

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**for Responding to Intimate Partner
Violence During Emergencies,
Crises, and Disasters**

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INTRODUCTION

Societies around the world are facing an increasing number of natural and human-made emergencies, crises, and disasters. This includes natural disasters or extreme weather, pandemics or infectious disease outbreaks, war or conflict, mass casualty incidents, and even economic recessions. These events are disruptive to normal societal functioning—impacting economies, ecosystems, and even the ability to meet basic human needs. However, an often-overlooked consequence of these events is an increase in gender-based violence—particularly intimate partner violence (IPV). According to Stark and Ager (2011), IPV is the most prevalent form of gender-based violence to occur in complex emergencies.

There are several explanations as to why IPV is so prevalent during these events. First, experts note that these events can magnify gender inequality and power dynamics in intimate relationships that increase vulnerability for IPV survivors. Additionally, the destabilizing nature of these events can lead to increases in stress, substance use, social isolation, and economic insecurity, which increase the risk of experiencing or perpetrating IPV. For example, it is now well documented that stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in IPV perpetration (Keilholtz et al., 2023). IPV increases have also been noted during periods of collective economic insecurity, as evidenced when the City of Calgary reported a 36% increase in IPV after 40,000 jobs were lost during the downturn in the oil and gas industry in 2016 (Graveland, 2016).

Emergencies, crises, and disasters also disrupt IPV resources, supports, and services, making it difficult for survivors to access the help they need. During these events, resources, supports, and services may be forced to close, reduce hours, or make changes to their regular programming. The infrastructure used to house these supports and services may even be damaged, depending on the nature of the emergency. In addition to these challenges, services may be overwhelmed by demand as IPV increases. This can put an enormous strain on service providers working with IPV survivors, in both their professional and personal lives (Haller et al., 2023). Similar disruptions can be found in other formal support mechanisms tasked with responding to IPV, such as police or court systems.

It is important to note that emergencies, crises, and disasters are happening more frequently. For instance, the World Meteorological Foundation (2021) states that weather-related disasters have increased five-fold over the last 50 years, with a disaster relating to weather, climate, or water hazard occurring *every day* on average during this time. Scientists also estimate that the yearly probability of another pandemic, such as COVID-19, can increase threefold in the coming decades (Marani et al., 2021). These natural disasters and emergencies are occurring within a world facing increasing human-made conflict, with the average level of global peacefulness declining for the ninth consecutive year in 2023 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). This



underscores the importance of preparing and planning for increases in IPV during emergencies, rather than implementing reactionary measures

RESPONDING TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE DURING EMERGENCIES, CRISES, AND DISASTERS

As emergencies, crises, and disasters become more prevalent in society, there are several ways to ensure that IPV is acknowledged and addressed.

Implement Gender-Sensitive Emergency Response Plans

Preparing for the next emergency, crisis, or disaster begins *before* the event happens. Although emergency response and disaster management plans exist at all levels of government in Canada, these plans rarely account for the gendered impacts of these events. For instance, Slick and colleagues (2022) found that despite significant and documented impacts on women during the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency management plans at the federal, provincial, territorial, and local levels remain “gender blind” (pp. 1). There is a need for governments to direct special attention to gender-based violence in these plans by utilizing a gender analysis method (such as GBA+) and including organizations that work with women and gender diverse individuals in the planning and development process (Slick et al., 2022).

Ensure that Women are Represented in the Emergency Planning, Response, and Recovery Process

Women remain underrepresented throughout the emergency planning, response, and recovery process. According to Staab and colleagues (2022), women represented a mere 24% of COVID-19 task force members worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important for women to be involved in decision-making spaces during emergencies, crises, or disasters—especially when considering that these events have disproportionate impacts on women and girls. Ensuring that these spaces are gender inclusive involves representation from diverse groups of women (racialized and Indigenous women, disabled women, low-income women, women living in rural areas), as well as gender diverse individuals.

Invest in Gender-Based Violence Resources, Supports, and Services

It is important to invest in resources, supports, and services for IPV survivors *before* the next emergency, crisis, or disaster strikes. Staab and colleagues (2020) note that governments were better able to mitigate violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic if they were able to rely on pre-existing services in the gender-based violence sector. This underscores the importance of strengthening supports and services in the interim to build organizational resilience for future emergencies.

Provide Flexible Funding during Emergencies

When emergencies, crises, or disasters do strike, agencies and organizations can encounter a myriad of unexpected expenses and financial challenges. For instance, organizations may have to support relief efforts, invest in new technology, or forego their usual fundraising measures (Wood & Majumdar, 2020). The need for flexible funding during these times has been underscored, which enables organizations to use monies as they see fit with decreased reporting requirements (Peterman et al., 2020; Yakubovich et al., 2023). Flexible funding measures are key to ensuring that organizations are able to build resilience, adapt to their current circumstances, and improve the response to gender-based violence (Wood & Majumdar, 2020).

The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women's (2020) *Five Point Action Plan* for supporting organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a helpful guideline for implementing flexible funding. This includes:

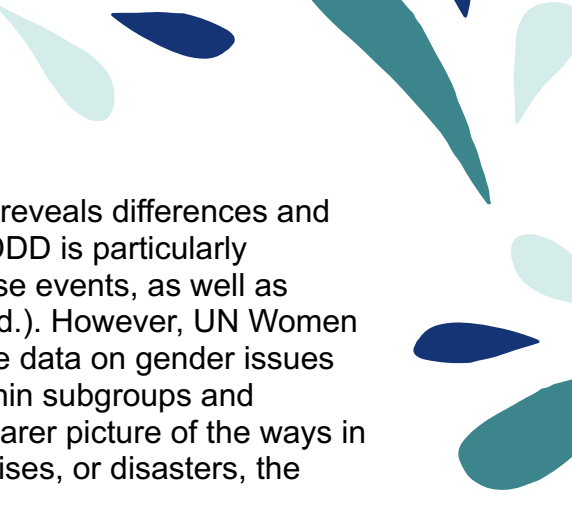
1. Exercising flexibility in enabling organizations to modify or delay project activities and ensuring that organizations prioritize the wellbeing of their staff and beneficiaries.
2. Accepting proposals for the reallocation of funds in order to meet core costs and minimize the negative impacts of emergencies, crises, or disasters on organizational stability.
3. Acknowledging and approving delays in reporting.
4. Approving extension requests to complete or modify project activities that are disrupted by emergencies, crises, or disasters.
5. Sharing resources and guidance to help organizations navigate the emergency, crisis, or disaster.

Ensure Access to Information is Available

In order for survivors to access resources, supports, and services, they must first be aware of them. This is particularly important during emergencies, crises, or disasters, as circumstances can lead to confusion surrounding the availability of services. This was evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when perpetrators of IPV utilized confusion surrounding lockdown or “stay at home” orders to tell survivors that services were closed or unavailable (Haller et al., 2023). It is important to utilize various measures to ensure that survivors have access to information about resources, supports, and services during these events such as public awareness campaigns and advertising on multiple platforms radio, television, social media, and in essential services.

Increase Gender Data Collection

More research and information are needed to fully understand the gendered impacts of emergencies, crises, and disasters—particularly in relation to IPV and other forms of gender-based violence. Experts state that there is a specific need for sex, age, and



disability disaggregated data (also known as SADDD), which reveals differences and inequalities amongst population groups (UNDRR, 2021). SADDD is particularly important for measuring the direct and indirect impacts of these events, as well as calculating gendered risks in these situations (UN Women, n.d.). However, UN Women (n.d.) states that data collection should also include qualitative data on gender issues during emergencies, as well as data that reflects diversity within subgroups and captures aspects of their lives and experiences. Without a clearer picture of the ways in which all women are impacted by IPV during emergencies, crises, or disasters, the specific needs of women and girls will remain unmet.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring that survivors have access to resources, supports, and services is *always* important. However, these needs are heightened both during and after emergencies, crises, or disasters, as demand for violence services can remain increased for up to a year after an emergency event has passed (Enarson, 1999). With the increasing possibility of extreme weather, pandemics, and conflict, it is important to understand how survivors of IPV are impacted during these events and take the necessary steps to mitigate the impacts of violence for these populations.

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