

# Conducting remote qualitative interviews on intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown

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# Introduction

- The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown limited ability to do conventional face to face interviewing - to ensure safety of researchers and participants
- Presented an opportunity to use remote methods of conducting research
- Lessons are drawn from an exploratory qualitative study on women and men's experiences of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, and its impact and links to gender-based violence, mental health and livelihoods



## Summary of alert levels

ALERT LEVEL 5	ALERT LEVEL 4	ALERT LEVEL 3	ALERT LEVEL 2	ALERT LEVEL 1
 <b>OBJECTIVE</b>				
<p>Drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus and save lives.</p>	<p>Extreme precautions to limit community transmission and outbreaks, while allowing some activity to resume.</p>	<p>Restrictions on many activities, including at workplaces and socially, to address a high risk of transmission.</p>	<p>Physical distancing and restrictions on leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence of the virus.</p>	<p>Most normal activity can resume, with precautions and health guidelines followed at all times.</p> <p>Population prepared for an increase in alert levels if necessary.</p>

# Methods

## ▶ Recruitment

- 18 men and 19 women, 18 years and older recruited using social media platforms
- Participants indicated interest using WhatsApp message, text or an email
- 1<sup>st</sup> call to screen for eligibility, go through informed consent process, and scheduling suitable time for IDI

## ▶ Data collection

- IDIs of 35 - 60 minutes, conducted by research team with extensive experience in conducting IDIs on sensitive topics like sexual gender-based violence
- Reflections are derived from debriefing sessions held during data collection and analysis stage
- Privacy and confidentiality were emphasized during screening and when we started the interview.

## RESEARCH

Open Access



### Impact of COVID-19 lockdown and link to women and children's experiences of violence in the home in South Africa

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#### Abstract

**Background:** Evidence on the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown remains at an early stage. There is limited research about the impact of hard lockdown restrictions on families, specifically how these restrictions impact on women and children's experiences of domestic violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) and child abuse in South Africa. We conducted research among men and women in Gauteng province, South Africa to understand their experiences of the COVID-19 national lockdown and its impact and link to women and children's experiences of domestic violence.

**Methods:** We conducted a qualitative study, using social media to recruit men and women who were 18 years and older, living with a spouse and/or children in Gauteng province, South Africa during the lockdown. To collect the data, we conducted telephone interviews, and analyzed data using the thematic approach.

**Results:** The lockdown had unprecedented negative economic impacts on families, and exacerbated some of the risk factors for violence against women and children in the home in South Africa. Some women reported experiences of emotional violence. Experiences of physical violence were mostly amongst children. The risk factors for women and children's experiences of violence in the home differed by socio-economic class. Job losses and reduction in earnings resulted to food insecurity which was a key driver of violence in most low socio-economic status (SES) families. Confinement in the home with spouses was an unfamiliar and difficult experience, associated with conflict and perpetration of violence by men in high SES families. Participants across socio-economic groups reported high levels of stress with limited psychosocial support available during the lockdown.

**Conclusions:** Our finding showing a link between low socio-economic status and increased risk for domestic violence during the lockdown in South Africa suggests the need for socio-economic interventions to mitigate these risks. Structural and social relief measures need to be strengthened to reduce the loss of jobs and income and to address food insecurity during pandemics. Psychosocial support should be provided to men and women to mitigate the mental health impacts of the pandemic and lockdown.

**Keywords:** Intimate partner violence, Domestic violence, COVID-19 impact, Lockdown, Women, Children, South Africa

# Recruitment and establishing rapport

- Recruitment of participants using social media platforms was feasible, but took longer
- We were able to recruit all age groups (29 - 57 years of age)
- Rapport was difficult to establish, without in-person connection
- Probing did not yield much effect.

# Privacy during interviews

- ▶ Ensuring privacy during the interview was difficult. Some participants had a third person present in the room during interviews

“My wife is here right now next to me, andinoyithetha”

- ▶ Others had a baby cry and would request to be excused to give the child to someone else around the house
- ▶ Presence of another person in the room might have limited responses.

# Disclosure of violence experience and perpetration

- ▶ Participants openly spoke about affected livelihoods, difficulties of parenting, violence they perpetrated against children, and poor mental health
- ▶ Both male and female participants were hesitant to respond to intimate partner violence (IPV) questions
- ▶ Most women avoided talking about personal experiences, and more openly talked about IPV experiences of others
- ▶ Men understated perpetration of IPV during lockdown (e.g. we had small disagreements, misunderstanding, tension).

**“I wouldn’t say its violence, my husband is short-tempered and has anger. My next door neighbour... there was violence between him and the partner there. He is staying with a girlfriend. They are always fighting to an extent that those people break everything in the house...”**

**“My parents have had episodes of violence during the lockdown I would say. My dad has definitely uhm I think he’s starting to feel very cooped up and cranky, very impatient with my mom, aggressive and I wonder what else happens. We only had disagreements, sometimes very emotionally draining”**

- ▶ “I am working in a food store my wife doesn’t work sometimes when I get home you find there is no food sometimes she would blame me and pressurize me you understand, **we end up having a misunderstanding...** she was saying you are the father you should make a plan, you understand, she was giving me pressure. **Sometimes we used to fight physically and breaking things in the house and sometimes verbally, but it was nothing much”**
- ▶ “Being confined in one space with someone that you are not used to spend much time together - because you were used to wake up in the morning and leave the house for work - **that caused so much conflicts. We used to have a lot of small fights**
- ▶ There was tension, mainly caused by her moods, **we would have heated exchanges, but I would not touch her.**

# Key messages

- ▶ Conducting remote VAWC research presents with methodological challenges: ensuring participant privacy, establishing rapport, and participant disclosures about violence
- ▶ Highlights the need for the field to deepen knowledge to improve remote data collection methods, to safely conduct remote VAWC research and to optimize participants' disclosure of IPV experience and perpetration.

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