1. Safety does not look the same for all women

When discussing and making safety plans to help increase women’s safety, it is important to recognize that what may increase the safety of some women could pose risks for others. Consider that:

- While limited contact with others is encouraged to contain the spread of COVID-19, for older women, and women living with disabilities, it may be necessary for them to receive support from others in order to remain in their homes and maintain their independence.
- While hiding weapons (e.g. guns, knives) may promote safety for some women, it could escalate other forms of violence (e.g. strangulation, physical assault) and lead to increased risk for other women.
- While reducing visits to stores (e.g. grocery) increases safety against COVID-19, it could escalate other forms of violence (e.g. strangulation, physical assault) and lead to increased risk for other women.

Due to the changing circumstances during this time, promoting the safety of women experiencing IPV will require the use of existing strategies to prevent and respond to IPV, in addition to context-specific measures and knowledge.

Herein we share three considerations when supporting women experiencing IPV during the COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Normal safety measures for women may be significantly disrupted by social/physical distancing and isolation. For instance, women who live alone or in group shelter environments report that when women are open and continue to offer refuge and supports to women and children experiencing violence.

2. Since in-person meetings are limited, communication and supports may need to be improved online. It is essential to recognize that technology may require new safety measures and that individuals who inflict harm can use these technologies to target and harm women. Ongoing risk assessment and safety planning are necessary for them to receive support from others in order to remain in their homes and maintain their independence.

To help women increase their safety, it is important to listen to their suggestions and explore different options or choices, while recognizing that each woman’s needs may be influenced by their social location (age, race, geographical location, class, ability). For more on safety planning with different groups, read this Brief on Creative Safety Plans with Vulnerable Populations to Reduce the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence and Domestic Homicide.

2. Ensuring safety during a pandemic requires additional strategies

To help women increase their safety, it is important to listen to their suggestions and explore different options or choices, while recognizing that each woman’s needs may be influenced by their social location (age, race, geographical location, class, ability). For more on safety planning with different groups, read this Brief on Creative Safety Plans with Vulnerable Populations to Reduce the Risk of Intimate Partner Violence and Domestic Homicide.

Additional strategies continue to emerge as service providers work with women to ensure safety. Follow the work of women’s shelters, anti-violence groups, and survivors to stay up-to-date on strategies and solutions.

3. Structural barriers to safety may be amplified due to the pandemic

Compounding barriers to safety specific to the pandemic may also emerge. For instance, messages that individuals need to “harden” to reduce the burden of emergency services (e.g. hospital, police) may discourage women from seeking assistance. Women’s experiences of violence may also be excused as “stress” related to the pandemic.

Discrimination and exclusion result in negative short-term and long-term impacts including victimization, health difficulties, financial problems, and traumatic stress. Additional strategies to support women during the COVID-19 pandemic are needed to support women experiencing violence and to reduce the risk of intimate femicide.

"One-size-fits-all" approaches did not work pre-pandemic and they will not work throughout this pandemic. During this time of crisis and increased risks, we need to strengthen and build on our efforts to work together with women and communities to increase their safety.