Circular 3/2020 28 April 2020

To: NFA Presidents and CIRs

From: Graduate Women International Board and Office

Dear Grace and Joy:

We hope that this letter finds you, your family, friends and colleagues safe and well as the world undertakes to resolve the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned in our 25 March 2020 [Special Edition](https://graduatewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/25-March-COVID-19-Update.pdf) [Update,](https://graduatewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/25-March-COVID-19-Update.pdf) the [Graduate Women International](https://graduatewomen.org/) (GWI) Board, Committees and Office stand in solidarity with our members and friends during these extraordinary times. We express our deepest concerns for the situation faced by every member, friend and colleague. We wholeheartedly thank the millions of caregivers around the world who are helping others during these times.

GWI is cautiously encouraged by Governments’ phase-in measures to reopen schools and economies around the world. Yet, we remain focused on raising the voices of graduate women against the proclivity of gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls worldwide as a by- product of COVID-19. Importantly, as countries work to stage COVID-19 recovery, GWI must help our NFAs address the lingering, sustained and consequential effects of GBV.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, GWI has expressed concerns about the probable and pervasive gendered impacts of the pandemic. There is, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, disturbing reports about the rise of GBV against women and girls. With one in three women globally experiencing violence over their lifetimes, the world was already facing a crisis. Now, COVID-19 is exacerbating the problem. We especially note that the restrictive measures adopted worldwide deemed as necessary to control the spread of COVID-19 are intensifying the risk of domestic violence and other forms of GBV- related violence against women, girls and boys alike.

Today, we are sharing with you a statement with findings about your country on the acute impacts of the COVID-19 on GBV. The goal of the statement is to provide non-GBV specialist family members, partners, friends and colleagues with information to identify COVID-19, GBV-specific risks in their communities and how to take actions to mitigate those risks. *The statement includes space for you to include local information for a more targeted approach and regarding local impact for GBV victims that you might know of.*

COVID-19 is a menace that knows no borders and is jeopardizing the safety, human rights and well-being of millions of women and girls. Dramatically changed conditions and uncertainty are distractive, but GWI has a collective duty to these millions of victims to raise awareness about the extreme GBV occurring and to offer information for resolve.

Thank you for your commitment to women and girls’ rights in these difficult times.

In solidarity,

Graduate Women International

**Graduate Women International (GWI) and the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) join UN Women, NGO Committee on the Status of Women Geneva, New York, Vienna and its regionals, and the international community in voicing concerns about the shadow pandemic of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

GBV is a fundamental human rights violation that crosscuts nationality, culture, race, sexual orientation or religion. Globally, more than 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the last 12 months[[1]](#footnote-1). Crises such as the current pandemic of COVID-19, have been linked to increased interpersonal violence, including incidence of GBV[[2]](#footnote-2), as the associated fear and uncertainty of pandemics provide an enabling environment that may increase occurrences of GBV. As organisations committed to the empowerment of all women and girls and agents of change towards the elimination of GBV, GWI and CFUW are remaining united and committed to pursuing their mission, by calling on governments worldwide to urgently combat domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 with practical and innovative measures to ensure adequate reporting of the phenomenon and assistance for GBV victims.

Emerging data from helplines and shelters across the world show more and more clearly every day that GBV and particularly domestic violence has intensified worldwide with the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, GWI and CFUW call attention to the fact that GBV, as pervasive of an issue as it is, remains widely under-reported. According to UN Women, less than 40% of women who experience violence report these crimes or seek help of any sort[[3]](#footnote-3). As domestic violence shelters are reaching capacity or unable to take on new victims due to the measures taken to contain the virus, women and girls, victims of GBV are finding themselves more isolated and vulnerable than ever. Concerningly, the current situation makes reporting even harder, as GBV victims have limited access to helpline and contacts with the police, justice and social services, who are usually at the forefront of GBV response. These disruptions also fuel impunity for the perpetrators, even more so when one in four countries have no laws protecting women and girls from GBV and domestic violence.

Rates of gender-based violence were high in Canada, even before the pandemic: on average, every six days, a woman is killed by her intimate partner[[4]](#footnote-4). Thousands of women and girls now face a heightened risk of violence at home with COVID-19 isolation measures. One in 10 women is very or extremely concerned about the possibility of violence in the home, suggests a Statistics Canada survey about COVID-19[[5]](#footnote-5). GWI and CFUW call on governments to urgently address the rising GBV pandemic that is putting the safety and well-being of millions of women and girls around the world at risk. In line with UN Women recommendations, «helplines, psychosocial support and online counselling should be boosted, using technology-based solutions such as SMS, online tools and networks to expand social support, and to reach women with no access to phones or internet»[[6]](#footnote-6). GWI and CFUW call on governments to mobilize police and justice to ensure that incidents of violence against women and girls are given high priority with no impunity for perpetrators.

Finally, GWI and CFUW raise concerns that, whilst more and more media outlets around the world are reporting the ongoing rise in GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic, such publication concerningly lack information about how GBV survivors can find help and support. Providing survivors of GBV with contact to GBV actors, including a referral pathway or GBV special and focal point must be a priority and is even more vital as GBV victims are isolated. Some useful contacts and helpline in the region include:

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency services (police, fire, ambulance). These websites list services, programs, and organizations all over Canada. You can also look for other places to get help in your community using Google search. Try search terms like “crisis line”, “domestic violence”, “women’s shelter near me”:

Shelter Safe: <https://www.sheltersafe.ca/>

United Way Centraide Canada: <http://211.ca/contact-us/>

Ending Violence Association of Canada: https://endingviolencecanada.org/

Canadian Women’s Foundation: https://canadianwomen.org/support-services/

Also, please promote the new Signal for Help campaign amongst your contacts and colleagues. The signal is a simple one-handed sign someone can use during a video call to silently show they want someone to check in with them in a safe way. It may help some people in violent homes reach out during this time of social isolation[[7]](#footnote-7).

[NFA : please include other helpline and contact information that you might know of]

However, if there are no GBV actor available in your area or if your measures put in place to fight the current the COVID-19 pandemic are making it difficult to access usual GBV referral, we encourage all to consult this [GBV Guidelines Pocket Guide resource package](https://gbvguidelines.org/en/pocketguide/), providing concrete information on how to support a survivor of GBV. The resource package uses global standards on providing basic support and information to survivors of GBV without doing further harm. Resources include a decision tree, do’s and don’ts, sample scripts of what to say to survivors and more in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Burmese and Turkish. When possible, an adaptation of this resource to your local context, with the support of a GBV specialist, is encouraged.

As a global community, we have the duty to ensure that the extraordinary circumstances and measures taken against COVID-19 do not put women and girls at risk of falling victim to GBV and deprive them of their fundamental right to live a life free of violence.

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GWI is a membership-based international non-governmental organisation based in Geneva, Switzerland, with presence in over 60 countries. Founded in 1919, GWI is the leading girls’ and women’s global organisation advocating for women’s rights, equality and empowerment through access to quality education and training up to the highest levels. GWI is in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1947 and maintains official relations with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as well as the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Information about CFUW here

This outreach project was prepared by the GWI Office with assistance by Anna Indermaur (Graduate: Advanced Masters LLM Programme in European and International Human Rights Law at Leiden University); Annalise Simons (Colgate University); and Morgan Cassidy (Boston University).

1. UN Women [https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155) [violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. PETERMAN et. Al. (2020) Pandemics and Violence against women and children, working paper 528, <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/pandemics-and-vawg-april2.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. UN Women [https://www.unwomen.org/-](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155) [/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155) [violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-infographic-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5155) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Canadian Women’s Foundation <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/covid-19-pandemic-gender-based-violence/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Canadian Women’s Foundation <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/covid-19-pandemic-gender-based-violence/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women [https://mailchi.mp/info/statement-violence-](https://mailchi.mp/info/statement-violence-against-women-and-girls-the-shadow-pandemic-from-un-women-executive-director-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka?e=2c9fe72ff0) [against-women-and-girls-the-shadow-pandemic-from-un-women-executive-director-phumzile-mlambo-](https://mailchi.mp/info/statement-violence-against-women-and-girls-the-shadow-pandemic-from-un-women-executive-director-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka?e=2c9fe72ff0) [ngcuka?e=2c9fe72ff0](https://mailchi.mp/info/statement-violence-against-women-and-girls-the-shadow-pandemic-from-un-women-executive-director-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka?e=2c9fe72ff0) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Canadian Women’s Foundation <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/covid-19-pandemic-gender-based-violence/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)