

TO: Government of the Republic of North Macedonia

Subject: Request for issuing urgent measures for protection of women and children of domestic violence during state of emergency

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1. Introduction

The Government of the Republic of Northern Macedonia on 18 March 2020 declared a state of emergency on the entire territory of the country due to the situation with COVID-19 and to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. After the state of emergency was declared, as of 9 April 2020, the Government has held 15 sessions in which new decisions and measures for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in R. North Macedonia are adopted on a daily basis.¹ The measures address different aspects and aim to alleviate the health, social and economic crisis that the citizens of RNM are currently facing, as well as to mitigate the consequences that will appear in the aftermath of the crisis.

A number of health measures² have been adopted aimed at preventing the spread of the virus, such as restrictions on the movement and grouping of citizens in general, but guidelines are also given by categories regarding hygiene and disinfection measures, mandatory isolation and self-isolation, and quarantine, respectively.

Two packages of economic measures³ have been adopted to help companies, employers and workers deal with the risks from job loss, loss of profit and income, and self-sustenance during the crisis. Several measures and recommendations have been adopted in the area of social protection⁴ which mostly concern the exercise of rights provided for in the Law on Social Protection, as well as special recommendations for special categories of citizens and facilitation of their access to social rights.

¹ <https://koronavirus.gov.mk/merki>

² <http://zdravstvo.gov.mk/korona-virus/>

³ <https://koronavirus.gov.mk/merki/ekonomski-merki>

⁴ <http://mtsp.gov.mk/covid-19.nspx>

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy issued a statement to the public with a recommendation that both parents should agree on the visitation schedule of the parent who does not have the children, disregarding the parents who are unable to come to such an agreement, which is especially true for domestic violence victims.

Special categories of citizens covered by the measures, or possible exceptions to the same, are people aged 67, people under 18, people with disabilities, farmers, as well as employees in pharmacies, restaurants and cafes who deliver food, and users of maternity leave. These groups of citizens are more prone to certain risks that make them more vulnerable to the coronavirus, but also to other risks including social and economic risks.

However, a particularly vulnerable category that is completely disregarded in the measures and the recommendations are the victims of domestic violence, i.e. women and children who are under great risk of domestic violence. Except for the notification of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy⁵ addressed to victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence which lists the telephone lines for reporting violence, no urgent measure has been imposed or proposed for this particularly vulnerable category of citizens.

On a global level, the alarm about the increased risk of domestic violence is on. International organizations such as the United Nations⁶ and the Council of Europe⁷ point out the need for increased attention to domestic violence in times of crisis and urgent measures to deal with it. Some countries have adopted both urgent and specific measures⁸, designed to meet the specifics of women victims of domestic violence, as well as children victims of violence.

This document proposes measures the immediate adoption of which will enable protection of victims of domestic violence in the face of this crisis, but will also prepare the system of protection for dealing with cases of domestic violence after the crisis. The document underlines the risks specific to domestic violence and proposes urgent measures to deal with the same.

⁵ http://mtsp.gov.mk/pocetna-ns_article-zrtvite-na-semejno-nasilstvo-covid19.nsp

⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/06/horrifying-surge-in-domestic-violence-against-women-amidcoronavirus-lockdowns-un-chief-w>

⁷ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/covid-19-crisis-secretary-general-concerned-about-increased-risk-ofdomestic-violence>

⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/28/domestic-violence-cases-jump-30-during-lockdown-in-france>

2. Risk factors for increase in domestic violence

- State of emergency with government measures and recommendations for limited movement: curfew during working days from 16.00 to 05.00 hrs and a complete ban on movement during the weekend on the territory of the entire country (Friday from 16:00 to 05:00 on Monday). Additional restriction on the movement of persons older than 67 years (every working day from 10:00 to 12:00) and children up to 18 years of age (every working day from 13:00 to 15:00). Quarantine in Debar;
- Intensive recommendations for staying inside for all citizens;
- All cafes, bars, restaurants, shopping malls, sports betting shops, etc. are closed, except for pharmacies and supermarkets. There are no cultural or sporting events, or any form of socialization except with the family;
- Many citizens are under pressure of losing their jobs after the end of the state of emergency and the termination of government measures;
- Children (students) of all ages do not go to schools and kindergartens and they are all at home. They are not allowed to go out and play in children's playgrounds, or to group with other children;
- People working in key institutions such as health facilities and police stations, spend many hours outside their home, which makes organizing and sharing household chores and childcare more difficult. The stress of possible infection is greater and affects their everyday life;
- The burden usually falls on women - not only in terms of taking care of the children, but also of the older family members. This, again, puts women in greater risk of getting ill, and makes them additionally sacrifice their time on these household chores and obligations, instead of on their professional and career responsibilities;
- One of the Government's measures consists of delaying the issuance of referral acts for imprisonment for up to 3 years, which allows perpetrators who are sentenced with a court decision to remain free by September 2020.

All these factors lead to drastic increase in the level of stress among citizens, their frustration, fears and worries about the future, which are triggers of aggressive behaviour, irritability, increased need for control and expression of power, violent conflict resolution and increased use of violence. This puts in direct risk women and children who are forced to stay in their homes with the perpetrators of violence, exposed to an increased risk of violence in a life- threatening environment.

3. Additional risk factors for reporting violence

- Due to the physical presence of the perpetrators, women are not able to call the help and support lines, or report the violence;
- Many women are afraid to seek health care and medical help due to the risk of coronavirus infection;
- Many women do not want to leave the violent environment and be placed in crisis and shelter centres for fear of coronavirus infection;
- Women are afraid to flee from the violence due to the high fines for movement during curfew;
- Women are afraid to report the violence and leave the home for fear of losing their jobs (if employed) after the termination of the government measures, or if they are unemployed, there is the fear of low employment opportunities and achieving economic independence after the end of the state of emergency due to the expected economic crisis.

4. Proposed urgent measures for protection of women and children victims of domestic violence in times of crisis:

1. Violence report lines (SOS lines, Mol and CSW, CSOs) and help and support lines to operate through online chats and messages, including SMS messages. (victims are not always able to call and report or seek help and advice because the perpetrators are constantly at home and near the victim due to the state of emergency);

2. In addition to reporting violence on 192, the ambulance services (194) and the fire brigade (193) to respond to calls for reporting violence and to notify the competent police station to act as soon as possible.

3. National and local TV stations, as well as other types of media, should regularly publish the telephone numbers for reporting and assistance in domestic violence and violence against children, for all cities where such services and Centres for Social Work are in place. National and local TV stations, as well as other types of media, should publish the safety guidelines for victims on how to protect themselves in their homes and how to make an exit strategy, as well as the guidelines for healthcare professionals and pharmacists on how to recognize victims of violence (The guidelines for protection against COVID 19, as well as Government decisions and measures are broadcast daily. On the same note, the media should broadcast the telephone numbers and services for domestic violence assistance and support, emphasizing the increased risk of violence against women and children in this state of crisis);

4. The guidelines for reporting violence and seeking help and support should be published on the website <https://koronavirus.gov.mk/> where all data, measures, directions, etc. associated with COVID 19 and the crisis are published. (the website provides information regarding all areas of social life in one place, which enables citizens to find information with one click);

5. The curfew and movement restriction measures, should allow for exceptions for perpetrators of domestic violence that, in these emergency circumstances, must be removed from the home and be brought in, detained or accommodated somewhere else.

6. All people working in the field (health workers, family doctors, civil society organizations, police officers, the Red Cross, etc.) should IMMEDIATELY report any detected case of domestic violence to the Ministry of Interior and the CSW;

7. Pharmacists and supermarket staff should have information about how to report violence (numbers, emails, services) which they can share with victims if they are alone. If they are accompanied, by the perpetrator or someone else (it may be someone who is in a close relationship with the perpetrator, such as his brother/sister, parents, neighbors, friends, etc.) the option of using a code by which the victim can request help in pharmacies should be considered. The pharmacist can write down the victim's data, name, surname, address, etc. and send a police team to the field.

8. Prepare safety guidelines and escape plans that will make it easier for the victims to leave the violent environment and seek help, or protect themselves from future domestic violence if they cannot leave the perpetrator. These guidelines should not be publicly promoted, as they may reach the perpetrators, and a strategy should be devised to ensure that this information reaches the victims who need it most. (Victims who call the Ministry of Interior, CSW and NGOs for help can get verbal directions, but ways should be found for this information to reach those who won't make such calls- this is where health workers, pharmacists, supermarket employees can be used);

9. Specialized services for protection of victims of domestic violence that provide accommodation should be disinfected on regular basis in order to prevent the transmission of the virus;

10. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy in cooperation with the Ministry of Health to develop protocols for safe accommodation of women victims of violence and their children, in accordance with the recommendations for protection against COVID 19.

11. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy to publish numbers for reporting domestic violence that will be open 24/7 for every town that has a Center for Social Work;

12. The telephone numbers for reporting, assistance and support for domestic violence and violence against children to be published by all municipalities at the local level, and the municipalities to take active participation in providing support to the victims;

13. The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy to publish weekly statistics

on the number of reported cases of domestic violence, segregated by cities and gender of victims;

14.Regarding visitation schedules of parents who do not live with their children in families where domestic violence has previously been reported and where temporary protection measures have been imposed, and where there are no conditions for mutual agreement, the visitation dynamics should be changed in order to reduce the contact of the perpetrator with the victim, prevent future violence, and protection of the children and the parent they live with. These changes should be made by the competent Center for Social Works upon request of the parent with whom the children live, electronically and via telephone notification during the effectiveness of the COVID-19 measures. Additionally, new domestic violence reports should not allow for the perpetrator to see the children, again in order to reduce the risk of violence against the victim;

15.The state should allocate funds for child support payments, in cases when it cannot be collected from the other parent due to unemployment;

16.Making of posters and sticker with numbers and directions for reporting domestic violence, distributed in shops and pharmacies and visibly displayed, including at traffic lights, light poles, bus stops;

17.Measures for increasing the awareness of citizens' who are aware that someone's health and life is endangered to report the violence, especially through pointing out the limited possibilities of the victims to do the same;

18.In case of filling up the sheltering capacities for victims of domestic violence, or in towns where there are no shelter centers, temporary accommodation of victims in hotels following the same principle that applies to accommodation of persons in state quarantine.

Skopje 13.04.2020

Sincerely,



Elena Dimushevska
Executive director

National network to end violence against women
and domestic violence