

Survivor Mental Health and Wellbeing

Adapting the Violence Against Women Systems Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Overview of Results from the Marco VAW Study

Survivor Challenges and Outcomes

Greatest organizational challenge during the pandemic?



Staff were more likely to agree that their VAW clients were experiencing negative rather than positive outcomes during the pandemic:

Compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, since March 2020, VAW clients:	Average score (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
Are experiencing more severe forms of violence	4.0
Have a lower sense of power due to the pandemic	3.9
Have increased difficulty in navigating available services and resources	3.9
Are experiencing a stalling or reversal of their progress	3.7
Have greater access to emotional or informational support	2.9
Have a new referral opportunities	2.7
Have greater access to financial or resource supports	2.6
Have increased opportunities for community building and support	2.4

Pandemic Barriers to Therapeutic Progress

With the switch to virtual rather than in-person VAW services, some survivors described feeling like they were getting less out of programming, making less meaningful connections with others, and more isolated.

"I was using the services before, but because they were being more active in person and social, it helped a lot more, you know? But now it's just like you talk to someone on the phone [...] and then I have to deal with the rest of the situation by myself and learn how to cope with that." [Survivor participant, C76]

The process of seeking out VAW services often involved difficult disclosures that survivors had to manage the emotional consequences of on their own, in some cases while waiting long periods of time before actually gaining access to any services.

"So I had hard time finding help. I was only reaching out to female friends I have and I have to talk about it. And it was very embarrassing also because they could see the signs of being beaten. [...] I managed to get in touch. But they told me that everything was closed." [Survivor participant, C81]

Pandemic Impact on Survivor Experiences of Violence

Many VAW survivors were also forced to shelter in place with violent partners or family members during the pandemic. Survivor participants noted increases of family violence, including psychological, physical, financial, and sexual violence.

"Actually, he didn't have any job even before pandemic, but it's more difficult to get a job after a pandemic, so he got stressed a lot. So, before he met me, he got a lot of pressure from his own family already. He couldn't do whatever he wanted to do. And after a pandemic, he didn't have anybody else to explode his emotions except me." [Survivor participant, C79]



In addition to socioeconomic and pandemic restrictions, COVID-19 as an infectious disease played a role in the coercive and controlling dynamics of abusive relationships

"I think COVID created a new way of abuse. Like the partners would say, 'if you go out, then you will get sick. You will bring this to the house. You have to stay indoors.'" [Non-residential frontline participant, P23]



Benefits of Virtual Services

Despite the challenges, both staff and survivors highlighted newfound benefits of virtual VAW services. These included being able to access a wider range of supports without having to worry about the commute or location of services, and feeling greater anonymity for those less comfortable with sharing their personal experiences.

"Actually, I thought [the] telephone service was the most comfortable way to me, because if I want to show my face, it was really uncomfortable and it was just a shame to me. And then if I get a service through a telephone, I can cover my face so I could open 100% of my story." [Survivor participant, C80]

Mid-pandemic, many staff described a desire to run hybrid services (i.e., in-person and virtual options) as part of their post-pandemic VAW work. Staff and survivors expressed that this hybrid approach has the potential to meet the widest scope of survivors' diverse needs.

"It has been interesting to see the interest from our clients, even though it has been quite difficult for some of them to adapt to the new technology [...] I think a lot of them have adapted well to that, you know, whereas many months ago we wouldn't have thought that they would have been able to join a support group on Zoom or on Google Meets." [Non-residential leader participant, P7]

