

Counselling women survivors of violence in the context of COVID-19

Brief on the note:

This note has been prepared for counsellors at One Stop Centres (OSCs), detailing the counselling process. It is likely that the number of women and girls facing violence might surge as a result of the crisis and following the lock down period. The note deals with responding to the immediate and long term needs of survivors of violence.

Introduction:

The current lockdown will have a direct impact on women and girls. As distancing measures are put in place and people are encouraged to stay at home, there is a likelihood that incidents of domestic violence against women and girls will rise in the coming days because of:

- Loss of family income as a result of loss of livelihoods
- Increased burden of care giving responsibilities and the controlling behavior of partners
- Distribution of limited household resources
- Limited access to basic needs and services
- Lack of social contact with family and friends

The likelihood that women in already abusive relationships will face violence is even higher during these times. Sadly, these women will not be able to access basic RSH services including services for violence. It is likely that they will access hotlines and telephone counselling facilities for psycho- social support and to understand how they could seek protection and legal aid.

Following the lockdown, there is all likelihood that there will be a surge in the number of women approaching the One Stop Centres with a variety of needs. It is essential that these women are provided with both short term and long-term support. Short term support would be essential for management of crisis and would involve prevention and provision of safety to the woman. Long term support on the other hand would involve rebuilding her self-esteem and self-reliance.

Counseling for Gender based violence:

The basic principles of counselling women survivors of violence should be on reassuring the woman that abuse is not her fault and being non-judgmental. The woman should be supported to get over her feelings of shame, fear and depression.

In case a woman survivor of violence has approached the center in a crisis situation, which might be the case in the current situation of COVID, because of confinement within the household or lack of social connectivity, the OSC staff/ Counselors need to assess the kind of support and intervention that the woman requires. This could include immediate medical

help or shelter. In some cases, it could also be the need for police intervention. OSC staff/counselors should then help prepare a safety plan for the woman.

In case of a woman who has not come in the event of an immediate crisis, but has approached the OSC after the lockdown has got over, in such cases, a problem solving approach should be adopted and the emphasis must be on helping the woman identify and prioritize her problem areas, which could include physical, mental, financial concerns or concerns about her safety or the safety of her child/ children. Helping the woman survivor to set a goal to address her problems would follow this. An action plan would have to be enlisted to achieve the goal. The action plan should enable a woman to regain her self-esteem by reminding her of her strengths and enabling her to take decisions. She should be encouraged to implement the action plan and told to seek help of the OSC staff/counselors whenever required.

The Counseling Process:

Listening to the woman in a non-judgmental manner: Counselors should listen to the woman with attention. They should avoid the tendency to justify or rationalize the violence in any way and provide a non-judgmental space where they are accepted unconditionally, ensuring privacy, and protecting the confidentiality of the transaction. While ensuring confidentiality, women should also be informed of the limits of confidentiality, as cases of sexual assault need to be mandatorily reported to police.

Exploring the problem areas that need to be worked on: Women in abusive relationships often faces many problems. Apart from the violence, they might have a physical or mental health problem, financial crisis, concerns about their own personal safety or the safety of their children, etc. Counselors should explore the problem areas and prioritize their concerns. This would help in understanding the immediate and long-term concerns the survivor. During epidemics like the current one, it is likely that women would approach the OSCs with a range of psycho social problems as well because of the complete breakdown of social networks.

For e.g. women facing violence may approach the OSC manifesting symptoms of depression with complaints that they are able to sleep or have lost their appetite, or have no interest in the daily routine, they might even report that they have lost their desire to live. At such times it is important to deal with a woman's immediate mental health condition that might have got precipitated by the violence and aggravated further due to the lockdown. Once the woman is relieved of her symptoms, she would be in a better frame of mind to deal with her problems

Assessing a woman's support systems and making her aware of her rights: A woman facing violence needs to be reminded of her support systems and strengths, since most women facing abuse, often forget their strengths, because their self-esteem has been attacked. They should be reminded about their natal family, friends, women's organizations, NGOs and significant others who could provide support and could prove significant while evolving problem solving strategies. At the time of an epidemic, they should be informed that their best support could be from neighbors.

Counselors should also make women survivors aware about their right to emotional, physical and sexual health and their right to a violence-free life. Right to health requires that a woman has access to physical, reproductive, and mental health services. At times these needs may be

time sensitive and should be prioritized. The woman should also be made aware of her rights under the Protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, which include her right to

protection, right to shared household, right to monetary relief, right to temporary custody of child/children and right to compensation. These should be integral elements of the counselling process. Making women aware of their rights, especially the right to a violence free life tremendously helps them get over their feelings of guilt, inadequacy and low self-esteem.

Working out an Action Plan: Listening to the woman, helps her externalize the experience of violence while counseling helps her to see violence in an objective fashion within the overall patriarchal framework. Furthermore, counseling also helps her identify her support systems and strengths and prioritize her concerns. This needs to be further strengthened by building her capacities to combat violence and seek a violence free life. For this an action plan should be worked out, the action plan should aim to work on and improve a woman's cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects.

Preventing further episodes of violence: The counselors should attempt to assess the incidents and nature of violence and abuse and help the woman understand the patterns. This would include an understanding of whether the violence was physical, verbal, sexual, mental and/or economic. They should also try and understand the triggering factors and frequency of violence. Delineating the patterns of violence and equipping the woman to break the same plays a crucial role in self-defense and prevention of further episodes of violence.

Working out a safety plan: The counselors should help a woman explore the options available to her in case, she desires to leave home or is forced to leave home under unforeseen circumstances. The importance of carrying all the important documents (ration card, evidence of marriage, education certificates etc.) in case a woman desires to leave home should be part of the safety plan. Women should also be given the names and phone numbers of hospitals, women's groups, and police stations which they can contact in case of an emergency. The safety plan should be worked out keeping the key provisions of the DV Act in mind.

Improving the woman's self-image and self-confidence: The counselors should enable women to develop self-confidence by making them aware that violence is something that they can resist and combat. This can be done by reiterating a woman's rights and entitlements, the support systems available to her and her right to access police and law enforcement agencies.

Encouraging the woman's participation in the decision-making process: All decisions regarding the course of action should be taken by the woman, with counsellors extending emotional support, providing information, and pointing out the likely implications of the actions. The woman is thus expected to think through and make the decision on her own and to take responsibility for the same.

Working towards and promoting individual growth: At times, the counselors might find it important to identify opportunities that would help a woman in her individual growth, either through her skill development or educational programs. Women should be made aware of such facilities and linkages should be established wherever possible.

Helping the woman attain economic independence: The counsellor should help women attain economic independence by assisting them to fight for their economic rights both at the

natal and matrimonial family, as well as finding employment opportunities or engaging in some form of self-employment. Women could be linked to the skill development centers initiated by the Government.

Precautions for counsellors:

Counsellors at OSCs should ensure that they follow necessary precautions for reducing the chances of being infected and spreading the COVID infection. For this ensure the following:

- Use personal protective equipment, like the three-layered mask.
- Maintain a one-meter distance between yourself and the client at the time of counselling.
- Ensure you wash your hands with soap and water after attending to each client.
- Ensure the client coming to the center also maintains hand hygiene and washes her hands before your interaction with her.
- Cover your mouth with a tissue if you have a cough and dispose it off in a closed bin.
- If you develop fever, cough or difficulty in breathing, immediately seek medical help.
- It is likely that you yourself might feel stressed as a result of attending to survivors of violence. Adopt certain relaxation techniques to relieve yourself of stress.

Acknowledgement: This woman centric model of counselling was adopted at Aarohi: Counseling center for women facing violence, initiated by TISS at Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Hospital, Thane, Maharashtra, India, with support from UNFPA.

30th March 2020