Objectives:
- Exploring changes in service demand related to violence against women and children (VAWC) during the COVID-19 pandemic across 53 Member States of the WHO European Region; and
- Examining measures taken by Member States to prevent and respond to VAWC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology:
The assessment used a mixed methods design including a survey completed by representatives from the WHO European Healthy Cities Network (HCN) and national violence and injury prevention (VIP) focal points; key informant interviews with service providers and experts in the field of violence prevention; and searches of media reports, publications and grey literature published between 1 January and 17 September 2020.

KEY FINDINGS

Service demand changes related to VAWC during the COVID-19 pandemic:
- Increased demand for NGO services, particularly telephone calls to helplines during lockdown or restrictions.
- Decreased demand generally seen by police and health services across different forms of VAWC.
- Data from 10 Member States showed an increase in service demand related to intimate partner violence (IPV) during lockdown in 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.
- Results of the survey conducted as part of the assessment showed that:
  - Around one third of survey participants reported a perceived increase in VAWC in their country during lockdown.
  - 42.9% of survey participants perceived that service demand had increased for violence against women (VAW) helplines, and 31.4% for violence against children (VAC) helplines.
  - Over 20% of survey participants perceived that service demand had increased in relation to social protection for vulnerable children, child protection case management, social welfare services and psychosocial support services.
- Although there was relatively few data identified on sexual violence, available data indicated a decrease in service demand related to sexual violence for police and health services. One NGO reported an increase in calls to a helpline for revenge porn. There was a particular increase in the number of women reporting sextortion (blackmailing the victim with threats of publishing images as a way of financial extortion). Calls to the UK Revenge Porn Helpline were almost twice as high in April 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.
Measures to prevent and respond to VAW:

- The most frequently reported government measures were media and information dissemination campaigns, used by governments at the national level across 37 Member States.
- The most frequently used channels were television, radio and social media.
- The second most widely reported group of measures by governments focused on the maintenance and expansion of shelter and helpline services for VAWC survivors.
- Enhanced responses to address the anticipated rise in VAWC were reported by nearly all government services (e.g. provision of additional funding).
- Adaption of services to meet the requirements for online/telephone-based service delivery; and/or use of NGO-led measures to fill gaps in government-led responses were reported.
- Measures ensuring that services were available and accessible online were mostly found within the work of NGOs and CSOs rather than governments.
- NGO services often had to mitigate the negative impacts of the national COVID-19 responses – one example was the provision of transport in several Member States where the absence of government allowances for certain groups to break lockdown rules required other alternatives.
- Solutions to move VAWC resources such as psychosocial support and counselling online were announced by governments at the national level in 13 Member States. The movement of resources online was widespread and frequently reported across service providers.
- Governments most often provided the lead for official guidance and policies, making allowances for VAWC survivors to break lockdown restrictions and fast-tracking and prioritizing legal processes.
- NGOs were more likely than governments to provide financial support and goods packages to survivors, including money, food and hygiene-related items.
- Support specifically targeted for vulnerable groups was most often led by NGOs, highlighting how such populations are often underrepresented in government-led responses.
- NGOs and CSOs were most frequently reported to be leading advocacy campaigns.

CONCLUSIONS:

- Rather than simply implementing emergency measures alone, governments should reflect on the gaps in their existing national VAWC response frameworks.
- Although governments, NGOs and CSOs were able to rapidly adapt under pressure, the responsibility should now be for governments to develop stronger baseline support systems.
- Within health systems, Member States should increase investment in human resources working in VAWC responses; increase and earmark financial resources for VAWC-related work; and strengthen the integration of the health system response within multisectoral plans.
- Governments must ensure that the need to protect women and children does not fall on NGOs and CSOs as the world rebuilds from COVID-19.
- Further research is needed to understand how the mental health impacts of the pandemic, along with the wider disruptions to service provision and access to work and education, will affect VAWC in the long term.