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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND COVID-19: LOCKDOWN IN AN ABUSIVE HOME

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Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increase in domestic violence cases has been reported worldwide. Concerns from around the world suggest that implementation of lockdown has led to a rise in domestic violence.

Social isolation has led victims of domestic violence to be trapped at home with their abusers. Victims can no longer seek refuge at home and are cut off from reaching out for help. Victims may also be afraid of the abusers finding out that they are seeking help, which will make it even more difficult for government agencies and non-profit organisations (NGOs) to provide help in such cases.

Malaysia has seen a spike in the number of domestic violence cases following the Movement Control Order (MCO), which has been imposed since March 18, 2020. This is based on data gathered from the Women and Family Development Ministry and NGOs attending to domestic violence cases. (New Straits Times, April 4, 2020, "MCO-linked domestic violence rises")

Malaysia passed the Domestic Violence Act (Act 521) in 1994 (DVA 1994). With its recent amendments gazetted on September 21, 2017 which came into enforcement on January 1, 2018, added protection in the form of an emergency protection order (EPO) and some desirable changes were incorporated into the DVA 1994.

Despite the Act, challenges are still faced by domestic violence victims during the MCO. Laws made should always be flexible enough to cover all situations. It was indeed a great challenge to stop domestic violence even before the pandemic outbreak. Now, we are strained even more and grappling with ways on how to aid victims of domestic violence.

There are some useful examples of international approaches in dealing with domestic violence during the lockdown period of COVID-19. In the Canary Islands, the regional government and pharmacies launched a scheme whereby a woman can request a "Mask-19" (Spanish: Mascarilla-19, a code word meaning she urgently needs help with a domestic violence situation) to a pharmacist, who can then call the police for them. (The Olive Press, Gender Violence Initiative "Mascarilla-19" Helps Three Women Across Andulcia Since Launch, April 8, 2020). The French government recently announced it would put victims of domestic violence in hotel rooms and finance pop-up counselling centres in grocery stores, amid a surge of reported domestic violence cases since the lockdown began on March 17 (Time, French Government to House Domestic Abuse Victims in Hotels as Cases Rise During Coronavirus Lockdown, Melissa Godin, March 31, 2020).

Clearly, it is important that all government agencies and other relevant organisations work collaboratively and make more support services available to the victims of domestic violence. It is undisputed that COVID-19 has affected everyone globally, and government should incorporate gender considerations into their responses and initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call to humanity. We need to reflect deeply and view the future with ethical will. As much as we are worried for the health and well-being of the world, the risk of violence towards women and children during COVID-19 crisis cannot be disregarded.



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