



## Article

# Violence against Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic: From Children to the Elderly

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**Abstract:** Women of all ages can be exposed to violence both within and outside of the home, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to analyze violence against women (VAW) before and during the first year of the pandemic in Portugal. Crimes perpetrated against female victims from 17 years old and younger to 65 years old and older were analyzed by comparing requests for help in 2019 and 2020. A total of 12,045 requests for help for VAW were received by the Portuguese Association for Victim Support and analyzed in the current study. The findings reveal a 16% increase in requests for help in 2020 and a 95% increase when the lockdown was implemented. That said, the most reported, intimate partner violence (IPV), showed a decrease of 5% in 2020. Furthermore, compared to 2019, requests for help concerning criminal offenses involving psychological violence in non-IPV contexts increased 79% in 2020, especially for victims 17 years old or younger (116%), and attempted femicide/femicide requests for help increased 53%. We are still in the early stages of understanding how the pandemic will affect this situation. Future directions concerning support of female victims during the pandemic are outlined.

**Keywords:** violence against women; COVID-19 pandemic; children abuse; elderly abuse



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## 1. Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is defined by the Council of Europe as “a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Council of Europe 2011, p. 3). It is considered a major public health problem and a violation of human rights (UN Women 2021; United Nations 1993; WHO 2013, 2021a, 2021b), and recognized as a “global pandemic” (UN Secretary-General 2018). Affecting about one-third of all women globally (WHO 2013, 2021a, 2021b), VAW includes several types of violence against female children, adolescents, adults, and elderly victims (Mazza et al. 2020). The most known forms of violence in intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-IPV situations are psychological (e.g., threats, manipulation), physical (e.g., slapping, kicking) and sexual (e.g., harassment, nonconsensual sex) (Han Almiş et al. 2020; Breiding et al. 2008; Brozowski and Hall 2010; WHO 2020). An increase in these types of violence against women has been

reported in several studies (e.g., [Fraser 2020](#); [Ghoshal 2020](#); [Hatchimonji et al. 2020](#)). It is estimated that over a quarter of female children, adolescents, and adults between 15 and 49 years old have been exposed to physical and/or sexual violence ([WHO 2021a](#)). Moreover, about 30% of women worldwide have been victims of physical and/or sexual intimate violence, or non-partner sexual violence ([WHO 2021b](#)). Additionally, about 38% of femicide happens in the context of IPV ([WHO 2013, 2021b](#)). In Portugal, according to the Annual Report of Internal Security, IPV has been the most reported crime among female victims ([Sistema de Segurança Interna 2020, 2021](#)).

The lockdown restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the exposure of women to violent situations, while limiting their access to services ([UN Women 2021](#); [WHO 2021b](#)). Data from police reports, emergency services, shelters, and requests for help from victim support services indicate a general increase in VAW (e.g., [Boserup et al. 2020](#); [Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020](#); [Jarnecke and Flanagan 2020](#)), which may be explained by a growth in the number of victims actively reporting their victimization ([Piquero et al. 2021](#)). This increase has not only been reported in low- and middle-income countries, but also in other regions that have been impacted by the pandemic and by social distancing constraints ([Sánchez et al. 2020](#)). With the pandemic, however, the economic impact contributed to male unemployment and to an increase in stressors at home (including the care and homeschooling of children). Social distancing measures required by the epidemiological response may have served to undermine the decades of progress made in keeping women and children safe at home ([UN Women 2020](#)). COVID-19 stay-at-home orders and social distancing policies will, in all likelihood, lead to a woman's home becoming one of the most dangerous places ([Mazza et al. 2020](#)). As concluded by [Emezue \(2020\)](#), COVID-19 has increased violence against female adults and children with up to threefold increases in domestic violence cases compared to the same time in the previous year. Furthermore, an increase in violence against intimate partners ([Agüero 2021](#)) and against elderly people ([Chang and Levy 2021](#)) is another probable outcome of the requirement to quarantine day after day with a violent and abusive partner ([Sharma and Borah 2020](#)), a situation that results in limited access to those that might provide care and assistance. Offenders' aggressive and controlling behaviors, consumption of alcohol, presence of firearms, limited privacy, and fear of contamination by the virus are the main risk factors identified in the control and isolation of victims, and in the decrease in requests for social support and protection during the pandemic ([Kofman and Garfin 2020](#); [Ruiz-Pérez and Pastor-Moreno 2021](#); [Telles et al. 2021](#)). Even though some studies find that requests for help have decreased because of such restriction policies that may, indeed, prevent victims from seeking help ([Sharma and Borah 2020](#)), especially children and adolescents ([Campbell 2020](#)), it is fair to assume that the severity of violence is still likely to increase ([Sharma and Borah 2020](#)).

International studies regarding the prevalence of VAW during the pandemic have found similar results. [Peraud et al. \(2021\)](#) revealed that more than 7% of women in France were victims of physical or sexual violence after lockdown restrictions were lifted. [Boxall et al. \(2020\)](#), in Australia, indicated that about 5% of women suffered psychological or sexual violence at the hands of their intimate partner. In Italy, [Romito et al. \(2022\)](#) conducted research about IPV during the lockdown and reported a 28% increase in violence against cohabitating women, and a 56% decrease against non-cohabitating women. Additionally, in Germany, [Ebert and Steinert's \(2021\)](#) study indicated incidents of emotional abuse (8%), non-consensual intercourse (4%), and physical conflict (3%) in the IPV context for women aged 18 to 65 years old. Moreover, in this study, 7% of families with children reported child physical abuse. Providing similar findings, [Gama et al. \(2020\)](#) conducted a study in Portugal, indicating that 14% of the women were victims of domestic violence, mainly suffering psychological (13%), sexual (1%), and physical violence (1%). Another study from Portugal by [Ribeiro et al. \(2022\)](#) analyzed a dataset of domestic violence requests for help from a victims support association, in which 83% of the data were from female victims. This study revealed an increase in requests for help by 13% in 2020 and by 101% during the lockdown period ([Ribeiro et al. 2022](#)). Finally, a narrative review conducted by

Wake and Kandula (2022) indicated how violence against female children and adults is prevalent, and even increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in several countries (e.g., Ethiopia, California, USA, Bangladesh, Iran). As a result, the pandemic has exacerbated gender inequalities for women while simultaneously reducing their access to treatment and care.

It is clearly crucial to understand how the pandemic has impacted female victims of intimate partner violence, child/adolescent abuse, and abuse of the elderly. The current study analyzes victims' requests for help as received by a Portuguese victim support association in 2019 and 2020. Therefore, this study allows the analysis of the prevalence of VAW and the identification of the most reported crimes concerning the ages of the victims during a pandemic and a non-pandemic year.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Characterization of the Data

Requests for help were collected by the Portuguese Association for Victim Support (APAV). APAV was founded in 1990 and is a non-profit organization with offices nationwide. Recognized by law, APAV aim intends to inform, protect and support citizens who have been victims of a crime, as well as their families and friends, providing them with free, and confidential, services. APAV has a networking system comprising several entities, especially formal justice systems (such as police and courts), helping victims to report their victimization (i.e., to request help). For this study, only requests for help from female victims were considered, hence only victims who identified themselves as women (APAV 2022). The types of crime considered in the current study include all categories present in the definition of VAW (i.e., IPV, sexual violence, etc.), and other crimes perpetrated against women (e.g., stalking).

In 2019 and 2020, APAV received 14,468 requests for help (6801 in 2019 and 7667 in 2020). From these data, 12,045 requests for help (83%) were regarding as female victims (2019:  $n = 5570$ , 82%; 2020:  $n = 6475$ , 85%). These requests were sought directly by women who identified themselves as the victims of crimes ( $n = 6992$ , 58%), and the remainder were sought by other individuals or recognized institutions that reported a crime committed against women ( $n = 5048$ , 42%), such as the police or judicial establishments ( $n = 1496$ , 30%), other establishments providing support and intervention (e.g., hospitals) ( $n = 879$ , 17%), acquaintances, neighbors or friends of the victims ( $n = 563$ , 11%), relatives ( $n = 403$ , 8%), and others not described ( $n = 665$ , 13%). In total, 74% of requests for help from victims aged 17 years old or younger and 63% from victims aged 65 years old or older ( $n = 956$ ) were sought by other individuals/institutions ( $n = 887$ ), while 67% of women aged 18 to 65 years old ( $n = 5.084$ ) reported their victimization to APAV.

In this study, three age groups of victims are considered: female children and adolescences (17 years old or younger;  $n = 1197$ , 10%), adult women (18 to 64 years old;  $n = 7589$ , 63%), and elderly women (65 years old or older;  $n = 1517$ , 13%). The age of female victims ranged from one month old to 101 years old ( $M = 42.1$ ,  $SD = 20.2$ ). Furthermore, 40% of victims had an intimate relationship with the alleged offender ( $n = 4826$ ). As for the other types of relationships, 7% of victims were the mother of the alleged offender ( $n = 890$ ), another 7% were daughters ( $n = 791$ ), and the remaining had another type of relationship (e.g., no previous relationship, co-worker).

### 2.2. Materials and Data Analysis

The dataset analyzed in the current study was exported from the Service Management Platform (SMP). SMP is a digital platform financed by the Internal Security Fund—Police (ISF Police) with a multiple-choice selection system. In this system, information such as sociodemographic (e.g., gender and age of victims and alleged offenders) and victimization characteristics (e.g., type of violence, relationship between victim and the person accused of victimization) may be inserted by APAV professionals. When it comes to victims of femicide, the information present in the requests for help was provided by the victim's

friends and relatives to the APAV profession through the Support Network for Families and Friends of Homicide and Terrorism Victims (APAV 2021).

To fulfill the aim of this study, the number of requests for help during 2019 and 2020, the ages of victims, and crimes reported (e.g., sexual crimes) were included in the analysis. Considering the categorical nature of the dataset, descriptive statistics and Chi-Square Test of Independence were conducted on IBM-SPSS Statistics v.26, and a percentage change formula was calculated.

### 2.3. Procedure

The present study only analyzed requests for help from the APAV database. Our research team did not contact victims/requesters directly, as only the APAV professionals that received the requests could reach them. These requests were gathered from all of Portugal's districts and archipelagos either face-to-face (the requesters would go to one of the existing victim's association offices to request help) or through remote support (e.g., phone calls, online chat). Following an internal protocol, the information collected was first inserted into the SMP and later exported to the dataset analyzed in the current study, guaranteeing the fulfillment of the APAV's and the research's ethical guidelines. Only data from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2020 were included due to the restriction imposed by the funded investigation project *Gender Research 4 COVID-19* by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia. Missing data were handled by listwise deletion to exclude requests for help with more than 80% missing information, and thus, any requests for help without the pertinent information needed to develop the study were not included.

### 3. Results

A percentage change was calculated to evaluate the positive or negative growth of the number of these requests using the following equation:

$$\frac{(V_2 - V_1)}{|V_1|} \times 100$$

where  $V_2$  = the new value (i.e., 2020) and  $V_1$  is the old value (i.e., 2019) (Cuemath 2022).

In general, a 16% increase in the number of requests for help was registered in 2020 compared to 2019, with the greatest growth for victims 17 years old or younger (an increase of 34%). Furthermore, the number of requests for help during the lockdown period decreed in Portugal (22 March and 3 May 2020) increased by 95% when compared to the same period in 2019. During this period, the number of requests for help from women aged 18 to 64 years old increased by 119%, while the number of requests for help from women aged 65 years or older increased by 52%. Requests for help from victims aged 17 years old or younger, however, showed a 4% decrease (Table 1).

To understand the most prevalent types of crime committed against women in 2019 and 2020, two tables were created: Table 2 indicates the number of requests for help concerning IPV crimes, while Table 3 shows the requests related to non-IPV crimes.

IPV was the most reported criminal offense ( $n = 6278$ ) among the crimes committed against female victims, specifically in the form of psychological and physical violence ( $n = 3452$ ). Even so, the number of requests for help for IPV decreased by 5% in 2020. A general decrease in the forms of violence in this crime is noted, except for physical violence, which increased by 139% (Table 2). Regarding non-IPV crimes, the number of requests for help increased for criminal offenses involving psychological violence by 79%, for stalking by 68%, and for attempted femicide/femicide by 53% (Table 3). In both years, the most reported crimes in requests for help were criminal offences involving psychological violence (e.g., threats, insults, defamation, coercion), followed by sexual crimes (e.g., sexual harassment, rape, sexual coercion), offenses against physical integrity (e.g., slapping, kicking), stalking, attempted femicide/femicide and other crimes (e.g., discrimination, extortion, cybercrime).

**Table 1.** Number of requests for help from female victims by age group in 2019 and 2020 and during the period of lockdown.

Requests Received During the Year			
Age	2019	2020	Growth (%)
≤17 years old	511 (9.2%)	686 (10.6%)	+34.3%
18–64 years old	3763 (67.6%)	3826 (56.1%)	+1.7%
≥65 years old	757 (13.6%)	760 (11.7%)	+0.4%
N/A	539 (9.7%)	1203 (18.6%)	-
Total	5570 (100%)	6475 (100%)	+16.3%
Requests Received During The Lockdown Period *			
Age	2019	2020	Growth (%)
≤17 years old	45 (16.9%)	43 (8.3%)	−4.4%
18–64 years old	164 (61.4%)	359 (69.0%)	+118.9%
≥65 years old	44 (16.5%)	67 (12.6%)	+52.3%
N/A	14 (5.2%)	51 (9.8%)	-
Total	267 (100%)	520 (100%)	+94.8%

Note: \* The lockdown period in Portugal was 22 March to 3 May 2020. The same period was considered in 2019 for comparison; N/A = No answer.

**Table 2.** IPV crimes reported in requests for help during 2019 and 2020.

Types of Crime	2019	2020	Growth
Intimate Partner Violence	3220	3058	−5.0%
Psychological and Physical Violence	1894	1558	−17.7%
Psychological Violence	854	953	−12.0%
Physical Violence	110	263	+139.0%
Sexual Violence	41	31	−24.4%
Attempted Femicide/Femicide	15	7	−53.3%
Other/Multiple Types of Violence	296	245	−17.2%

Note: The increase(+)/decrease(−) in requests for help from 2020 to 2019 is represented by the Growth column; only cases without missing data in these variables were included in this analysis. More than one crime may be reported; hence, percentages are not included in the tables.

**Table 3.** Non-IPV crimes reported in requests for help during 2019 and 2020.

Types of Crime	2019	2020	Growth
Criminal offenses involving psychological violence	645	1152	+78.6%
Sexual Crimes	268	349	+30.2%
Offenses Against Physical Integrity	220	279	+26.8%
Stalking	53	89	+67.9%
Attempted Femicide/Femicide	19	29	+52.6%
Other Crimes	166	174	+4.8%

Note: The increase(+)/decrease(−) in requests for help from 2020 to 2019 is represented by the Growth column; only cases without missing data in these variables were included in this analysis. More than one crime may be reported; hence, percentages are not included in the tables.

Lastly, the age of the victims was analyzed with the types of crime committed. Among victims 17 years old or younger, there was an increase in the number of requests for help in criminal offenses involving psychological violence by 116%, and in IPV by 52% (the youngest reported victim of IPV was 15 years-old). For adult women (18 to 64 years old), the number of requests for help concerning criminal offenses involving psychological violence also increased by 73%, while the number of requests for help for IPV decreased by 11%. Sexual crimes, however, had an increase in the number of requests for help by 78%. Finally, for women aged 65 years old or older, criminal offenses involving psychological violence had an increase in the number of requests for help by 28%, and, similar to the figures for adult women, an increase in IPV by 21% was seen in 2020 (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Types of crime reported in requests for help during 2019 and 2020 by age groups.

Types of Crime	≤17 Years Old			18–64 Years Old			≥65 Years Old		
	2019	2020	Growth	2019	2020	Growth	2019	2020	Growth
Intimate Partner Violence	48	23	−52.1%	2482	2217	−10.7%	274	217	−20.8%
Criminal offenses involving psychological violence	136	294	+116.2%	267	461	+72.7%	214	274	+28.0%
Sexual Crimes	187	188	+0.5%	76	135	+77.6%	1	8	<sup>a</sup>
Offenses Against Physical Integrity	18	17	−5.6%	130	169	+30%	59	37	−37.3%
Other Crimes	144	100	+44%	109	122	+11.9%	48	16	−66.7%

Note: The increase (+)/decrease (−) in requests for help from 2020 to 2019 is represented by the Growth column; only cases without missing data in these variables were included in this analysis. More than one crime may be reported; hence, percentages are not included in the tables; <sup>a</sup> due to the low number of request for help in this group, the growth was not calculated.

#### 4. Discussion

Violence against women, from children to the elderly, was already a global and public health issue before the COVID-19 pandemic, and was aggravated during and after lockdown measures. From this perspective, the present study analyzed the prevalence of VAW using data from requests for help received by a Portuguese association for victim's support, during a non-pandemic (2019) and a pandemic year (2020). The methodology used in the current study, based on a national database gathered from the victim's support offices from all of Portugal's districts and archipelagos, gives a nationwide view of VAW. However, it is crucial to note that, in this scientific field, it is possible to identify the diverse methodologies used to collect data, thus hindering the analysis of this form of violence.

Based on the main goal of the research, the growth rate of VAW in all ages was analyzed by comparing the number of requests for help between 2019 and 2020. Foremost, an increase in requests for help for VAW was noted in 2020, corroborating previous research that also indicated an increase in VAW (e.g., [Agüero 2021](#); [Chang and Levy 2021](#); [Emezue 2020](#)). Furthermore, a greater increase in requests for help was noted during the lockdown period. This finding underpins other studies reporting an increase in VAW during this restriction policy, especially at home (e.g., [Chang and Levy 2021](#); [Romito et al. 2022](#); [Ribeiro et al. 2022](#)). Taking into consideration that more than half of requests for help come from the victims themselves, this increase may confirm the suggestion by [Piquero et al. \(2021\)](#) that women actively report their victimization and request help from victim support associations. However, it is undeniably possible that the number of women that have suffered violence during the pandemic might be higher than reported in this study. Restriction policies may present difficulties for victims to report their victimization—especially in situations of violence within their household ([Sharma and Borah 2020](#)). Therefore, it is possible that, for instance, the decrease in requests for help for victims aged 17 or younger during lockdown may be due to this difficulty in reporting situations of violence, especially considering that help was often requested by other individuals/institutions (e.g., schools) rather than the victims (e.g., [Campbell 2020](#)). Additionally, the number of requests for help for victims aged 65 years old or older increased in 2020, especially during the lockdown, confirming the finding of the [WHO \(2021b\)](#) and suggesting an increase in violence against elderly women as well.

Concerning the types of crime reported, regardless of the age group, most requests for help were for IPV, specifically psychological and/or physical violence. This is consistent with most research on VAW, especially considering the increase in these types of violence during the first pandemic year (e.g., [Fraser 2020](#); [Ghoshal 2020](#); [Hatchimonji et al. 2020](#); [Sistema de Segurança Interna 2020, 2021](#); [WHO 2020](#)). Even so, it is noteworthy to underline that a relevant number of requests for help also reported non-IPV crimes, specifically criminal offenses involving psychological and sexual crimes. This is not an uncommon finding when considering previous studies (e.g., [WHO 2021a](#)), even though it is less studied than IPV. Women in Portugal, as in other countries, are transversely exposed to violence (e.g., IPV or non-IPV), age, and adverse circumstances such as pandemics. The similarity of some of these findings to those of international studies demonstrates the global difficulty

of providing methods for preventing violence against women, especially psychological violence, which is the most reported in all age groups and both IPV and non-IPV situations.

Additionally, from all the data analyzed, 31% of requests for help for attempted femicide/femicide happened in the IPV context, a similar frequency to that observed worldwide (c.f. WHO 2021a, 2021b). However, there was a decrease in the number of requests for help for attempted femicide/femicide in this context in 2020. Aligned with what has been previously described, restriction policies and isolation by offenders may have made it more difficult for the victim's friends and family to recognize the possibility of victimization or an aggravation of the violence that could have led to femicide, thus reducing the opportunity for seeking help. Attempted femicides/femicides in non-IPV requests for help, however, indicated an increase in 2020. On the other hand, this may lead to the hypothesis that requests for help for attempted femicides/femicides in IPV did not result from the increased difficulty of reporting this crime but instead resulted in a reduction of this crime. Intimate partners had more control over their victims under the same restriction policies implemented during the first year of the pandemic. Hence, this might reduce the use of more aggravated forms of violence to exert the desired power. This highlights the importance of developing strategies that provide help to every female victim, especially those in a vulnerable situation concerning the pandemic context and restriction policies.

Some limitations of this research should, however, be underlined. The methodology used may represent a hindrance in the current study, since researchers could not control the data collection or the variables. Due to the inherent limitations of the data that were gathered, the number of risk factors evaluated was limited. Therefore, a further evaluation of the risk factors affecting victims during the pandemic is necessary to improve the research. Lastly, it was not possible to ascertain if the victims requested help multiple times, which did not allow us to evaluate re-victimization.

Nonetheless, the present research includes nationwide data, providing a noteworthy contribution to public policies, the work of victim support associations, and the prevention of VAW in adverse social and environmental situations (e.g., pandemic). This is especially important in the Portuguese context, considering the scarce scientific studies in this field undertaken by victim support associations.

#### *Future Directions and Conclusions*

Women of all ages can be subjected to violence both within and outside of the home. It is important to develop strategies that will make requests for help easier, and that will allow victims' associations to provide the best response to these requests for help, especially during pandemic scenarios. The intensification that VAW showed during the COVID-19 pandemic means that its prevention and methods of intervention became a social and political priority (cf. UN Population Fund 2020). When taking into consideration the results of this research, combined with the international literature available, the need to analyze the impact of, and find solutions to, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has become clear. To achieve this goal, scientific research needs to be improved, and new approaches and intervention protocols need to be developed with the aim of facilitating the identification and assessment of VAW cases, permitting a form of intervention that specifically meets the needs of each individual situation (Sánchez et al. 2020). Careful consideration should be given to the training and education of the professionals responsible for the implementation of this goal (e.g., police officers, victim support association professionals, prosecutors, and healthcare professionals). The development and use of tools and methods modified to meet the changing needs of the victims of VAW are necessary if the quality of support provided by existing organizations is to be improved. The use of Information Technology (IT) and other methods of communication used to provide remote assistance must be analyzed and improved in order for them to become functional work tools for the professionals providing support.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the nature of the data.

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