

July 17, 2020

RISK INCREASING FOR WOMEN DURING COVID-19

Central Victoria's specialist domestic and family violence response service, Centre for Non-Violence, is seeing more women at high risk who require immediate protection, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women who were previously living in environments with high levels of coercive control are also reporting they are now experiencing physical violence.

CNV general manager of client services, Yvette Jaczina, says there is also additional risk to women because perpetrators of violence who would usually be on remand are being released on bail, as result of efforts to limit the risk of COVID-19 spreading through the prison system.

"We know the nature of the violence against women is escalating," she said. "Women who may have experienced controlling behaviours in the past, are now experiencing physical violence for the first time.

"Jealous behaviours and controlling tactics have escalated to physical violence."

Centre for Non-Violence remains concerned that many women remain in a position where they cannot seek help.

"There is the likelihood some women will be trying to understand what's going on for them and it may take some time to reach out," Ms Jaczina said.

"For example, a woman may be the breadwinner but has noticed the man increasing control over the family finances – women could be attributing that to the man's stress and job loss, but COVID-19 doesn't cause family violence, job losses and stress don't cause family violence."

In an abusive relationship, one person tries to control another – and can use a number of tactics to do this. It may be physical violence, verbal abuse, restricting their freedom and movement, controlling finances, making demands or threats, or sexual abuse – and can be perpetrated by a partner/former partner, or another family member including your son/daughter.

"There is never an excuse for abuse," Ms Jaczina said. "We know COVID-19 does not cause domestic and family violence – gender inequality does.

"Everyone has the right to live freely, without violence and to make their own choices – and we hope women are using services such as ours and 1800 RESPECT to try to understand what they're experiencing."

While it is difficult for some to find a safe way to contact Centre for Non-Violence, women may be able to create a plausible reason for leaving the house, or wait for their partner to fall asleep before calling. They should always try to call from a room with an exit. Some women may also seek support and confide in trusted friends or family.

Centre for Non-Violence can help women prepare safety plans – regardless of whether the woman intends to leave the relationship. Safety plans could include a list of emergency contacts, identifying a safe place to go, having a support person they can call and use a code word with, checking their online security or preparing a bag with important documents such as medication, money or keys.

It is up to all of us to be active bystanders. We must act if we hear or see someone experiencing domestic or family violence or abuse. You can:

- Report concerning behaviour.
- Offer support or assistance if it's safe for you to do so.
- Call out sexism and attitudes that disrespect women, or condone violence.
- Help victim/survivors prepare safety plans.
- Educate yourself to understand what causes family violence and abuse.
- In an emergency, call 000.

It can be difficult to know how to help, but some strategies could include:

- Listening without judgement.
- Not making excuses for the abuse - which can be physical, but also psychological.
- Not questioning their choices - understand that for many reasons, they may not be ready to leave. For many women, leaving a relationship is the most dangerous time.
- Finding practical ways to help - for example, delivering groceries or keeping copies of private documents, and offering your home as a safe place to escape to.
- Helping the person prepare a safety plan.
- In an emergency, call 000.

Centre for Non-Violence covers the Loddon region – which includes the City of Greater Bendigo and the Central Goldfields, Mt Alexander, Macedon Ranges, Loddon and Buloke shires. Centre for Non-Violence can be contacted on 1800 884 292 | The 24-hour statewide safe steps family violence crisis response line is 1800 015 188 | Men's Referral Service 1300 766 491 | In an emergency, call 000 | For information, visit: <https://www.cnv.org.au/we-are-here-to-help>