed by the pandemic's emergency priorities. While women have continued to bear the heaviest burden from childcare and attending to family needs, they remain as unknown heroes at the forefront of hospital care as nurses and doctors.

In a recent policy brief, the Secretary General identifies three priority areas where governments should concentrate

their efforts to ensure policies and measures are built with a gender dimension, to address the current response and long-term recovery efforts. These are:

1. Ensuring women's representation in all Covid-19 related decisions;
2. Setting up fair mechanisms for the recognition of informal and formal work; and
3. Considering women and girls addressing the future impact of Covid-19.

In Italy, the Covid-19 pandemic hit particularly hard, with the national health system reduced to near collapse. The virus mortality rates seemed to be

affecting women slightly less than men; preliminary analysis shows mortality rates at 47 per cent among females and 52 per cent among males.

However, in traditionally female dominated employment areas, such as nurses and health care workers, house workers and supermarket cashiers, percentages of infection in women were noted to be nearly twice that of men, with infections up to 66 per cent versus 34 per cent among nurses.

Fearing a possible surge in domestic violence due to the quarantine lockdown, various Member States have taken measures to ensure women are not left alone and at the mercy of violent partners. Spain

has set up an emergency plan which includes helplines and special housing for victims. France, which already has the highest rates of gender-based violence in Europe, had to respond to a soaring 30 per cent increase in domestic violence cases during the Covid-19 quarantine, converting hotels to shelters for victims. In Argentina, the Ministry for Women, Gender and Diversity has designated pharmacies as referral places for women victims of intimate partner violence.

Like most countries in Europe, Italy already had a strategic plan against domestic violence in place for the years 2017-2020, which included policies and financial resources for protecting women victims of intimate partner violence (IPV). However, in addition to that, the Minister for Equal Opportunities declared a number of emergency measures, including a special increase in the budget to support anti-violence centres and special shelters for victims of gender-based violence; this allowed for more immediate support to women victims of IPV during the Covid-19 emergency. An additional 24-hour help line is available for psychological support or for referral and legal assistance. Media campaigns on national television also have been launched and financial resources have been set aside

to support sex workers and victims of trafficking in persons.

With regard to women in the workplace, various Member States, including Italy, have set up emergency funds to protect workers from job losses and to provide subsidies during the quarantine.

However, these measures are likely to exclude the informal economy sector, where women represent a significant number. The social and economic crisis which is most likely to follow the Covid-19 pandemic may be further exacerbated for women if gender differences in wages, and career opportunities, continue to be undervalued in national development policies.

Finally, in various countries, political and economic decision-making committees as well as scientific boards, set up during the pandemic to assist governmental decisions, have been predominantly composed of men. Continuing to exclude women's voices from the current and post-Covid-19 political debate might have a detrimental effect not only in the short term, with decisions that might not reflect the actual priority needs of women and girls, but also will likely have a negative impact in achieving the Agenda 2030 goals.

UNICRI conducted in 2014 a study to shed light on the im-

pact of the economic crisis of 2008 on women's wellbeing and gender equality, in four countries of the Mediterranean Basin. The study analysed women's public and private aspects of life, such as IPV, number of divorces, employment rates, poverty, minority groups, housing, health, prostitution and retirement benefits. In all countries analysed, violence against women and girls in particular increased, exacerbating already-existing situations of socio-economic stress. Where the "gender gap" was greatest - in the status of women's health, participation in the economy, education levels, and representation in politics - women were more likely to be subjected to violence. In the effort to create a prevention strategy, economic and social empowerment are paramount. This study also analysed the coping responses from governments and made highly useful recommendations. This research complements several initiatives undertaken by UNICRI toward the prevention of violence against women, encompassing research, awareness raising, capacity building of law enforcement, and the protection of victims through women's empowerment programmes and cooperation with civil society.



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## Conclusions and Recommendations

Governments should ensure that women’s and girls’ needs are taken into due consideration in contingency crisis and emergency plans, in order to benefit both men and women equally and leave no one behind during emergency preparedness and response plans.

Governments also should ensure that women’s voices are heard in times of crisis. This means making sure that there is equal representation of men and women in decision making boards and in political deci-

sions and policy spaces at large, at all stages, during and following a crisis or emergency.

Access to prenatal and maternal care services and frontline responses to gender-based violence should not be diminished in times of crisis, and indeed should be considered essential at all times.

Governments should increase collection of sex-disaggregated and gender data in order to ensure that the gender perspective is regularly included and integrated in all national emergency response plans.

Governments should ensure access to social protection mechanisms for all workers including informal workers. Women’s unpaid work at home and for childcare should be accounted for in social protection policies.

Economic crises can significantly and negatively impact gender-based inequalities, worldwide, and governments can use such crises as opportunities to take leadership in reducing such inequalities, in the short, medium and long term, for the benefit of women and men.





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## ■ The Author

**Alessandra Liquori O'Neil** joined the United Nations in 1989, working with the United Nations Development Programme. In 1993 she joined UNICRI, the United Nations Institute mandated to assist Member States in research and training on crime prevention and justice administration. Since then, she has developed capacity building projects with a focus on protection of human rights with particular regard to vulnerable populations. Over the years, Ms. Liquori's programme portfolio has included projects on the protection of the rights of women, alternatives to detention for substance users, access to health and social services for vulnerable populations (including inmates) and ethics and legality of biomedical research. Mrs. O'Neil holds an MA in Humanities from the University of Rome. Since June 2014, she is also responsible for the UNICRI Liaison Office in Rome.



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# Partner and domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis

■ by Wim Hardyns, Ines Keygnaert, Koen Ponnet and Christophe Vandeviver

## Introduction

The global spread of COVID-19 has dramatically impacted our lives. In an effort to contain the virus, governments across the globe have resorted to social distancing, home lockdowns, and isolation policies. However, such measures can have a negative impact on people's mental well-being, put pressure on their relationships and cause stress, thus potentially contributing to an increase in violence and aggression within households. A recent review of the psychological impact of quarantine measures confirms that isolation can produce several negative emotional effects, such as post-traumatic stress syndrome, emotion regulation problems, depression, and increased feelings of stress.<sup>1</sup> Experiencing stress and powerlessness is associated with an increased risk of violent victimization.<sup>2</sup> Perpetrator and victims often know

1 Brooks, S. K., Webster, R. K., Smith, L. E., Woodland, L., Wessely, S., Greenberg, N., & Rubin, G. J. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 912-920.

2 Straus, M. A., & Douglas, E. M. (2019). Concordance between parents in perpetration of child mistreatment: how often is it by father-only, mother-only, or by both and what difference does it make? *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 20(3), 416-427.



© Photo by Ulrike Mai via Pixabay

each other.<sup>3</sup> The combination of stress-inducing factors due to the lockdown and potentially living together with a perpetrator of violence may trigger an increase and worsening of various forms of violence within the household.<sup>4</sup>

“ ***Experiencing stress and powerlessness is associated with an increased risk of violent victimization*** ”

Increases in domestic violence were observed in multiple countries in which lockdown measures were taken.<sup>5</sup> In addition, healthcare services report that since the beginning of the lockdown fewer victims use their services and victims report additional barriers to seeking help.<sup>6</sup> The movement-limiting measures during the lockdown make it more difficult for victims to escape from a problematic home situation and to receive timely assistance. This can exacerbate the underlying problems

and increase the risk of serious, long-term and sometimes life-threatening situations. In Belgium, far-reaching isolation and movement-limiting measures to slow down the infection rate of COVID-19 were effective from March 13, 2020. In this contribution, we present the results of two independent but complementary interdisciplinary studies on partner and domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdown in Belgium.

- 3 Jouriles, E. N., McDonald, R., Slep, A. M. S., Heyman, R. E., & Garrido, E. (2008). Child abuse in the context of domestic violence: Prevalence, explanations, and practice implications. *Violence and victims*, 23(2), 221-235.
- 4 Hussein, J. (2020). COVID-19: What implications for sexual and reproductive health and rights globally? *Sexual and reproductive health matters*, 28(1), 1-3.
- 5 Graham-Harrison, E., Giuffrida, A., & Smith, H. (28 March 2020). Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>
- 6 Dzhanova, Y. (31 March 2020). NY domestic violence programs see client numbers decline as coronavirus traps survivors at home. *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/31/new-york-coronavirus-domestic-violence-programs-see-decline-as-disease-spreads.html>

In the first study,<sup>7</sup> which was conducted under the supervision of professor Christophe Vandeviver and professor Ines Keygnaert, an online self-report victimization survey was administered to a convenience sample of Belgian residents aged 16 and over. Participants were recruited via various channels and methods.

The questionnaire was available in Dutch, French, German, and English. Ghent University Hospital Medical Ethics Committee gave ethic clearance (project BC-07600, approval date 9 April 2020) and the study was conducted in accordance with the World Health Organization (WHO) ethical guidelines on violence research.<sup>8</sup> From April 13<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> 2020, 6,664 individuals participated in the survey. Of these, 61% or 4,047 participants completed the questionnaire. Participants reported on victimization events occurring between 13<sup>th</sup> March and 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020, which coincides with the first

four to six weeks of the Belgian COVID-19 lockdown.

“**Increases in domestic violence were observed in multiple countries in which lockdown measures were taken**”

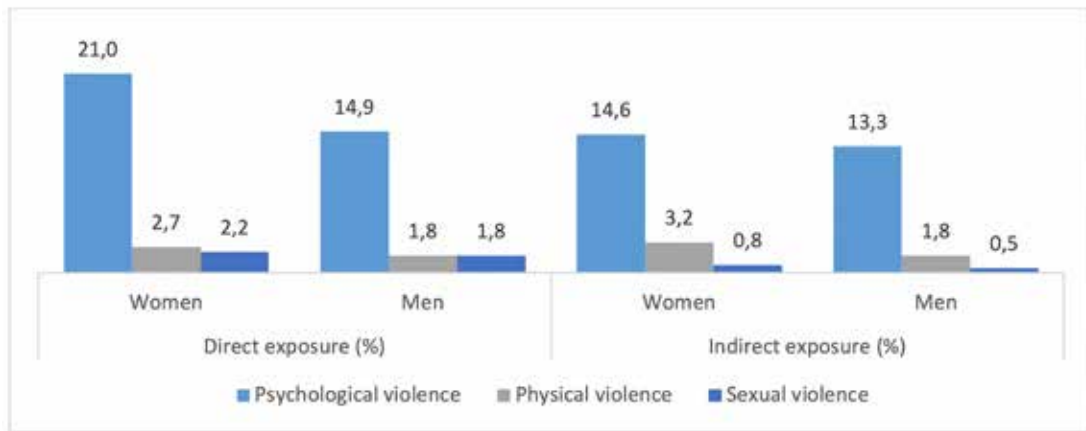
In the second study,<sup>9</sup> which was conducted under supervision of professor Wim Hardyns and professor Koen Ponnet, an online survey was distributed via various online channels. Anyone aged 18 years or older, residing in Belgium, and with sufficient knowledge of the Dutch language was invited to participate. The Faculty of Social Sciences of Ghent University gave ethic clearance (approval date 2 April 2020) and the study was conducted in accordance with WHO ethical guidelines on violence research. From April 3<sup>rd</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, a total of 3,807 people participated in the survey. After data

cleaning, a total sample of 2,889 respondents was retained.

**Results study 1: “Relationships, stress and aggression in times of COVID-19” (Keygnaert and Vandeviver)**

Participants in our study were mainly female (75%), their average age was 42 years old (SD = 14.58), and they have completed higher education (81.5%). Most participants were Belgian (92.6%) and identified as heterosexual (90.6%). The survey was primarily completed in Dutch and to a lesser extent in French (89.3% and 5.6% respectively). In our study, we define violence as forms of psychological, physical or sexual suffering that is inflicted by one person on another. The victimization questions of psychological, physical and sexual violence were based on previous research<sup>10</sup> and for sexual violence in particular on a number of internationally validated questionnaires including the Sexual Experiences Survey,<sup>11</sup> the National Intimate Partner

- 7 Keygnaert, I., Nobels, A., Schapansky, E., Robert, E., Depraetere, J., De Schrijver, L., De Moor, S., & Vandeviver, C. (2020). *Relaties, Stress en Agressie in tijden van corona in België: Voornaamste bevindingen over de eerste vier weken van de coronamaatregelen – Rapport 1: 13 mei 2020*. International Centre for Reproductive Health - Institute for International Research on Criminal Policy, Universiteit Gent. <https://ircp.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Toelichtend-rapport-RSA-studie-Eerste-bevinding-en-Mei-2020-1.pdf>
- 8 World Health Organisation. (2016). *Ethical and safety recommendations for intervention research on violence against women: building on lessons from the WHO publication putting women first*. World Health Organisation.
- 9 Ponnet, K., Hardyns, W., Anrijs, S., & Schokkenbroek, J. M. (2020). *Welzijn en relaties in tijden van corona: Bevindingen van een survey-onderzoek in België van 3-17 april 2020*. [https://ircp.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020\\_Resultaten-Onderzoek-Corona-Welzijn-en-Partnergeweld-3-17-April-2020-2.pdf](https://ircp.ugent.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020_Resultaten-Onderzoek-Corona-Welzijn-en-Partnergeweld-3-17-April-2020-2.pdf)
- 10 Keygnaert, I., Vandeviver, C., Nisen, L., De Schrijver, L., Depraetere, J., Nobels, A., Cismaru, A., Lemonne, A., Renard, B., & Vander Beken, T. (2018). Seksueel geweld in België: Eerste representatieve prevalentiestudie naar de aard, omvang en impact van seksueel geweld in België. *Science Connection*, 59, 28-31. Pieters, J., Italiano, P., Offermans, A.-M., & Hellemans, S. (2010). *Ervaringen van vrouwen en mannen met psychologisch, fysiek en seksueel geweld*. Instituut voor de Gelijkheid van Vrouwen en Mannen.
- 11 Koss, M., Abbey, A., Campbell, R., Cook, S., Norris, J., Testa, M., Ullman, S., West, C., & White, J. (2006). *The sexual experiences short form victimization (SES-SFV)*. University of Arizona.



and Sexual Violence Survey,<sup>12</sup> and the Sexual Aggression and Victimization Scale.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, 25.1% of the participants had been directly and/or indirectly exposed to violence during the first four to six weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown (Figure 1). One in five of the participants was a direct victim of violence. With the exception of psychological violence, victimization rates were similar for men and women. One in six of the participants were indirectly exposed to violence and reported that a member of their household was victimized in the past four to six weeks. Women and men seem to be equally aware of violence befalling household members, except for physical violence (3.2% of women and 1.8% of men).

**Figure 1:** Prevalence rates violence during the first four to six weeks of the Belgian COVID-19 lockdown.

“**Overall, 25.1% of the participants had been directly and/or indirectly exposed to violence during the first four to six weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown**”

For direct victimization, the (ex)partner was most often referred to as the perpetrator of all forms of violence (Figure 2). In second order, physical violence (29.8%) was frequently committed by (step)children, and perpetrators of psychological (17.2%) and sexual violence (22.4%) were someone from

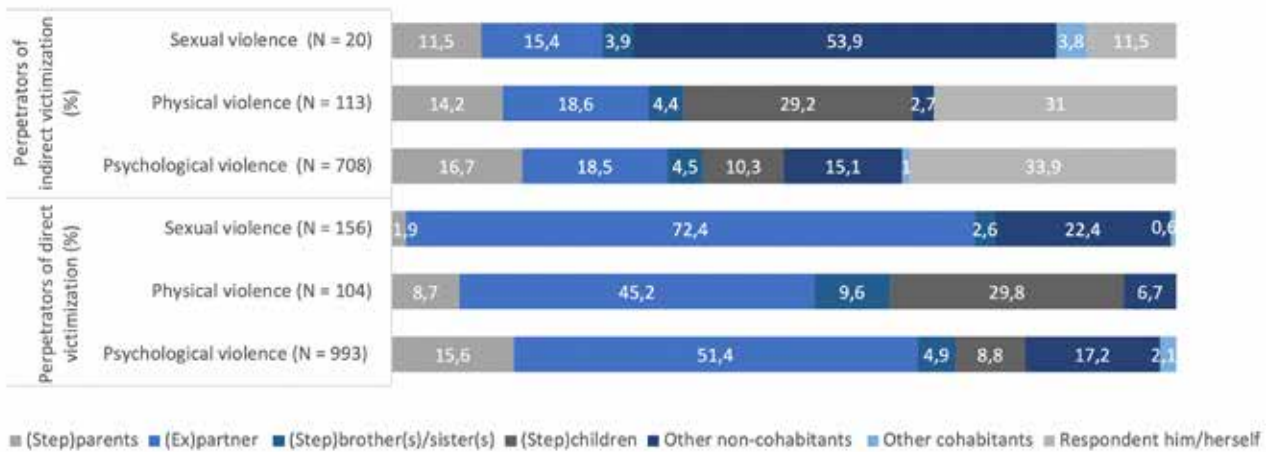
outside the victim’s household. For indirect victimization, the (ex)partner was the perpetrator in 18% of the cases, regardless of the form of violence. Instead, sexual violence was more likely to be perpetrated by someone from outside the witness’ household (53.9%). Strikingly, participants frequently disclosed perpetration of psychological (33.9%), physical (31%) and sexual violence (11.5%) targeted against a member of their household.

**Figure 2:** Perpetrators of violence during the first four to six weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Most victims informed someone from their personal circle (table 1), although one in three victims did not tell anyone and this was most likely for victims

<sup>12</sup> Walters, M. L., Chen, J., & Breiding, M. J. (2013). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 findings on victimization by sexual orientation*. National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>13</sup> Krahé, B., Berger, A., Vanwesenbeeck, I., Bianchi, G., Chliaoutakis, J., Fernández-Fuertes, A. A., Fuertes, A. De Matos, G. M., Hadji-georgiou, E., Haller, B., Hellemans, S., Izdebski, Z., Kouta, C., Meijnckens, D., Murauskiene, L., Papadakaki, M., Ramiro, L., Reis, M., Symons, K., ... Zygadlo, A. (2015). Prevalence and correlates of young people’s sexual aggression perpetration and victimisation in 10 European countries: a multi-level analysis. *Culture, health & sexuality*, 17(6), 682-699.



of sexual violence. A majority (77.2%) of victims did not seek professional care. Figures vary according to the type of violence. Physical violence is most often reported (38.3%), followed by psychological violence (22.2%). Sexual violence is least reported (14%). See Table 1

Reasons for not seeking professional care are diverse but personal reasons were most often cited by victims who did not seek help (62.6%). For example, victims were ashamed of what happened or felt that they would have not been believed. Approximately 4% of those who did not seek help

cited COVID-19 and associated containment measures. For example, some victims did not want to leave their home because of the pandemic or did not want to put additional stress on healthcare workers. Police were rarely notified of victimization (4.4%). In particular, psychological and sexual violence was rare to be reported to the police. More than 80% of victims who did not report to the police argued that the incident was not serious enough or did not contact the police to protect themselves. COVID-19 related containment measures were infrequently cited (2.5%). Those who reported victimiza-

tion to the police, were mostly (very) satisfied with the help they received (42.8%).

### Results study 2: “Well-being and relations during COVID-19 crisis” (Hardyns and Ponnet)

Of the 2,889 respondents in our study, 2,005 people indicated to be in a relationship. Of these 2,005 people, 1,491 (74.4%) full-time lived together with their partner during the lockdown. On average, their relationship duration was 15.6 years. A prior analysis showed that people

**Table 1:** Disclosure and help seeking during the first four to six weeks of the Belgian COVID-19 lockdown.

	Psychological violence (%)	Physical violence (%)	Sexual violence (%)	Total (%)
Personal circle (N = 826)	69,1	63,3	48,8	67,7
Professional care (N = 826)	22,2	38,8	14,0	22,8
Police (N = 802)	3,9	10,6	4,9	4,4

*Note:* the reported totals refer to the incident that had the biggest impact on the respondent or the only incident that the respondent reported.

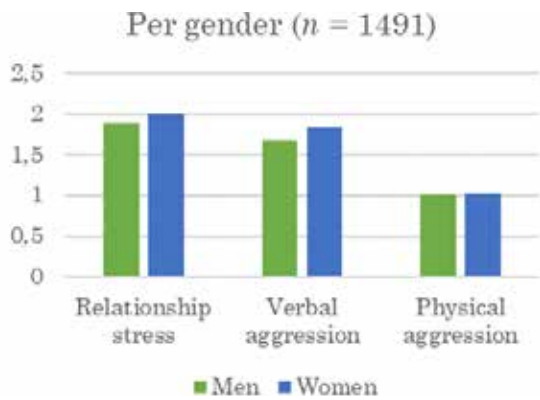


Figure 3: Mean frequency of relationship stress, verbal aggression and physical aggression during the fourth and fifth week of the COVID-19 lockdown per age group (n=1491).

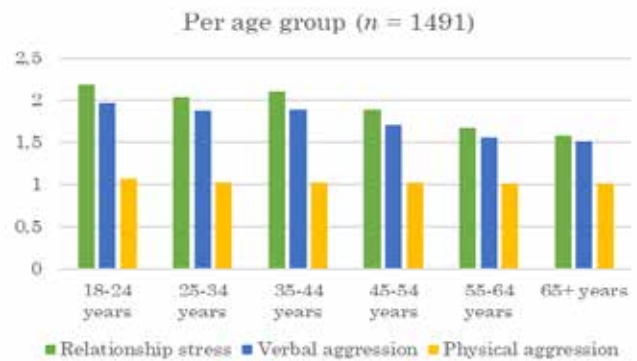


Figure 4: Mean frequency of relationship stress, verbal aggression and physical aggression during the fourth and fifth week of the COVID-19 lockdown per gender (n=1491).

who lived together with their partner during the lockdown experienced significantly more verbal aggression with their partner than respondents who did not live together with their partner. To examine how the COVID-19 crisis has affected people's relationships, we measured their relationship stress and reciprocal verbal and physical partner violence.

*Relationship stress* was measured by asking the respondents to indicate how stressful they experienced several aspects of their relationship to be during the corona lockdown.<sup>14</sup> The 5 items were measured on a 5-point frequency scale from 1 = 'not stressful' to 5 = 'very stressful'. An example of a relationship aspect is 'neglect by the partner'.

*Reciprocal verbal partner violence* was measured by asking the respondents to indicate the frequency of occurrence of various verbal interactions with their partner during the coronavirus lockdown.<sup>15</sup> The four items were answered on a 5-point frequency scale ranging from 1 = '(almost) never' to 5 = 'very often'. An example of a measured interaction is 'yelled or screamed to each other'.

*Reciprocal physical partner violence* was measured with a single item, namely 'hitting, pushing, or physically hurting each other on purpose'. Again, respondents indicated on a 5-point frequency scale from 1 = '(almost) never' to 5 = 'very often' how frequently this occurred during the lockdown. See Figure 3 and 4

For relationship stress, we found significant differences between younger and older age groups, in which younger respondents experienced more relationship stress than older respondents. Additionally, it appears that women experience more relationship stress than men, but this difference was not statistically significant.

In regard to reciprocal verbal aggression a total of 73.5% of the respondents indicated that they experienced this rarely to very often with their partner during the lockdown. We found there were significant differences between younger and older age groups, with younger respondents reporting higher frequencies of verbal aggression with their partner than older respondents. We also

14 Bodenmann, G., Schär, M., & Gmelch, S. (2008). Multidimensional stress questionnaire for couples (MDS-Q). *Unpublished questionnaire*, 49-57.

15 Kerig, P. K. (1996). Assessing the links between interparental conflict and child adjustment: The conflicts and problem-solving scales. *Journal of family psychology*, 10, 454. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.10.4.454>. Ponnet, K. (2014). Financial stress, parent functioning and adolescent problem behavior: An actor-partner interdependence approach to family stress processes in low-, middle-, and high-income families. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43, 1752-1769. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-014-0159-y>

found that women experienced significantly more verbal aggression with their partner than men.

Lastly, 36 respondents (1.7%) indicated to have experienced reciprocal physical aggression with their partner during the corona lockdown, of which 5 were men (1.1% of men in a relationship) and 31 women (2.0% of women in a relationship). We found no differences in the reported frequency of reciprocal physical partner aggression between men and women, nor between age groups.

## Recommendations

The current findings give a clear indication that the COVID-19 pandemic and the governmental home confinement measures to control it have a strong impact on people's relationships and may trigger household aggression, but our results only reveal the tip of the iceberg. As is often the case in research, many groups of people are underrepresented in the study samples. For example, as the surveys were distributed via online means, people who do not have access to information and communication technology equipment (e.g., people with lower financial resources) were less able or unable to participate. As research indicates

that people with a lower socio-economic status are more prone to experience partner violence,<sup>16</sup> it can be assumed that the results presented here do not paint the full picture. Additionally, the conducted studies have specifically focused on the Belgian context, thus leaving questions about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people's relationships in other countries unanswered.

Many experts argue that as long as there is no vaccine against the virus, it is highly probable that a global second wave of infections will hit. Additionally, it is very unlikely that this is the last pandemic we will face. Therefore, it remains important to investigate how pandemics and the measures to control them affect people's lives and relationships, so that prevention and intervention efforts can be employed accordingly. Thus, more research is needed towards the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence for different groups of people and in different countries.

The study findings and methodologies presented here form a valuable addition to the body of knowledge on aggression and violence in home environments and can serve as a foundation for future research. The employed methodology can

be replicated in other countries that may differ in terms of governmental measures and policy. A reproduction of the presented studies in other countries and contexts will provide a more thorough understanding of the problem. In fact, the Keygnaert & Vandeviver study is part of a larger European effort to map the nature, magnitude and impact of violence during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Although the need for further research is clear, the presented research itself also provides important insights for policy makers and health professionals. Going forward, policy makers could put in place measures aimed to prevent partner and domestic violence and could implement measures that support and protect people who already experience these forms of violence today. An example of such measures is the 'mask-19' codeword initiative in Belgium and several other countries such as the Netherlands, France and the Canary Islands. In this example, victims of domestic violence write the codeword on their order form at pharmacies as a request for help. Another example is the availability of online health-care initiatives such as the Belgian Chatline after sexual violence that is discreetly accessible by victims from their

16 Jewkes, R. (2002). Intimate partner violence: causes and prevention. *The Lancet*, 359(9315), 1423-1429. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(02\)08357-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(02)08357-5)





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home. Low-threshold and discreet initiatives such as this one should be drawn up and thoroughly implemented by policy

makers. Additionally, health professionals should be sufficiently prepared and equipped to detect domestic violence

during the pandemic and to support those in need.

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# AESI promoted active dialogue among students on several topics of international relations in this pandemic period

■ by Massimo Maria Caneva, President AESI

Preparing young people for the diplomatic and international careers of today means facing the new international crises with an innovative and global vision that analyzes their real causes first and then provides adequate and effective responses over time. Furthermore, a greater synergy with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) is needed. In this regard, the European Association of International Studies (AESI) usually organizes two missions in Geneva in coordination with the Italian Representation at the United Nations agencies. Unfortunately, the health emergency has not allowed this tradition to continue this year, but the liaison with the Director-General of the UN Agencies in Geneva, Ms. Tatiana Valovaya, is still vigorous and the activities promoted by AESI for young university students are considered of



great importance. Indeed, AESI is strongly convinced that only by investing in the new generations with innovative and global training, which envisage above all concrete contacts with international actors such as the UN and the European Union (EU), we can achieve a future of peace and promote a culture of solidarity. Furthermore, we believe that the interaction with young university students who are preparing for diplomatic and international careers can also enrich international organizations through a deeper understanding of young people's perspectives, enhancing also their creative solutions to crises. The Director-General of the United Nations Agencies in Geneva illustrated in her Message to AESI what the priorities of this health emergency are, but she also encouraged the UN to listen to the new generations. She invited students to send them messages and contributions. The Director-General also expressed her wish to meet with the young AESI members in Geneva when it will be possible. The University will play a

great role in the future, not only with respect to the international relations dimension, but above all with the involvement of young people in the process of renewing peace promotion strategies in crisis situations. The United Nations has discovered this great added value and for this we also thank the United Nations Director-General of Geneva.

### **Introduction of** *Cinzia Vanzo, Director of AESI and Silvia Siciliano, AESI Direction - Rome*

As the epistemology of pandemic suggests, from Greek "pan" all and "demos" people, COVID-19 has posed a threat to everyone with no exceptions. Suddenly it has turned our lives upside down and in these hard times AESI has left no one behind. In these terms, the Association has stood out for its capability to cope with new and unknown challenges. Combating COVID-19 with resilience has been the cure to

this pandemic. AESI has never stopped, and it has tried its best to accomplish its goals. Conferences, study seminars and international missions have been postponed in accordance with the Italian measures. If not properly addressed through global and shared policies, the social crisis caused by the pandemic may also increase inequality, discrimination and poverty in the short and long term. More than ever, AESI raised and spread awareness among its students with the main goal of cultivating young critical minds in a complex world. Human dignity, peace, cooperation among institutions and universities are absolute imperatives in creating a better place for future generations. In order to give continuity to the activities of its students, AESI has published different articles, research and messages on its website. With the following words, AESI students, national staff and the Directorate would like to testify the great role played by the European Association of International Studies during this pandemic period.



### AESI and university cooperation for justice and human rights

*“The pandemic period that we are all experiencing is hampering the cooperation between nations. In this critical context, AESI has strengthened its active dialogue with its students, willing to enhance justice and human rights. To do this, we need a greater involvement of international organizations, with the aim of promoting a rapid exchange of information, and closer cooperation among states to close the gap that the pandemic has shown within international cooperation.”*

*Giulia Covalea, AESI Website Director and Secretary of study seminars and Ms. Samantha Pisano, AESI student ROME*

### AESI and the EU promoting peace

*“AESI always tries to promote cooperation among students. The aim is to share experiences and ideas as well as to have an exchange of views in order to achieve solidarity. Solidarity and cooperation are indeed the most used words by the EU institutions during the COVID-19 health crisis. We can overcome this emergency only together. This is why the key word should be cooperation, especially among the young new generations.”*

*Giulia Sarti, AESI Staff - Florence*

### AESI and cooperation among academia, the diplomatic entities and the military peace forces

*“The importance of cooperation between military peacekeepers, the diplomatic world and universities is an element to which AESI pays particular attention by acting as a mediator and providing a solid opportunity for dialogue and training. During this period of pandemic, the Association has continued to support dialogue between students and institutions with the ultimate aim of enhancing international relations.”*

*Marco Gregori, AESI Publication and Thesis Coordinator and Francesca Romana Spinosa, AESI student SIENA*



### **AESI and peace in the Mediterranean**

“The Mediterranean unites and divides nations. There is no doubt that it is a frontier, but it is also a starting point, the ‘opening door to new horizons’. Over the years, we have achieved international balance and repudiated war. Even in this pandemic, AESI has never stopped, putting in first place peace and social stability, justice and human rights, because it is only through interventions that a strategy for dialogue and reconciliation can be built. And remember, there is no Europe without the Mediterranean, and there is no Mediterranean without Europe.”

*Maria Lucia Gallo, AESI student MESSINA*

### **AESI in the Middle East: strategic studies and crisis areas**

“The Mediterranean area is a body with many scars, and still many open wounds. Over the years, AESI has operated in crisis areas, such as the Middle East. Even in this pandemic, AESI has continued with an effective digital strategy to overcome the distance through the desire for peace and dialogue on wars. These themes are unfortunately still vivid despite the lockdown period. The conflicts do not stop even during a pandemic and AESI with its online publications has continued its work to repudiate war and open debates.”

*Sophie Beatrice Morganti, AESI student and Matteo Farina, AESI Staff - Turin*

### **AESI and NATO**

“The relationship between AESI and NATO is solid and dates back in time. The Association is a regular guest at the Joint Force Command of Naples and was supposed to visit the NATO Headquarters in Brussels in June 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has postponed this mission but indeed has not weakened this bond. Fruitful discussions on the role of Italy within the Alliance, and on security in Southern and Eastern Europe are just on hold.”

*Gabriele Pierini, Vice Director of AESI NATO BRUXELLES*



### AESI and diplomacy for university cooperation development

*“One of AESI’s main goals has always been to develop and ensure a ‘University Cooperation for Peace’. The purpose is to educate a new generation of professionals willing to deal with humanitarian crises by implementing a joint-strategy approach. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, AESI has successfully collaborated with diplomats from different countries and with the United Nations to promote practices and provide suggestions for a consolidation of a fruitful dialogue among universities.”*

*Francesco Napolitano, AESI Staff – Naples and Giacomo Antonio Lombardi, AESI student*

### AESI and university training for university cooperation for peace

*“The AESI programmes have significantly improved our ability to read the global scenarios with confidence. We have come to understand that violence is not inescapable, we only need to understand why people behave this way and meet their needs. The philosophy behind the cooperation between AESI and the university cooperation for peace tells us that everyone is important and that all of us have something to contribute to make the world a better place to live in for the future generations.”*

*Vincenzo Scutto, AESI Staff - Milan*

### AESI and the crises of diplomacy

*“For us as students, AESI has had a crucial role during the world-wide crisis of the past months. In these hard times of quarantine, not one of us has been left behind in the deep need of understanding the global situation. The academic faculty provided us with inputs and suggestions, on behalf of their long-lived experience in the international relations field, and a conceptual framework crucial in addressing such an unprecedented global challenge.”*

*Giorgia Sorrentino, AESI Staff - Bologna*



# The young people of Mali: Key players against Covid-19

■ by Yehiya Boré

The world is shaken by an unprecedented health crisis. Its multiple ravages are echoing all over the world and the media seem to revel in it as information concerning the situation becomes vital. Needless to say, Covid-19 made its appearance at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of the province of Hubei in China, and at the start of 2020, continued to spread in an overpowering and dominant way, not only characterized by its speed but also in its capacity of adaptation across all continents of the world. China has been overwhelmed. In France, there are no longer yellow vest protests. Italy no longer sings and the art world present in the country has closed its doors. It would seem that America, in tears, suddenly forgot its superpower. The virus rapidly spread also in Latin America, with more than 11 thousand cases in 24 hours in Brazil. All of this to show the very serious impact that Covid-19 has provoked on daily life around the world. In fact, on March 11, it qualified as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), exceeding the number of 100 infected countries to all areas of the globe.



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Africa is no longer spared despite all the theories put forward, that have proven to be false, including the idea that the continent would be immune. On May 26, the African continent had 3,589 confirmed deaths and 46,418 healed of 119,391 cases registered, according to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention of the African Union (Africa CDC).

Mali, a West African country known since January 2012 for having suffered from terrorist and extremist acts, is one of the countries most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic adds on top of multiple fractures and tensions present in this country due to poor governance. Overwhelmed by so many problems, the government has seemed to improvise a response strategy against Covid-19, resulting in serious consequences for the Malian society and economy, but with a priority: preserving the health of the population.

“ ***As everything darkens, confidence now comes from elsewhere, from another side, that of Malian youth*** ”

Currently with more than 508 confirmed cases according to health services, the issue regarding feelings of uncertainty is increasing between the decision-makers and the people. As everything darkens, confidence now comes from elsewhere, from another side, that of Malian youth who fight daily to enforce barrier measures, save lives and bring food to people with disabilities and above all to restore a wind of hope across the whole extent of Malian territory. In the capital of Bamako as well as in the surrounding regions, the many initiatives and actions of young people have shown to be beneficial. Youth have decided not to be





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by-standers but rather actors. Beyond raising awareness, they carry out concrete actions with a strong impact on the ground. Humanitarian organizations such as Albarka Aide, led by the young Daraja Haidara, educate approximately one hundred people about the use of wearing masks, barrier measures to preventing Covid-19 and on distributing food to families in need. Associations like Riposte against Covid-19 offer masks, soaps and handwashing mate-

rials to hospitals in Bamako. The young people of Timbuktu are on all sides of the streets to raise awareness. Young people of Mali find innovative ways to create new means in supporting the population. The young people trained by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the Centre for Counter-terrorism (ICCT) in Mali as part of the [MERIT](#) project are not strangers to all these efforts; they permeate so-

cial networks in order to raise awareness among young people and are on the ground in the different localities. These are just some examples among many that portray the involvement of young people in Mali as dedicated actors against the Covid-19 pandemic.

The whole of Mali is standing up and placing its hopes on the conscious youth who is working ceaselessly to protect the country from the pandemic.

## ■ The Author

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# Coronavirus: in Timbuktu youth are at the forefront of raising awareness against COVID-19

■ by Mohamed Mahmoud Elhadj

In its efforts to raise awareness against the coronavirus, the association *“The voice of the students of Timbuktu”* has just trained around thirty young people in respect of measures to stop the contagion. The training can be recognized as a means to strengthen the prevention of COVID-19 in Timbuktu, where nothing seems to worry the population.

Approximately thirty young people composed of men and women were trained by the association on 22 April 2020 on how to protect themselves and protect others against COVID-19.

This pandemic has wreaked havoc in the world since its appearance in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. As of April 23, in our country, Mali, 309 people have been infected, including 77 sick patients and 21 patients who died from the virus. Most of the regions are affected by the



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disease. From Kayes to Kidal, passing through Bamako, the number of infections is multiplying. These figures should draw attention to the situation and encourage the inhabitants of Timbuktu to comply with established preventive measures.

While officially Timbuktu has not yet registered a case of COVID-19, the population is struggling to comply with the barrier measures recommended by experts. In the city, groups of more than 50 people engage in outdoor activities including: sports in stadiums, outings on the dunes, picnics, and so on. For the time being, citizens continue to go about their daily lives without any restrictions. Nothing seems to worry

the inhabitants of the “city of 333 Saints” despite the calls of religious leaders and messages of awareness that invade the “Mysterious City”. At present, compliance with barrier measures remains the only effective preventive measure against the virus.

“ ***At present, compliance with barrier measures remains the only effective preventive measure against the virus*** ”

The organizers of the above-mentioned training addressed to the youth of Timbuktu, pre-

viously benefited from the same exercise with the regional health authorities. Abdoulaye Coulibaly, a member of the association, reported to us: “We have successfully completed this training by the health authorities, in our turn we have transmitted it, and, in your turn, you must also transmit it” he declared, addressing the beneficiaries.

During the training, hardworking beneficiaries dedicated to passing on the knowledge, made recommendations to expand such initiatives in other localities of the city for the benefit of other layers of the society.

Abdallahi Baby, a young man who participated in the train-



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ing, stated that the session had been very useful to him, but he called on the implementers to improve some techniques, since according to him “we must certainly educate, but we can’t educate empty handed.”

He also added, “people need soap, sanitizers, kits; they know about the disease, but most do not have the necessary means.”

Among the young people trained, some expressed their

concern regarding the arrival of passengers in the city without screening. This situation worries the youth: “everyday people leave Bamako for Timbuktu without being tested on arrival,” warns a participant.

## ■ The Author

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# Violent Extremist Offenders Rehabilitation and Reintegration in prison: a focus on the challenges and way forward in Mali

■ By Elise Vermeersch and Elena Dal Santo

## Introduction

In his remarks to the High-level Meeting on Mali and the Sahel held on the margins of the General Debate of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly, the Secretary General António Guterres acknowledged the increasing threat posed by the rise of violence in the Sahel and its spreading towards the Gulf of Guinea. He also warned about terrorist groups exploiting local conflicts and acting as defenders of communities to enhance their popularity and local support. As a matter of fact, countries in the Sahel region have been experiencing a significant increase in the level of violence, resulting in severe consequences for the population. Accord-



ing to [Mohamed Ibn Chambas](#), UN Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the casualties caused by terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, have increased five-fold since 2016. The fragile circumstances and the deteriorating security situation have also pushed many people to flee their homes, with more than one million refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) sheltered in the central Sahel.

As the countries in the Sahel region face increasing security threats resulting from terrorism, organized crime and inter-community tensions, the pressure on the prison systems escalates. Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Mali and Mauri-

tania present the [highest prison overcrowding rates in the world](#), ranging from 120% to 232%. Within this framework, a specific threat is represented by the risks of radicalization and/or recruitment taking place in the prison settings in light of the increasing number of suspected violent extremists within both the judicial and correctional systems.

Prisons, with their peculiar characteristics, certainly represent an environment where inmates are more vulnerable as a result of the restrictions of freedom, the loss of means of subsistence, personal effects and housing, the loss of important personal relationships and the deterioration of social and family ties. All these factors may increase the chances of

inmates becoming more easily attracted by the advantages of taking part in a radical group while in detention.

On the other hand, prisons can play a multi-faceted role in identifying, assessing and countering radicalization and recruitment. Such a unique environment represents an opportunity for the implementation of tailored rehabilitation activities, including targeted rehabilitative measures, capacity-building initiatives and awareness raising opportunities. Under certain circumstances and within the framework of tailored initiatives, incarceration may thus reduce the risk and instead mark the beginning of a disengagement process. In this regard, the design and development of effec-

tive rehabilitation and reintegration programs can prevent further radicalization and help deradicalize inmates convicted of terrorism-related offences.

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***Prisons, with their peculiar characteristics, certainly represent an environment where inmates are more vulnerable***  
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The current article is aimed at assessing the main challenges and opportunities for the development and implementation of targeted rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) measures for the violent extremist offender (VEO) population in detention in Mali. The first part will provide an overview of the Malian prison system, while the second will focus on the trajectories of violence of the VEO population in Mali. The third section will elaborate on the main challenges faced by the prison administration in the management of suspected/convicted violent extremist offenders, including the development of rehabilitation and reintegration measures. Finally, the conclusion will portray some alternatives in terms of future tailored R&R

initiatives for the VEOs population in Mali.

## Methodology

In the context of a series of initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism in prisons and fostering community resilience against violent extremism in Mali, [the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute \(UNICRI\)](#), together with [the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism \(ICCT\)](#), have developed and implemented a set of activities over the past four years both within as well as outside the prison settings. This publication is built on this experience and is based on the analysis of existing literature on the region and on the radicalisation process, combined with data gathered during field missions organized by UNICRI and ICCT. Primary data were collected through fieldnotes, as well as unstructured interviews with local, national and international actors, and thirty semi-structured interviews with inmates accused of/ convicted for terrorism-related offences. The semi-structured interviews<sup>1</sup> were conducted between 2016 and 2019 in Bamako’s central prison, to enhance the understanding of the detainees’ background and their reasons

for engagement with terrorist groups. Finally, supplementary data were gathered on 22 additional VEOs in Bamako Prison in 2019.

### 1. Overview of the prison system in Mali

Within the Ministry of Justice, the Malian prison administration is directed and managed by the *Direction Nationale de l’Administration Pénitentiaire et de l’Education Surveillée* (DNAPES), which serves the twofold purpose of custody and reintegration of detainees. The country counts 59 detention centers, including some agricultural and specialized establishments, of which [14 have been destroyed](#) by the conflict in 2013. A new and capacious prison is under construction in the town of Kenieroba, located in the district of Koulikoro, approximately 75 kilometres in the South West of Bamako.

The increased number of arrests due to the criminal activities occurring in the country as well as the impact of the conflict on the detention facilities have been worsening the already critical levels of prison overpopulation. At the end of 2018, the overall prison population exceeded [6,250 inmates](#). Compared to the official ca-

1 All 30 interviewees were selected by prison staff but participated in the interviews voluntarily: a social worker informed the inmates one day before the arrival of the research team, briefly presenting the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation. A research team consisting of two researchers interviewed the 30 inmates. The interviews were not allowed to be audio-recorded but written notes were taken and transcribed immediately after each interview. In general, the interviews took 45-90 minutes each.



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capacity of approximately 3,000 inmates as of 2009, the actual occupancy rate would translate to a general congestion rate of roughly 175%. The number of pre-trial detention cases constitutes a considerable burden for the Malian prison system, with an estimated representation of 60 to 90% of the prison population<sup>2</sup> according to various sources.

“ ***Prisons can play a multi-faceted role in identifying, assessing and countering radicalization and recruitment*** ”

The main prison in Bamako, the Maison Centrale d'Arrêt, has an official capacity of 400 inmates, but, at the end of 2019, it was housing 2,400 people, leading to a congestion rate of 615%. The issue of overpopulation is supposed to be addressed with the new prison of Kenieroba which should have a capacity of 2,500 inmates. At the end of 2019, a group of approximately

440 low-risk offenders were transferred to Kenieroba prison on a trial-basis.

### Prison's actors

Under the authority of the DNAPES, each detention centre is headed by a prison director, or *régisseur*, in charge of the overall prison management, including both of inmates and staff. Prison personnel is mainly comprised of guards and security officers, managing the prison population on a daily basis and maintaining operational security within the facility. In addition, administrative staff usually composed of fewer individuals are responsible for keeping the general prison

<sup>2</sup> See: [https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/Socioeconomic%20impact%20of%20PTD\\_Sept%2010%202010\\_Final.pdf](https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/files/Socioeconomic%20impact%20of%20PTD_Sept%2010%202010_Final.pdf); <http://maliactu.info/societe/la-maison-centrale-darret-mca-de-bamako-un-enjeu-securitaire-qui-ne-reflete-pas-les-conditions-de-vie-et-de-travail-des-surveillants-de-prison>; <https://www.prsf.fr/pays-d-intervention/mali>



administration up to date, registering new inmates and visitors and managing the prison archives. Depending on the available resources, some prisons also employ social workers to focus on prison welfare, as well as rehabilitation and reintegration interventions. In terms of health care, some facilities can count on a doctor or nurse(s) working in the prison, while in other detention centres doctors/nurses visit at regular intervals.

“ ***Incarceration may thus reduce the risk and instead mark the beginning of a disengagement process*** ”

The prison environment also entails connections and links with several external actors. In particular, religious leaders generally visit once a week, for example to conduct the Friday sermon for Muslims and/or to lead Sunday prayer services with Christian inmates. In addition, various international organisations, civil society, or non-governmental organisations (such as MINUSMA,<sup>3</sup> ICRC,<sup>4</sup> Prisonnier Sans Frontière, UNICRI, ICCT and Think Peace) support the overall prison management by providing basic services (such as kitchen machinery, healthcare mate-

rial), education materials or equipment for vocational occupations (such as cloth-making, woodwork, or agriculture); delivering capacity-building activities (e.g. UNICRI and ICCT provided several trainings for security officers, psychologists and religious leaders working in prison to promote the rehabilitation of VEOs in prison); or by conducting research and analysis on needs, gaps and priorities linked to the prison environment. Finally, family members, who generally visit prisoners on pre-approved days and times, may also play a central role in basic services such as provision of additional food as well as relational and emotional support.

### Intake process

Despite the specific individual profile and background, the intake process of new inmates is relatively similar across Malian prisons. An overall evaluation is conducted by key prison staff through a combination of their professional assessment and an analysis of the charge and the case file. Figure 1 provides an overview of the intake and risk assessment procedure at the Maison Central d'Arrêt in Bamako, and exemplifies the current standard intake process. New inmates are usually transferred to the prison by the Malian police, with a warrant of arrest detailing some basic de-

mographic information (name, date of birth and region) and the charge or sentence of the individual. First, the prisoner is brought to the security office, where he or she is informed of the prison's rules and procedures, and is assigned to a prison cell. Prison guards also immediately perform a physical security check to ensure that the newly arrived inmate does not carry any weapons or other prohibited items. Then, the administration office, so-called *Bureau aux fichiers*, creates a file on the prisoner and registers his/her demographic data, biometric data, and fingerprints. The personal belongings of the inmate (including for example a cell phone, identification documents and money) are taken and registered in the prison registry. Next, the inmate undergoes a medical check by the doctor or nurse. Depending on availability, the inmate meets with a social worker who conducts a general interview focused on the prisoner's background, family history, the motivations for their alleged criminal offence and produces a social investigation report. The prisoner's file consists of all documents and information related to the inmate during his/her detention, including the warrant of arrest, as well as personal, health, and social-related data. The file can be updated and extended with additional information by the

3 The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (<https://minusma.unmissions.org/en>)

4 International Committee of the Red Cross (<https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/africa/mali>)

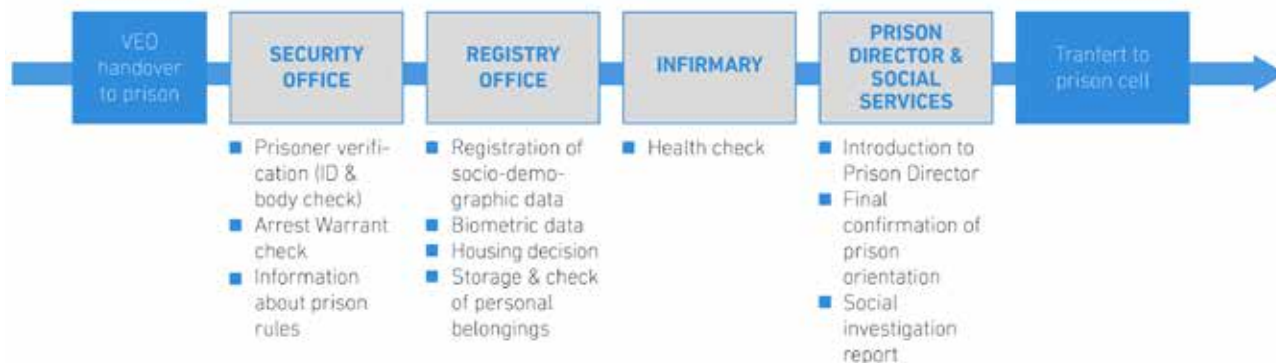


Figure 1 - Intake process in Malian prisons

prison personnel having regular contact with the inmates during their detention, especially for what concerns relevant security, administrative and health-related information. Finally, the inmate also meets with the prison director before being brought to the cell.

With the aim to improve VEOs intake process and risk assessment procedure within the Malian prison system, in 2018-2019 UNICRI and ICCT developed a Risk Assessment Tool to determine the level of radicalization leading to violence and trained prison staff on the use of the tool. Through the use of the tool, prison staff develop a comprehensive assessment of the situation and can suggest priority interventions. At the time of writing, a number of risk assessments have been performed with incoming VEOs in Bamako and Koulikoro prisons. Over time, the risk assessment process should be applied to all VEO inmates thus allowing for

a standardized approach and paving the way for the development of tailored rehabilitation and reintegration measures.

### VEO's housing

VEOs<sup>5</sup> in prison are classified as high-risk population and housed in two correctional institutions: at the Maison Centrale d'Arrêt in Bamako and in Koulikoro prison, approximately 60 km North-East of Bamako.

The number of inmates housed at Bamako's prison has been growing in the past years and a similar trend is found in the number of incarcerated VEOs: from approximately 62 in 2016, the number of terrorist offenders increased to sharply 270 in early 2020. Among them, only 2 have been sentenced (3%) by the time of writing, while the large majority is in pre-trial detention. Koulikoro's prison housed 174 inmates as of February 2020, including 49 VEOs, of which ten have been sentenced

(20%). With an official capacity of 200, this prison is currently below capacity but, as it is used as a "transit prison" for inmates coming from different regions over the country, the number can vary quickly and greatly, making the overall management challenging.

**“The risk assessment process should be applied to all VEO inmates thus allowing for a standardized approach and paving the way for the development of tailored rehabilitation and reintegration measures”**

In Bamako two designated units have been established for the VEO population, generally referred to as the “jihadist block”

5 Throughout this publication the term VEOs is used to refer to inmates both arrested as well as sentenced for terrorism-related offenses.

and the “rebels” quarter: placement is generally determined by the type of group the inmate is (allegedly) affiliated with. The “jihadist block” consists of several cells and a courtyard. Inmates in this unit usually spend their day in the courtyard, while during the night are housed in their respective cells. The courtyard is used for daily activities such as prayer, socialising with other detainees, or for inmates generally biding their time. In Koulikoro, the prison consists of one large cell where VEOs are mixed with the general prison population. They do not have access to the courtyard, and daily activities occur in the cell. Koulikoro prison is currently under reconstruction to extend the overall size of the prison and number of cells. In both prisons, VEOs have access to a doctor or nurse and, if need be, can be hospitalised in the infirmary within the correctional facility.

## 2. Trajectories of violence of the VEOs inmate population in Mali

According to the data collected through field missions, the VEO population in Malian prisons is estimated to be around 319 VEOs at the time of writing, with numbers changing rapidly. The unpredictability of the numerical trends along with a heterogeneity of actors and ap-

proaches involved in the arrest phase make it difficult to elaborate a comprehensive overview of the background of the VEO population currently managed by the Malian prison system. However, the analysis provided below partially contributes to fill this gap, capitalizing on primary data collected through in-depth interviews with 30 VEOs, held at Bamako Maison Centrale d’Arret between 2016 and 2019. Because of unbridgeable limitations, including security concerns and language barriers, the sample of respondents could not be selected randomly. Hence, the analysis elaborated below is not meant to allow for a generalization of VEO profiles in Mali but is rather aimed at sharing some valuable findings in order to contribute to an improved development of tailored and efficient rehabilitation and reintegration measures for VEOs in the country.

### Socio-demographic overview

The 30 participants were almost all in pre-trial detention at the moment of the interview, with only one being sentenced to imprisonment, and they were mainly housed in the so-called “jihadists block”. The age of the interviewees ranged from 18 to 64 years old, with almost half (40%) being between 26 and 35 years old, and one third between 18 and 25 years old. The fact that 70% of the

interviewees were 35 years old or younger at the moment in which they (allegedly) committed a terrorist offence is in line with the general trends identified by criminology, according to which involvement in criminal activities usually occurs before the age of 30.<sup>6</sup>

Almost all the participants were Malian citizens, with only one having a different nationality. The participants were mainly (80%) from the north of the country and, in particular, coming from the regions of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, namely the areas most affected by terrorism in the aftermath of the 2012 coup d’état. In line with the geographical origin, the ethnic affiliation of the respondents mirrors the spectrum of the groups living in the north of Mali, with more than two thirds of the interviewees declaring to be Arab (37%) or Tuareg/Tamashek (37%). Most recent data collected in 2019-2020 concerning 22 newly incarcerated VEOs show a shift in the place of origin, with more than half coming from central Mali. This reflects how armed violence is progressively affecting new areas, especially in the [regions of Mopti and Ségou](#).

Out of 30 interviewees, 20 were married at the time of the interview and half had children. For what concerns the profes-

6 Jeffrey Todd Ulmer and Darrell J. Steffensmeier, ‘The age and crime relationship: Social variation, social explanations’, *The nurture versus biosocial debate in criminology: On the origins of criminal behavior and criminality*, SAGE Publications, 2014, pp. 377-396.



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sion, almost all the respondents declared a certain involvement in farming activities and/or in trade, thus mirroring the most common occupations in a region where wealth and power depend on the transport of goods rather than on the possession of land.<sup>7</sup> One participant self-reported his occupation as a scholar of the Quran, while another declared to be a marabout. For what concerns the level of education, almost half of the respondents (48%) had received no formal education, although all appear to have received at least some form of informal education, such as, for example, Arabic lessons in the bush. Half of the interviewees declared to have experienced formal education, ranging from 1 up to 12 years, with one re-

spondent specifically reporting having been educated at a madrassa. The entire sample declared to be Muslim, in line with the religious composition of the country, in which more than 90% of the population is Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

### Participation in violent extremism

Approaching the issue of violent extremism, its consequences for the country and individual forms of participation in and support towards armed and violent groups represents a complex and sensitive topic. Part of the challenges linked to this effort are strictly related to the difficulties in identifying a comprehensive and universally accepted definition of terror-

ism.<sup>9</sup> Second, many different violent extremist and armed groups have been proliferating in the region in the past years, including local insurgents fighting for territorial control as well as regional (i.e. Katiba Macina) and global (i.e. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) terrorist organizations: the rapid shift in alliances among these groups as well as the establishment of additional fighting forces makes it even more difficult to clearly define affiliation. Finally, talking about individual involvement in forms of violent extremism entails various barriers for the interviewees, ranging from fear of legal implications to social desirability.

7 Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, 'State, secession, and Jihad: the micropolitical economy of conflict in Northern Mali', *African Security*, 8:249–271 (2015), p. 250.

8 Houssain Kettani, 'Muslim population in Africa: 1950-2020', *International Journal of Environmental Science and Development*, 1:2 (2010), p. 137

9 Alex Schmid, 'Terrorism-the definitional problem', *Case W. Res. J. Int'l L.* 36 (2004), p. 395



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**“ Many different violent extremist and armed groups have been proliferating in the region in the past years ”**

Being aware of the limitations described above, the following paragraphs provide an analysis of several aspects connected to engagement into violent extremism, ranging from affiliation to reasons for participation. In terms of groups' membership, approximately half of the respondents declared to have been part of an insur-

gent/secessionist organization, while almost one third made reference to a terrorist group. Indeed, it is worthy to underline that many respondents approached the topic of affiliation in a vague and contradictory manner, such as mentioning different groups during the interview or denying participation in any form of violence. Crucial historical events occurring in the region were mentioned, stressing their influence and impact on individual trajectories of violence, and acting as what Crenshaw would define as preconditions, “factors that set the stage for terrorism over the long run.”<sup>10</sup> In particular, the fall of the Gadaffi regime

was referred to in connection with an increased availability of weapons in the region and a significant return of fighters from Libya to Mali. With reference to reasons for engagement, while interviewees were reluctant to talk about personal motivations to join violent organizations, it was possible to approach this topic by reflecting more in general about the reasons that motivate people's support towards these actors. Among the factors acknowledged during the interviews, several elements have been identified more frequently, namely lack of options, feelings of injustice, economic opportunities, and ideological beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Crenshaw, 'The causes of terrorism', *Comparative Politics*, 13:4 (Jul., 1981), p. 381.

## Self-protection

Lack of other available options was mentioned several times by the interviewees as a reason for engagement into violence. Such a motivation included various interlinked aspects, such as the need to support a group for self-protection and/or to protect families and properties in a scenario characterized by an increasing level of instability and insecurity. Engagement for survival purposes was mentioned by almost half of the sample (14), including those that mentioned membership as having a strategy to ensure protection towards other actors present in the area and perceived as more violent. Some respondents also related the adoption of self-protection mechanisms to unstable or weak governmental presence at the local level.

## Feelings of injustice and frustrations

Grievances against the institutions and inter-ethnic cleavages represented the most recurrent factor mentioned by the interviewees in leading to engagement into violence. Interviewees often referred to experiences of injustice, frustrations and neglect as a motivation to join armed groups. Such a category includes very different elements. For some respondents the nature of their grievances was mainly resulting from forms of ethnic dis-

crimination: according to one participant, Fulani, Tuareg and Arabs living in the north of the country are by default seen as terrorists. Many respondents claimed that violent extremist groups are particularly effective in exploiting ethnic tensions and approximately one third of the participants mentioned that support towards violent (extremist) groups can act as a way to overcome the discrimination due to the ethnic affiliation, as a strategy to seek justice. Others denounced a certain level of discretion by the security forces, including foreign counter-terrorism troops, in the performance of the arrests. One respondent even mentioned that this dynamic is a reason for supporting violence after release. On a broader level, several respondents identified the source of grievances with a general feeling of neglect by the authorities and institutions, manifesting itself with limited or non-existent access to basic services, such as health care, food, water and justice. Four respondents acknowledged the efficiency of violent groups present in their regions of origin in the provision of these services. Finally, slightly more than half of the sample (57%) identified the lack of political representation as a cleavage and, in such a dynamic, engagement in violent (extremist) groups was portrayed as a tool to gain political control and power. This holds particularly true for involve-

ment in secessionist movements claiming for the independence of the north of Mali.

“  
***For some respondents the nature of their grievances was mainly resulting from forms of ethnic discrimination***  
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## Economic opportunities

Almost two thirds of the respondents (57%) referred to economic opportunities as a reason for joining. Such a motivation was mentioned by some of the interviewees in connection to a basic survival need, identifying membership as a strategy to safeguard an existing business or as a mechanism to obtain an occupation. Some interviewees reported an expansion in the trade opportunities for what concerns illicit trafficking (especially in weapons and drugs). The possibility of getting a job was referred to not only as a mean to gain financial resources but also as a way to have a clear role and purpose in life. These findings are partially in line with recent research indicating the revenues and financial benefits provided for as a result of membership that are of particular interest in a context of economic fragility: [UNDP](#) reports employment



as being the reason for joining a violent extremist group in the African continent for 13% of young interviewees.

“ ***Less than 15% of the interviewees mentioned ideology or extreme religious beliefs as a reason to engage into violence*** ”

### Ideological beliefs

Participants were generally reluctant to talk about beliefs, ideologies and religion. Less than 15% of the interviewees mentioned ideology or extreme religious beliefs as a reason to en-

gage into violence. This finding is in line with various authors claiming that religion and ideology play a less important role in radicalization towards violent extremism than expected<sup>11</sup> and with the fact that, generally, violent extremists do not have a particularly extensive religious knowledge or training.<sup>12</sup> One respondent claimed that the perception that religion cannot be granted a key role in politics because of various internal and external pressures and forms of opposition can function as a justification for engagement. A widespread sense of threat and discrimination towards religion has also been detected by UNDP across the African continent and has been identified as a serious source for “future risk

with regard to the potential for violent extremism to expand further.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite different backgrounds, diverse experiences and various push and pull factors mentioned in the interviews, there are some dominant elements that appear to be more recurrent among what the participants identified as reasons for engagement. Many of these elements, such as the survival motif, the economic opportunities and the sense of being a victim of injustices, are strictly connected with structural conditions, which require further actions to gain territorial control over the north in order to provide local communities with security, justice and access

11 See Anne Aly and Jason-Leigh Striegher, ‘Examining the role of religion in radicalization to violent Islamist extremism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35:12 (2012), pp. 849–862.

12 Lisa Schirch, ed., *The ecology of violent extremism: Perspectives on peacebuilding and human security*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, p.43.

13 UNDP, *Journey to extremism in Africa: drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment*, 2017, p. 48



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to services. In addition, stronger initiatives are required to (re)establish a national sense of belonging, to overcome (perceived) discrimination, to enhance mutual trust among different social actors and to provide all the segments of the population with adequate access to the political discourse and dimension. While many of these activities should occur outside the carceral domain, the prison system can play a significant role in contributing to the main priorities and challenges that Mali is facing.

### 3. Main challenges for the prison administration in the management of the VEOs population

The main challenges faced by the prison administration in the management of the VEO population relate to a lack of resources affecting different actors and sectors. Overall, the Malian prison system suffers from a significant overcrowding rate, coupled with a general lack of personnel, as well as poor health, safety and security conditions and infrastructures. Additionally, the prison system generally struggles with administrative management and

recordkeeping along with the lack of a dedicated ombudsman to receive prisoners' requests or complaints.

This issue of limited resources and capacity translate into different outcomes depending on the prison. In Koulikoro, the prison consists of one large cell where VEOs are mixed with the general prison population, increasing the risk that they might radicalise other inmates. Indeed, radicalisation in prison settings has been identified as a specific issue of concern,<sup>14</sup> considering the proximity and potential vulnerability of some inmates, especially the young-

<sup>14</sup> Silke (Ed.), *Prisons, terrorism and extremism: critical issues in management, radicalisation and reform* (2014)



est, facing radical charismatic preachers.<sup>15</sup> In Bamako, while VEOs inmates are separated from other offender types, the estimated congestion rate of 615% results in a higher need for strict security measures. In Koulikoro's prison, an additional challenge comes with the function of a "transit" detention centre resulting in potential rapid and great change in the number and profile of inmates housed, which makes the overall management of the prison and the implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration activities challenging.

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***The prison system can play a significant role in contributing to the main priorities and challenges that Mali is facing***  
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Such conditions result in the implementation of very limited - both in terms of number and nature - rehabilitation and reintegration activities occurring in Malian prisons, none of which are applicable to violent extremist offenders. Due to limited resources and capacities in terms of security and surveillance, VEOs are not allowed time outside their unit or cell to participate in any

of the other activities offered within the prison environment, such as access to the library or the place of worship. Similarly, VEOs cannot participate in the activities offered in the prisons, including attending courses in a tailoring or mechanical workshop, vocational training activities, nor working on a plot of agricultural land or in the prison kitchen. At the moment, only a very small fraction of inmates has access to those activities, also in light of the limited availability in terms of spaces and the infrastructural restrictions. All inmates interviewed in Bamako reported following a very similar routine composed by a few basic activities (sleeping, waking up, eating, praying, washing and, sometimes, reading<sup>16</sup> or walking) and declared a certain level of malaise due to the lack of opportunities, training and occupations. Most inmates indicated that they would like to have the opportunity to work and have access to certain activities, in particular vocational skills training.

«*All days are the same in prison*» (*Tous les jours sont les mêmes en prison*)<sup>17</sup>

The lack of security and surveillance resources and capacities could be partly addressed through the implementation of an advanced risk assessment

procedure, which should concern all the inmates, especially if accused of terrorist offences, upon arrival at the prison. Such a procedure consists in assessing the degree of radicalisation in order to determine the potential risks they pose to fellow prisoners, to prison personnel and to society at large, and thus determining appropriate treatment in prison, related to low-, medium- or high-risk categorisation, including providing a starting point for a targeted rehabilitation and reintegration intervention strategy. Risk assessment should be an underlying activity throughout the detention period, and release decisions should also be critically based on a determination of the risk a given individual would pose on re-entering society. However, the initial risk assessment of VEOs at arrival in prison in Mali is somehow skewed by a general lack of information. Indeed, inmates accused of terrorist offences are generally arrested by national and international armed forces in north and central Mali and then transferred to the capital city, where they usually spend some time at Gendarmerie Camp One for further questioning, as well as for categorizing and determining whether to house them in Bamako or Koulikoro Central Prison. Various actors are involved in

15 Council of Europe (2016). Handbook for prison and probation services regarding radicalisation and violent extremism. <https://rm.coe.int/16806f9aa9>.

16 Inmates can request books (generally in French) mainly offered by the church.

17 VEO inmate interviewed in Bamako's prison in December 2016.



© Photo by Nancy Palus/TRIN

the different steps from the arrest to imprisonment, thus weakening the data collection process. People accused of terrorism are usually brought in prison with limited data and information about their arrest and charges against them, thus negatively affecting the ability of the prison staff to perform a full-fledged risk assessment.

Another management issue derives from the high number of pre-trial detentions, estimated to represent 60 to 90% of the overall prison population, with similar numbers for the VEO population (97% in Bamako and 80% in Koulikoro as per our estimates). This factor might lead to an increased risk of radicalisation among the detainees charged but not yet sentenced of terrorism (and who might prove innocent) by increasing exposure to recruiters and strengthening a sense of unfair

treatment and discrimination. In terms of rehabilitation and reintegration, this results in a situation where less than half of the overall population, and only 3 to 20% of the VEO population, may have access to such R&R interventions.

Another important factor limiting the rehabilitation and reintegration of VEOs in prison relates to the fact that many of the inmates accused of/sentenced for terrorism are incarcerated far away from their family, who are generally unable to visit. Indeed, all VEOs are housed in Bamako and Koulikoro prisons, both situated in the southern part of the country, while many of detainees come from north or central Mali. Despite the long and challenging route for families to reach Bamako and Koulikoro, another difficulty is related to the fact that family visits are generally lim-

ited to one day a week: families are then required to remain in the south for several weeks to get to see the inmate more than once. These factors lead to a very reduced number of visits, as reported by the interviewees. This aspect is crucial as families, peers and communities play a fundamental role in the rehabilitation **process** and their support is essential both during the detention, to provide additional food and services, as well as for the re-entry phase to avoid stigmatisation and prevent recidivism. Linked to this geographical issue is the language barrier, since most of the VEOs speak Arabic or Tamashek, while the languages mostly used in Bamako and Koulikoro are Bambara and French. This might have an impact on social interactions and might limit the possibility for inmates to participate in activities provided in a language they do not master.



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«I don't know the others and I don't understand them because they speak other languages like Arabic and Bambara» (*Je ne connais pas les autres et je ne les comprends pas parce qu'ils parlent d'autres langues comme l'Arabe et le Bambara*)<sup>18</sup>

***This factor might lead to an increased risk of radicalisation among the detainees charged but not yet sentenced of terrorism***

Besides the practical aspects detailed above, some behavioural factors must also be taken into account. First, the most radicalized inmates might reject the R&R activities offered by the prison administration, either by simple lack of interest, or as a signal of rejection towards the administration and, more generally, the authorities and institutions, in line with the grievances described above. Second, the development of R&R activities limited to the VEO population might produce a negative effect on the relationships among inmates, arising from a sense of discrimination amid the rest of the prison population, and thus negatively

affecting the status of VEOs, who might already suffer from stigmatization within the prison environment. These factors should also be taken into account when developing R&R programmes and interventions in prison.

Finally, in the previous analysis of the factors that play a role in driving extremism in Mali, some elements have been identified as most common and recurrent. Understanding of local and context-specific drivers is essential to effectively prevent and counter violent extremism as well as to successfully identify the main elements that should be at the centre of

<sup>18</sup> VEO inmate interviewed in Bamako's prison in December 2016.



© Photo by Chris Simpson/IRIN

a comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration effort. From the primary data collected by UNICRI and ICCT, besides the survival motif, longstanding grievances and frustrations as well as the availability of economic opportunities play a key role in the engagement into violence. Furthermore, ideology also plays a minor role according to the respondents. Despite the great value of the data gathered so far, further efforts should be channelled into developing a more thorough understating of the drivers and trajectories of violence among the VEO population in prison in Mali.

#### 4. Way forward in terms of tailored R&R initiatives for the VEOs population in Mali

Episodes of violence have progressively increased in the Sahel region, going hand in hand with an increased number of prisoners accused of or sentenced for terrorism-related offences. Prisons can function as a unique environment in which inmates can disengage from violence as a result of a comprehensive, tailored and resilient rehabilitation and reintegration strategy. Mali has already undertaken various steps to prevent and counter vi-

olent extremism, including the elaboration of a national strategy and an action plan to operationalize it. The Malian prison system has also taken active part in the efforts to apply the national strategy at the penitentiary level with the support of various international actors, such as [MINUSMA/JCS](#), [UNODC](#), [UNICRI](#) and [ICCT](#).

However, some challenges are still to be addressed, as outlined in the previous sections. The lack of a comprehensive VEOs rehabilitation and reintegration plan should be overcome with the active engagement of the national prison adminis-

tration and through the elaboration of evidence-based and context-specific measures. As claimed by many experts in this field, the design of R&R initiatives should not follow the “one-size fits all” approach but should rather be tailored to local conditions, culture, legal traditions of the state, and in line with national and international laws and regulations.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the prison administration plays a crucial role in this regard given its privileged position when it comes to the identification of main gaps, existing risks, and priority needs. The elaboration of comprehensive, tailored and resilient rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives in Mali requires the leadership and ownership of the DNAPES.

“ ***Mali has already undertaken various steps to prevent and counter violent extremism, including the elaboration of a national strategy*** ”

The design of R&R measures should be anchored to empirical results and should constantly rely on action-oriented research and appropriate methodologies which could include building on successful

examples of rehabilitation and reintegration measures in Mali concerning the non-VEO population as well as the lessons learned by the neighbouring countries. In addition, research and assessment could help with finding realistic solutions within the existing limitations in terms of infrastructures, lack of personnel, and overcrowding: rehabilitation and reintegration measures can take various forms, such as education training (from basic literacy to more advanced skills), vocational training - either manual (such as woodwork, metalwork, agriculture, bricklaying, cooking, sewing skills, etc.) or intellectual (computer, accounting, entrepreneurial skills, etc.) - psychological counselling and other activities that could be adapted according to the environment. Evidence shows that engagement in vocational training and capacity-building initiatives positively contributes to reducing the drivers that lead to engagement in terrorism and increases the possibilities of finding employment after release, further limiting the recidivism risks and improving security for society at large, as confirmed also by some interviewees, of which one declared that being engaged in some activities would help inmates recover and overcome mental and physical frustrations.

In addition, before designing and implementing R&R initiatives, it is important to define clear objectives, identify clear roles and actors for each phase and clarify the respective responsibilities. All relevant stakeholders shall be engaged, from families to international and civil society organizations, religious leaders, psychologists as well as actors involved in the arrest-to-imprisonment process. Family members can be strong influencers in VEO rehabilitation and their engagement is indeed a way to create “cognitive openings”<sup>20</sup> for disengagement and/or de-radicalization. Given the existing challenges portrayed above, a stronger involvement of the families for VEOs could pass through a revised procedure for family visits, allowing for family members coming from far away to receive authorization to visit for several consequential days in order to reduce the impact of the trip. In addition, the already existing cooperation between international and civil society organizations could be expanded and strengthened within the framework of an R&R plan. One third of the participants interviewed expressly mentioned, for instance, their appreciation towards the regular International Red Cross (ICRC) visits. The involvement of diverse stake-

19 UNICRI, *Strengthening efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism: good practices and lessons learned for a comprehensive approach to rehabilitation and reintegration of VEOs*, 2018, p. 16.

20 GCTF, *The role of families in preventing and countering violent extremism: strategic recommendations and programming options*.



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holders in the design and implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration measures requires mutual trust and a structure for facilitating cooperation and information-sharing: creating a stable network for enhanced dialogue, sharing experiences and lessons learned would allow for the development of a more thorough R&R plan, based on a much broader set of information concerning the inmate and his/her trajectory of violence.

*“It’s nice to have a visit on a regular basis because it creates a stable relationship» (Il est agréable d’avoir une visite sur*

*une base régulière parce que cela crée une relation stable)21*

“ **Evidence shows that engagement in vocational training and capacity-building initiatives positively contributes to reducing the drivers that lead to engagement** ”

Enhanced knowledge on the VEOs life-history and trajectories of violence would help in

designing tailored R&R measures within the prison settings as well as in the outside society. The initial findings presented in this report suggest that addressing the sources of (perceived) injustices and cleavages, would have a significant impact on limiting the avenues for radicalization. Given the general sense of hopelessness detected in the interviewees, working on enhancing trust among different communities as well as between the population and the institutions would also be crucial in addressing the current fragile situation in Mali. In light of the percentage of the prison population in pre-trial

21 VEO inmate interviewed in Bamako’s prison in December 2016.

detention, the strengthening of the judicial process could also help address the feeling of being a victim of an injustice: to use the words of one interviewee, “keeping the innocents in prison awaiting trial increases tensions in society.” A comprehensive action to enhance VEOs rehabilitation and reintegration should thus also advocate for an improved criminal justice system, more capable and accountable in providing effective responses throughout all the different phases of the criminal justice process. The research presented in this article regarding the reasons for engagement into violent extremism does not claim to be exhaustive but calls, on the contrary, on the need to expand and enhance the understanding of the relevant pull and push factors. Although conducting research in the prison environment implies several chal-

lenges, the resulting improved understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism is crucial for the development of a solid R&R programme: an assessment of the “situation and the underlying social dynamics responsible for social change” would guide the development of tailored policies promoting targeted strategies and solutions.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, a proper R&R programme should be aligned to the contextual framework and, in the case of Mali, shall complement the on-going implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, which provides for the integration of former combatants into the security services, as well as the reintegration of them into their communities through the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and integration programme.<sup>23</sup>

“**Former offenders could serve as powerful allies in the fight against violent extremism**”

All of the above elements and recommendations could contribute to the design of a tailored, comprehensive and resilient rehabilitation and reintegration plan for the VEO population in Mali, which represents a crucial component of the country’s efforts in the fight against violent extremism. As claimed by one of the interviewees, former offenders could serve as powerful allies in the fight against violent extremism and could be crucial in the dissemination of targeted peaceful messages across the country.

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<sup>22</sup> Veldhuis, T. M. and Kessels, E. J. *Thinking before leaping: the need for more and structural data analysis in detention and rehabilitation of extremist offenders*. The Hague, The Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> [https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s\\_2020\\_223\\_e.pdf](https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2020_223_e.pdf)



# Gender in the digital age: exploring innovative practices and women's involvement

■ by Soraya Binetti

## Introduction

In our contemporary globalized world, women and adolescent girls in various countries across the globe continue to face constant hardships and obstacles, ranging from gender-based violence to prevalent gender inequalities and deeply rooted gendered socio-cultural norms, which hinder their emancipation and development and negatively impact the implementation of gender equality and rights. Despite these circumstances, different advancements, such as emerging innovative solutions and technologies, can play a significant role in relation to the development and empowerment of women in various sectors of society globally. It thus becomes ever more necessary to apply cross-cutting approaches, such as a critical gender lens





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and a rights-based approach<sup>1</sup> to a wide range of development sectors and issue areas, including, but not limited to, education, political participation, and economic development, while considering, at the same time, the role that technology can have in these domains and analyzing its socio-cultural, global implications.

Generally speaking, women have less access to technology. Globally, there are 200 million more men than women with Internet access, and women

are 21% less likely to have a mobile phone.<sup>2</sup> In developing countries, this mode of communication is fundamentally important as phones provide access to security, containment networks/organization, early warning systems, mobile health care and money transfers.

In addition to strengthening women's access to these information and 'soft' technologies,<sup>3</sup> it would be important to ensure the use of traditional media such as radio, print and television to transmit essential

information, including on violence against women. In fact, in light of the current COVID-19 crisis, where women are more susceptible to experiencing gender-based violence due to the imposed lockdown measures, special measures should be adopted to facilitate complaints, reinforcing existing mechanisms and contemplating alternative measures.<sup>4</sup> Technology should thus become a facilitating means for filing complaints, through mediums such as smart phones and silent messaging, virtual

1 A rights-based approach integrates international human rights and humanitarian law norms, standards and principles into plans, policies, services and processes of humanitarian intervention and development related to violence against women. Rights-based approach. UN Women. (2013, July 03). See <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/1498-rights-based-approach.html>

2 COVID-19 in Women's Lives: Reasons to Recognize the Differential Impacts. Inter-American Commission of Women. (2020)

3 "Soft technologies": Internet access and telecommunication devices that facilitate the flow of information and knowledge. Gill et al., "Bridging the Gender Divide: How Technology can advance Women Economically," ICRW. (2010).

4 COVID-19 in Women's Lives: Reasons to Recognize the Differential Impacts. Inter-American Commission of Women. (2020)

police stations, panic buttons, geolocation, and even the use of social networks (Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram).<sup>5</sup> This could positively reinforce the need for women to be able to independently and freely gain access to basic, fundamental rights without feeling susceptible to external pressures and constraints, which further limit their efforts in seeking necessary resources.

Various emerging programs and innovative tactics have been implemented and put into practice, especially in vulnerable contexts and where women are targeted as minorities in their communities, in order to raise awareness and challenge consistent stereotypes. In African countries, for example, women have embraced the 'blogging phenomenon', with blogs being perceived as a positive and effective mode to promote women's equality and empowerment. Thus, the Internet, and other information and communications technologies, (ICTs), have the potential to support the economic, political, and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, while analyzing and exploring the various methods implemented in different countries, a holistic and balanced understanding across genders should be utilized. This strategy could be helpful in order to properly assess the impact and effectiveness that these methods and initiatives have on each respective community. This would allow, through challenging and problematizing such modes, to tactfully address and contribute to the goal of achieving gender equality and empowerment in congruence with the use of technological advancements as drivers of change.

### **Educational Practices: Integrating Technologies in schools**

In Kenya, young adolescent girls have been limited in being able to exercise the right to education. At the same time, there has been a greater access to digital technologies within the country and the use of mobile phones has increased exponentially. Girls have contributed to this uptake, using mobile phones for multiple purposes

including leisure, socialising, and education.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, creating interconnected networks amongst women - not only at the local but also at the regional and national levels - in exposing and challenging gender stereotypes and developing productive and engaging education environments, could be reflective of reaching more positive and innovative outcomes of education practices within a global context. In this regard, however, as it is evident through the example of Kenya, the education policy landscape is fraught with tensions that often curtail the potential for girls to use mobile phones, thus impacting their access to various rights - including that of education.<sup>8</sup>

Introducing various mobile media practices in the educational scheme - through a creative approach to how girls can use mobile phones to realise their rights in a digital age<sup>9</sup> - could have significant outcomes. In a research study conducted specifically in Nairobi, Kenya, notwithstanding the obstacles faced with limiting girls' rights to education, leisure, and play, most girls continued to utilize their mobile phones

5 COVID-19 in Women's Lives: Reasons to Recognize the Differential Impacts. Inter-American Commission of Women. (2020)

6 Somolu, "'Telling Our Own Stories': African Women Blogging for Social Change," *Gender and Development*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Nov. 2007).

7 Ronda Zelezny-Green (2018) 'Now I want to use it to learn more': using mobile phones to further the educational rights of the girl child in Kenya, *Gender & Development*, 26:2,299-311

8 Ronda Zelezny-Green (2018) 'Now I want to use it to learn more': using mobile phones to further the educational rights of the girl child in Kenya, *Gender & Development*, 26:2,299-311

9 Ronda Zelezny-Green (2018) 'Now I want to use it to learn more': using mobile phones to further the educational rights of the girl child in Kenya, *Gender & Development*, 26:2,299-311

in ways which enhanced their life choices.<sup>10</sup> As the digital age continues to expand and evolve in parallel with various technological advances and innovations, education remains a valuable sector in which these factors could enhance young people in learning to exercise their rights. It is thus imperative to create an effective and critical approach while examining fruitful tactics amongst stakeholders in order to engage technology in educational practices across the globe.

“  
***The education policy landscape is fraught with tensions that often curtail the potential for girls to use mobile phones***  
 ”

Notwithstanding the efforts to implement technologies within learning environments, there are also various frameworks and factors to consider that intrinsically affect the ways in which diverse education practices are reflected in the society and the benefits that they provide for women and men. This aspect emphasizes the need to find long-lasting solutions which will not only benefit the local and rural contexts, but would have an impact on

the larger debate regarding the roles and aspects of non-formal education in achieving gender equality.

The study carried out in the Kenyan context explored how mobile phones could facilitate after-school access to books by introducing 22 students at a Nairobi girls' school to two apps: biNu (quizzes, dictionary, games, YouTube) & Worldreader (formal and non-formal books). When considering which kinds of interventions would be beneficial to girls' education, the integration of technology in school or other supervised settings, may thus be considered as a way of improving the quality of education in the country. Furthermore, implementing, for example, group exercises using tablets to collaboratively solve problems could further ensure the formal educational content and allow for socialization amongst the youth, thus complementing the formal educational model.

Different unique tactics and programs are therefore critical in order to effectively address the various problems and challenges faced by women and girls in communities across the world, while also addressing the need to engage both women and men in order to progressively achieve gender equality.

Studies such as the one mentioned are indeed reflective of a larger and pressing debate pertaining to women's rights and further contribute to raising public awareness about the need to continue to implement effective educational practices integrated by technological advancements, while investigating positive solutions and beneficial change in regards to the emancipation of women across the globe.

### **Political Participation and Technology: Analyzing the rights-based approach (RBA) in achieving gender-quality**

The rights-based approach' processes of building capacity for women and marginalized people more generally, allows for the RBA approach for gender equality and development to transform power structures while working for gender equality and development.<sup>11</sup> The specific RBA practices in connection to technology and innovative approaches, used by certain activist groups, are essential in understanding the way in which such aspects are implemented throughout various 'women's human rights organizations' both at the regional and national level.

10 Ronda Zelezny-Green (2018) 'Now I want to use it to learn more': using mobile phones to further the educational rights of the girl child in Kenya, *Gender & Development*, 26:2,299-311

11 Carella and Ackerly, "Ignoring Rights Is Wrong: Re-Politicizing Gender Equality and Development with the Rights-Based Approach," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2017).



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In the article, Young feminists' creative strategies to challenge the status quo: a view from FRIDA, an analysis of the way in which the feminist movement is indeed a key force for change, fueling important shifts in power to ensure the rights of the most marginalized,<sup>12</sup> is investigated. Throughout the years, the feminist movement has undergone various shifts and transformations, while continuing to devote itself, through the challenges of time, to the rights of women across the world.

Young feminist organising is springing up in all corners of the globe – from Mexico to Morocco to Malaysia – powered by brave young women, girls and

youth in general who are creating the change the world needs. The work of FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund, a young feminist-led organization that began in 2010 to provide young feminist leaders with the resources to amplify their voices and initiatives<sup>13</sup> and the key findings of a 2016 report, *Brave, Creative, Resilient: The Global State of Young Feminist Organizing*, done in conjunction with the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), are explored<sup>14</sup> with the aim of building on existing data regarding the state of young feminist organizing and portray the way in which they are constantly developing innovative practices, at a grassroots level, in order to address many of the

structural and systematic issues they face.

Young feminists today emerge as a powerful force in implementing change and challenging the public debate, from a diverse set of lenses and perspectives, regarding women, gender role and relations, and gender itself - at the community, regional, national and international levels. When considering specifically the rights-based approach and its effectiveness, it is necessary to understand the importance of capacity building as part of programs and policies, thus allowing individuals and communities to become their own self-advocates, thereby making these policies and programs more attuned to

12 Bashi et al., "Young Feminists' Creative Strategies to Challenge the Status Quo: A View from FRIDA". *Gender & Development*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (2018).

13 Bashi et al., "Young Feminists' Creative Strategies to Challenge the Status Quo: A View from FRIDA". *Gender & Development*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (2018).

14 Bashi et al., "Young Feminists' Creative Strategies to Challenge the Status Quo: A View from FRIDA". *Gender & Development*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (2018).

local particulars.<sup>15</sup> In respect to the specific goals implemented by FRIDA, over the past two years, the top three strategies that emerged were: awareness raising, capacity-building, and advocacy and lobbying. This could support the positive and effective strategy implemented by the organization in order to focus not only on the trainings and capacity building of the local communities in which they work, but also on the internal strengthening of the organization. The article indeed re-emphasizes what young feminists are witnessing: the power of solidarity, collective (and self-) care, networking, and bringing together creative strategies such as [...] technology to rethink and create new ways of resistance and resilience.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, through the Capacity Development grant that FRIDA awards, various under-represented and marginalized groups are able to benefit from the capacity development strategies that are implemented and can thus receive necessary additional resources in order to promote leadership – including skills, spaces, and relationship-networking. These tools are therefore necessary in order to promote the engagement of young feminists in being able

to voice and challenge pre-conceived and normative notions of inequality, rights violations, and injustices through a different set of contexts.

“***Young feminists today emerge as a powerful force in implementing change and challenging the public debate, from a diverse set of lenses and perspectives, regarding women, gender role and relations, and gender itself***”

Aside from the above critical strategies, there are also different dynamic and creative approaches – technological, mediatic, visual, and literary – which have been implemented by young feminist groups in the shared commitment to shed new light on the issues raised, while at the same time allowing, through collaborative action, for a positive change in their communities. In our modern day, technology and online platforms have been usually

perceived as positive modes of connection between groups in order to increase awareness and advocate change. At the same time, it is important to consider the role of social media and online platforms in hindering and negatively impacting the effectiveness of such efforts by sharing misconstrued or false information. Nonetheless, through the specific examples of case studies across the globe, online platforms have been critical in supporting young activists to organize collective action [...] and have also enabled younger women and girls to have a direct link to audiences to hear their stories, from their perspectives.<sup>17</sup>

An example of an interesting mediatic form of communication amongst women across the world, could be that of Women's Voices Now (WVN). Through unique social-change films focusing on women's and girls' rights issues and by providing active support to filmmakers who give voice to unheard women and girls, this NGO drives positive social change by raising awareness of the struggles and triumphs of women and girls seeking full access to their political, civil, and economic rights.<sup>18</sup> As an ad-

15 Carella and Ackerly, “Ignoring Rights Is Wrong: Re-Politicizing Gender Equality and Development with the Rights-Based Approach,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2017).

16 Bashi et al., “Young Feminists' Creative Strategies to Challenge the Status Quo: A View from FRIDA”. *Gender & Development*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (2018).

17 Bashi et al., “Young Feminists' Creative Strategies to Challenge the Status Quo: A View from FRIDA”. *Gender & Development*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (2018).

18 Women's Voices Now. Homepage. (2020). See <https://www.womensvoicesnow.org/our-mission/>

ditional anecdote to supporting mediatic productions by women within social change, although through a different context, an ethnographic study of a participatory video workshop conducted with rural women in Fiji, observed how communities engage with processes of production for empowerment. The study found that rural women in Fiji integrate local norms and practices in the production of programme content, and use social capital – their relationships and social networks – as a key element in video production to highlight community needs and linkages.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the content produced by the women gave significance to women’s work, their abilities, their skills, and their potential as income producers, as well as their empowering networks.

In the specific political and social change realm, the organization ‘Fe-Male’,<sup>20</sup> which was founded in 2012 by a group of young feminists in Beirut, Lebanon, is committed to raising gender awareness through mass and social media involvement. Another prominent example in this respect could be that of a student-run political organization based in Florence, Italy called ‘Collettivo Spine’. The examples of associations such as Fe-Male and Collettivo Spine

– the latter formed by young feminist activists politically engaged in publicly denouncing patriarchal and nationalist discourses – are interesting examples of the way in which youth-led networks across the globe are interconnected in fighting for the shared overall cause of advocating for pressing women’s rights issues.

“***Rural women in Fiji integrate local norms and practices in the production of programme content, and use social capital***”

Through online platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, these organizations succeed in creating a “virtual community” and an open space to share ideas, stories, and take action in student protests and boycotts. One of the creative activities conducted by Fe-Male in their campaign to address the objectification of women in the media and the role this plays in contributing to gender-based violence, has been social media campaigns, which included visuals from their offline initiatives as well.<sup>21</sup> The success of organizations such as WNV, ‘Collettivo Spine’, and Fe-Male

thus lies in the combination of successful communication strategies through the positive use of technology, and the courage and determination that young women have in addressing and standing up against a conservative and often chauvinistic culture.

Through collective action and organized events, walk-ins, and systematic protests, the members of the organizations are thus able to powerfully voice their opinions as well as inform the rest of the community through the use of social media campaigns: publishing events on their respective pages, circulating activities the organization is involved in, and sharing/re-posting various relevant initiatives on their page from other young, political and activist organizations. These associations are in fact able to address not only the issues faced by the immediate, local community, but also those at the national level, through the use of social media networks, thus informing and engaging on a larger scale other young activists and possible stakeholders that are potentially interested in participating and engaging themselves to the movement.

Organizations such as these are indeed necessary today, as

19 Harris, “Transforming Images: Reimagining Women’s Work Through Participatory Video,” *Development in Practice*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2009).

20 Fe-Male. Homepage. (2020). See <https://www.fe-male.org/>

21 Bashi et al., “Young Feminists’ Creative Strategies to Challenge the Status Quo: A View from FRIDA”. *Gender & Development*. Vol. 26, No. 3 (2018).

they are able to voice the needs and opinions of a continuously shifting and transforming young generation, thanks also to the foundational aspects of older generations of feminists, while at the same time developing new and innovative political practices and approaches. In fact, through a series of interviews conducted in their research,<sup>22</sup> a young feminist from Tunisia emphasizes how: “younger feminist groups are much aware politically, are much more intersectional, and more radical... I believe that young feminists adopt these new strategies because they are more aware of the needs of younger generations.”

There are many examples of efforts made by organizations such as Fe-Male and Collettivo Spine that are essential in better understanding and representing the potentially positive and effective contributions of using a rights-based approach within technological advances in successfully implementing such practices.

The above organizations, in fact, further succeed in applying some combination of RBA practices by using intersectionality analytically as well

as by building coalitions and networks through connected action with others who could share the same goals.<sup>23</sup> In these contexts, the RBA is thus a necessary component in order to develop effective solutions and implement substantial change as a result of the devotion and commitment of these community organizations.

These collective efforts are fundamentally necessary in modern society, especially from the perspective of youth, as there is not a better time than now to take action in challenging institutional hierarchies and normative policies, especially by increasing the positive impact that underrepresented and marginalized groups can have on society.

An interesting anecdote that is necessary to recognize and assess, pertains to the ways in which a rights-based approach has been also integrated and implemented through the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This emphasizes the importance of practicing a rights-based approach through a measurement scheme that includes process and outcomes: “the processes of gender equality and de-

velopment interventions can and should be measured as outcomes.”<sup>24</sup> In this respect, when considering the theme of human rights principles, portrayed through the framework of the 2030 Agenda, the latter indeed succeeds in addressing equality in terms of outcomes and the ways in which this aspect is implemented in different contexts and settings:<sup>25</sup> equality must apply not only to opportunities, but also to outcomes.

“***The processes of gender equality and development interventions can and should be measured as outcomes***”

Therefore, through a significant achievement of inclusion, the 2030 Agenda functions in understanding the mechanism of interventions based on outcomes as a necessary and transformative development of the practice of the RBA approach. At the same time, it is also important to consider and recognize the different challenges that the Agenda may face. When taking into account

22 Bashi et al., “Young Feminists’ Creative Strategies to Challenge the Status Quo: A View from FRIDA”. *Gender & Development*. Vol. 26, No. 5 (2018).

23 Carella and Ackerly, “Ignoring Rights Is Wrong: Re-Politicizing Gender Equality and Development with the Rights-Based Approach,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2017).

24 Carella and Ackerly, “Ignoring Rights Is Wrong: Re-Politicizing Gender Equality and Development with the Rights-Based Approach,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2017).

25 Razavi, “The 2030 Agenda: Challenges of Implementation to Attain Gender Equality and Women’s Rights,” *Gender & Development*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2016).

specifically Goal 5 and understanding the role that women have in political participation and leadership, women's leadership in civil society and collective organizing emerge as fundamental aspects that are missing from the realm of decision-making as critical components of women's rights.<sup>26</sup> This is indeed a very necessary aspect that should be recognized in the gender-specific elements of the Agenda since one of the most powerful indicators of women's voice and influence in bringing about gender-responsive policy change is the strength of women's collective action.<sup>27</sup> Through the use of effective and innovative technologies, the power of collective and community-based action is thus significant in influencing hierarchical structures and can further empower women to work together to use resources at a local level in order to implement profound changes at a national one.

### **Economic Empowerment: Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Access and Use**

Innovation, technology and entrepreneurship are engines for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment by increasing women's access to education and socio-economic opportunities.<sup>28</sup> In fact, in countries across the world, a wide range of initiatives have been conducted in order to illustrate how ICTs embedded in broader communication for development strategies can provide the driving power to change and ensure better outcomes for marginalized adolescent girls.<sup>29</sup> However, although young people continue to drive early adoption of ICTs, existing inequalities are still dividing ownership and use of ICTs along economic, social and gender lines.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore important to consider the way in which proper technology advancements can be integrated within a rural context in order to maximize the benefits for

the community and women at large. Creating firstly a basis for a positive environment in order to correctly implement and use technology advances within it, is thus necessary and indispensable for positive social change. Within this context, it is further necessary to not oversee the requirement of a rights-based approach to 'basic' access and connectivity, so as to question indeed what models of access and connectivity will work for the marginalised peoples and countries, in a matter that promotes gender justice.<sup>31</sup>

In this regard, The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a union of about 530,000 poor women working in the informal sector in India, aims to achieve full employment and self-reliance for women workers and does so by focusing both on work and on support in other related areas like income, food and social security.<sup>32</sup> Through various grass-root level projects and training and capacity building with ICTs, the organization has shown that such technologies can support women working in the informal sector, bringing greater

26 Razavi, "The 2030 Agenda: Challenges of Implementation to Attain Gender Equality and Women's Rights," *Gender & Development*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2016).

27 Razavi, "The 2030 Agenda: Challenges of Implementation to Attain Gender Equality and Women's Rights," *Gender & Development*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2016).

28 Making Innovation and Technology Work For Women. UN Women. (2017).

29 Bachan and Raftree, "Integrating Information and Communication Technologies into Communication for Development Strategies to Support and Empower Marginalized Adolescent Girls." UNICEF. (2013).

30 Bachan and Raftree, "Integrating Information and Communication Technologies into Communication for Development Strategies to Support and Empower Marginalized Adolescent Girls." UNICEF. (2013).

31 Gurumurthy, "Gender and ICT Access and Appropriation: Taking a Rights-Based Approach" (2008).

32 BRIDGE, "Gender and ICTs," *Gender and Development InBrief*, Issue 15 (Sept. 2004).





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livelihood security to economically vulnerable households, living in increasingly fragile environments.<sup>33</sup> This is an important aspect to consider as it could indeed potentially bridge the existing 'digital divide' through the use of applying appropriate technological techniques with the needs of its members in a productive and efficient manner. Similarly, one of the projects developed through the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (WRP),<sup>34</sup> known as GenderIt,<sup>35</sup> provides a space for reflection, influence and advocacy on internet policy in relation to the rights and demands of women. Through the use of interconnected online networks, an understanding on how women

can be successful participants and productively engage in the digital age could be achieved, while also addressing present barriers in outlining the fundamental goal to achieving positive socio-economic outcomes for women.

In respect to economic growth, as women become increasingly active users of technology, their participation in designing and developing tech products and services will help to enhance technology's relevance for women as consumers, further boosting innovation and economic growth.<sup>36</sup> In fact, in respect specifically to ICTs, expanding women's access to ICT jobs would not only advance economic opportunities for women, their families, and

their communities, but it would also help address the shortage of skilled workers for these jobs and grow the digital economy.<sup>37</sup> In these contexts, it is indeed necessary to consider the role of the public and private sectors in addressing persisting barriers that women and girls face in countries whose economies stand to gain the most from greater participation of women in vital ICT positions. In this regard, the Global Innovation Coalition for Change (GICC) is a dynamic partnership between UN Women and key representatives from the private sector, academic and not-for-profit institutions focused on developing the innovation market to work better for women and accelerate the

33 BRIDGE, "Gender and ICTs," *Gender and Development InBrief*, Issue 15 (Sept. 2004).

34 Association for Progressive Communications. Women's Rights Programme Homepage. (2020) See <https://www.apc.org/en/wrp>

35 GenderIT. Homepage. (2020). <https://www.genderit.org/>

36 Chang and Powell, "Women in Tech as a Driver for Growth in Emerging Economies." *Council on Foreign Relations*. (2016)

37 Chang and Powell, "Women in Tech as a Driver for Growth in Emerging Economies." *Council on Foreign Relations*. (2016)



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achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment.<sup>38</sup>

Another aspect to consider in relation to economic development, could be the effectiveness of providing women with access to mobile phones and specifically Mobile Financial Services (MFS). In fact, MFS specifically offer a useful tool for women's economic and social development. By exercising the service provided, women will decide if it meets their financial management with greater convenience, reliability, security, and privacy than current tools, and thus will appreciate the value of both the

MFS and the mobile phone itself.<sup>39</sup> This further could support the critical role that women can play in contributing to the success of an innovative technology in the developing world, such as mobile financial services deployment.

Forward-thinking countries have launched media campaigns to promote women's full engagement and socioeconomic empowerment through ICTs and have provided special funding for women-owned small and medium enterprises that provide ICT.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in an effort to increase access to finance, UN Women is devel-

oping an accelerator venture fund to provide access to finance to women enterprises to invest in scalable innovations that accelerate gender equality.<sup>41</sup> Including a gender-responsive approach in the innovation cycle is thus imperative and critical in order to ensure that a given innovation meets 100% of its target customer base. This would also help to address and meet consistent obstacles faced by women in more vulnerable contexts, while actively participating in the socio-economic realm and achieving the right resources to be involved in such a process.

38 Making Innovation and Technology Work For Women. UN Women. (2017).

39 Unlocking the Potential: Women and Mobile Financial Services in Emerging Markets. GSMA.

40 Melhelm and Tandon, "Information and Communications Technologies for Women's Socio-Economic Empowerment" (2009), World Bank Group Working Paper. No. 176. The World Bank. (2009).

41 Making Innovation and Technology Work For Women. UN Women. (2017).

**“  
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”**

In order to help women in the ICT sector, it is necessary to engage various actors and stakeholders in order to implement change at the global level. For example, governments, donors, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should not only prioritize initiatives that help bridge the gender gap in access to mobile phones and the internet, but further should design more employment and job skills training programs to steer women toward jobs that build ICT skills.<sup>42</sup> However, at the same time, considering the difficulties women face in achieving such resources, more work needs to be done to tackle the root causes of why women and girls are denied control over resources. In fact, without addressing the power dynamics at play, there is a risk that their

opportunities will remain limited and girls will not be supported to reach their full potential.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

As the current digital age is expanding and transforming at an increasing pace, the role of women in contributing to technological and innovative advances, is ever more necessary and important in a variety of sectors. In order to achieve women empowerment and supporting development, when considering the relationship between gender and innovative technology, it is important to keep in mind and analyze the socio-cultural, global implications.

Therefore, further research in this regard should be taken into consideration, as well as an analysis on the ways in which technology has facilitated the socio-cultural and economic advancements of women in developing countries. It is also necessary to explore the obstacles faced and methods used in order to enforce what needs to happen to trigger greater eco-

nomical advancement, increased political participation, and access to resources in the education sector for women and girls globally.

In respect to UNICRI'S goals in relation to women empowerment and countering gender-based violence to support development, expected and generated outcomes include: increased effectiveness of legislation, policies, national action plans and operational systems to enhance women equality, political participation and empowerment aimed at ending gender-based violence and supporting development; enhanced access of women and girls, especially in more vulnerable contexts, to protection and essential, safe and adequate health, education and social services.<sup>44</sup>

These considerations are further required in order to approach the aspect of women's involvement in the technological realm, so as to productively address the potential women have in this sector in relation to the various areas of society at the global level.

42 Chang and Powell, "Women in Tech as a Driver for Growth in Emerging Economies." Council on Foreign Relations. (2016)

43 Herzhoff and Kanwal, "Building Skills for Life Annual Report." Plan UK. (2014)

44 Women empowerment and countering gender-based violence to support development. UNICRI Topics.

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## “He for She”: The new wave of the cultural revolution

■ by Varun VM

A patriarchal society confers the title of “breadwinners” on ‘him’ and bestows them with the responsibility to earn for the family. This confers another title on him as “head of the family” which thematically corresponds to “white man’s burden” as it creates an illusion that only men are capable of earning for the family. Unfortunately, the phrase “the father is the head of the family” is taught already as a lesson in pre-primary school thereby sowing the seeds of inequality in innocent minds. This illusion, born from the patriarchal mindset, laid the foundation for the socio-economic gender inequalities present today and is the root cause of intergenerational inequality faced by women.

In a traditional Indian family, a woman is the first to wake and the last to sleep. Her day begins before sunrise and ends late at night by doing household chores such as cooking, collecting water and firewood, care work, etc., which are classified by the patriarchal society as “her responsibility”. According to a UNICEF press release “*girls between age 5 and 14 years old spend forty percent more time or 160 million more hours a day, on unpaid domestic chores compared to boys their age,*” yet their work and service is the least recognized in society. This data is rel-



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evant because it points out two fundamental human rights violations, i.e. right to education and child labor.

“ ***The phrase “the father is the head of the family” is taught already as a lesson in pre-primary school thereby sowing the seeds of inequality*** ”

The classification of work based on gender has widened socio-economic inequality among genders. The household chores and care work done by

girls and women are unpaid and are categorized as ‘care economy’ which is not taken into account when calculating the Gross Domestic Product of a nation; consequently, she becomes economically dependent on males which pushes her to poverty and social withdrawal. In other words, the life of women becomes restricted to the four walls of the kitchen. The situation worsens further when they are prone to abuses and violence.

Household chores include cooking for the family members for a minimum of three times a day. This solemn duty is performed by women in most

households and this role makes her *Annapoorna*, the *giver of food and nourishment*. She provides food to everyone and sustains the life of others, yet, she is the last one to eat, that too from what is leftover. In other words, in a patriarchal society, *Annapoorna* is deprived of food and nourishment and she is a victim of chronic hunger. Women themselves are often the victims of food discrimination because in most families while serving food, a daughter is served after the son and wife is served after the husband; the consequence of which is undernourishment of girls and women. The food discrimination is based on the notion that



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it is men who bear the solemn duty of earning for the family and hence they deserve all nourishment. According to the World Food Programme Gender Policy, girls and women constitute 60% of the world’s chronically hungry population.<sup>1</sup> The lack of nourishment has severe consequences on women’s health, especially on their reproductive health. It is a fact that an undernourished mother gives birth to an undernourished child thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of intergenerational under-nutrition.<sup>2</sup> This vicious cycle, caused by food discrimination is another social evil born out of the son-preference attitude of the patriarchal mindset; however, it, can be broken and a healthy generation can be brought to the world without any huge investments or effort. To achieve

that, all you need is to provide healthy nutrition to women, after all, isn’t she entitled to *a fair share of a meal?*

“**An undernourished mother gives birth to an undernourished child thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle of intergenerational under-nutrition**”

According to the International Labor Organization’s report, 80% of the domestic workers in the world are women and girls.<sup>3</sup> The domestic work sector, which is an unorganized sector, is poorly regulated and is considered merely as ‘infor-

mal help’; the consequence is that domestic workers do not enjoy the benefits under labor law as enjoyed by other workers. Now the question is, can we call a woman a domestic worker? From an egalitarian society’s perspective, the answer is ‘no’ but from a patriarchal society’s, the answer is ‘yes’, since, as mentioned earlier, the household chores are deemed ‘her responsibility’. The lives of Maharashtra’s “water wives” are the best example to illustrate this gender-based inequality in household chores. For years, men in Parched, a water-scarce village in Maharashtra have practiced polygamy solely to ensure that the household water requirements are met. When the first wife falls sick and becomes unable to fetch water, the second wife takes her place and continues

1 World Food Programme, *WFP Gender policy*, available at <https://www.wfp.org/publications/wfp-gender-policy>

2 UNICEF, *Women’s nutrition*, available at <https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/womens-nutrition>

3 International labor organization, *Who are domestic workers*, available at <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/domestic-workers/who/lang--en/index.htm>



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until she falls sick and so on. This also points out to the fact that although natural calamities like drought affect both men and women equally, their severity is more experienced by women.

“ ***Domestic workers do not enjoy the benefits under labor law as enjoyed by other workers*** ”

The patriarchal mindset of male dominance, gender inequality in household chores, classification of work based on gender, and food discrimination causes poverty, deprivation of education, exploitation, undernourishment, and violence against women and girls. This is nothing but characteristics of domestic servitude which is a

form of modern slavery. Now, the question would sprout in our mind, would all domestic work or help amount to domestic servitude? The answer is no, but the moment domestic help transitions into a situation where a woman's bundle of human rights, especially those related to independence, health, education, and right to profession/ occupation is affected, it becomes a case of enslavement.

Unlike other contemporary forms of slavery such as human trafficking, sex-trafficking, bonded labor, and descent-based slavery, domestic servitude has certain unique characteristics. Firstly, the place of occurrence of domestic servitude is a private household where the victim lives with her family members and the perpetrators of the slavery are the victim's relatives. Secondly, in

some forms of modern slavery the victim is conscious that his/her right is being violated and that he/she is a victim of slavery, but, in the case of domestic servitude, the victims are mostly either daughters or wives who accept this responsibility as an obligation towards the family, without knowing that she is becoming a victim of domestic servitude. In addition, refusal to discharge the responsibility would result in violence against girls and women. Domestic servitude and domestic violence, although widely spread across the globe, are the least recognized human rights violations.

When it comes to finding a solution, the major challenge is to identify the victims because they are largely invisible. Their outcry echoing on the four walls of the household remains



unheard by the outer world. As their social interactions are also restricted, they have no means to resort to help. Furthermore, domestic servitude occurs in the most private place, i.e. the household, and hence the law enforcement agencies are restricted to a great extent by the right to privacy. Finally, the perpetrators are mostly a woman’s near and dear ones which further prevent her from going against her family.

The only solution to this social evil is reinforcing the need for behavioral change, since the harm caused by a behavioral attitude can only be corrected by good behavior. Empowerment begins at home. Practicing and propagating the culture of “he for she”<sup>4</sup> at the household level starts with ending the classification of work based on gender as “his” and “her”, and instead, embraces the notion of “our responsibility”. This could bring an end to gender-based discrimination of work at the household level. The next step

would be to strengthen measures to promote girls’ and women’s education. As the social reformer, Sree Narayana Guru said, “*One can prosper through education and strengthen through the organization*”. Providing education to women and promoting their participation in organizational projects would empower them and eventually allow them to participate in socio-economic activities. Thirdly, practicing & propagating ‘*he for she*’ culture at workplaces and in all other spheres of life, would wipe off gender discrimination at all levels. The new wave of the cultural revolution has begun and has been initiated and revolutionized across the globe by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women). The new cultural revolution may soon redefine a familiar quote in a new fashion, “behind the success of every woman, there is a strong man.”

Needless to say, tapping the potential of women would

boost the growth of the national economy; but more than that, their role is inevitable in achieving sustainable development, disarmament, and mitigating climate change. In other words, women’s empowerment is the need of the hour and is an important factor in achieving peace and security globally.

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<sup>4</sup> He for she is the United Nations global solidarity movement for gender equality. It is an invitation for men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women to create a bold, visible and united force for gender equality. The movement recognizes that gender equality is not just a women’s issue, it is a human rights issue. Join the movement and make the world a better and safe place for women. See <https://www.heforshe.org/en/movement>



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