



April 24, 2020

Urgent Prevention and Support Measures for Domestic and Sexual Violence amid COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect Hong Kong and social distancing measures remain in place to limit its spread, Harmony House, RainLily and The Women's Foundation have urged the Government to urgently implement prevention and support measures to support domestic and sexual violence victims during this challenging period.

Between January and March, Harmony House had [a 25% increase](#) in the use of its hotline to report instances of domestic violence. In April, their shelters marked the highest number of occupants this year. One fourth of their occupants over the past year identify as ethnic minorities. Rainlily reported a 30% rise in sexual violence hotline use in March. Increased stress levels, being forced to spend prolonged periods with their perpetrators, and limited access to support services [all contribute](#) to the increased vulnerabilities victims face.

This phenomenon [mirrors](#) the situation in other parts of the world from Europe to the Americas. In Asia, Malaysia [reported](#) a 50% increase in calls to its domestic violence hotlines and frontline organisations in Mainland China [reported](#) three times as many domestic violence-related inquiries than before quarantines were in place.

This upward trend is likely to continue for some time. Even when social distancing measures ease, research shows that pressure from redundancies and financial instability will continue to exacerbate tensions in households and this positively correlates increases in domestic violence¹.

To this end, we have written to the Hong Kong Government to urge them to move quickly and make prevention and support measures for domestic and sexual violence a key part of its COVID-19 response.

Among them:

- **Increased funding to frontline NGOs that offer critical services to individuals experiencing domestic and sexual violence:** With constrained resources compounded by increased demand and reduced sources of funding from private sector or external fundraisers, it is vital to ensure the financial viability of NGOs that work directly with domestic and sexual violence victims. In particular, extra funding is needed to support NGOs in recruiting ethnic minority workers and to provide current frontline and hotline responders with training around cultural sensitivities when handling domestic and sexual violence among ethnic minorities. Lack of cultural sensitivity and language barriers often deter ethnic minority families from seeking help or engaging with formal support systems via hotline services.
- **Subsidised hotel / hostel rooms:** With the increase in individuals seeking temporary shelter, this has led to shelters being at near capacity. Often shelters are structured so that some facilities like

¹ Chinese University of Hong Kong. [The Status of Women in Hong Kong: Challenges and Opportunities](#). Commissioned by The Women's Foundation, 2012. Chapter 6, pgs 149-150.



bathrooms and kitchens are shared, which increases the risk for COVID-19 infection and spread. Due to the limitations on tourism, hotels / hostels currently have availability – offering to subsidise a fixed number of rooms / days at select hotels for individuals who need this service would be a helpful alternative should shelters not have availability and / or the space to effectively protect against COVID-19.

- **Public education & awareness:** We must urgently raise public awareness around the issue of domestic and sexual violence to aid both prevention and support. Working with media, transport services, and NGOs familiar with the profile and needs of victims is paramount. We urge the Hong Kong Government to lead such a public campaign in collaboration with local NGOs.
- **Publicity of hotlines and social service support:** With the increased use of hotlines, greater publicity is needed to provide information about social service hotlines and available support services in multiple languages to ensure universal accessibility. This information can empower and provide support to those at risk of domestic and sexual violence.
- **Strengthen Social Welfare Department services:** Examine ways in which units of the Social Welfare Department can better work together and with NGOs to provide effective services to domestic and sexual violence victims. Ensure that services of relevant units are always readily available to domestic and sexual violence victims, including during times of pandemic restrictions.
- **Other initiatives:** Consider implementing emergency warning systems linked to dedicated resources such as code words at supermarkets and pharmacies to report domestic and sexual violence and seek support that are localised to the Hong Kong context.

COVID-19 has caused immense strain on our economy and society, and we acknowledge the diverse numbers of interests and factors that go into formulating an effective response plan. But the safety of all of our residents – particularly those in precarious and volatile home situations – must be addressed within this plan and given priority in terms of immediate access to information and services, regardless of their financial situation.

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