

What is a safe home? A Collective text on GBV during COVID-19.

During the pandemic of 2021, the question of Gender-based Violence (GBV) came to the forefront of public debates. People were asked to stay inside their houses in order not to be infected by the widespread virus and protect their communities. Lockdowns imposed restrictions of movement that exasperated tensions and conflicts within households. International organisations and governments reported a rapid rise in incidents of GBV that reached such enormous proportions that UN Women described it as a “shadow pandemic”. For many women, LGBTQ+ people, disabled and children, confinement meant increased exposure and vulnerability to different types of GBV. For many others, reports of GBV incidents in mass media and social media brought back not only memories of past GBV experiences but also, the realisation that GBV is a widespread and multifaceted phenomenon that no one is left unaffected. During a three-day workshop called ““A safe home during the pandemic?: Intersectional Perspectives of Gender-based Violence”, we exchanged ideas, experiences, and views on GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic, which have been the source of this text.

Words/Concepts/The ABC of “a safe home”.

The following words or concepts depict the idea of the so-called “safe home” during the COVID-19 pandemic.

-Absence of any form of violence. A safe home is free of verbal, psychological or physical violence. There are many forms of violence that one can find in a place where one was forced to isolate because of COVID-19 restrictions, ranging from femicides and rapes to sexual and psychological abuse. Even shouting can be a form of violence. In a safe home, no one’s physical or psychological health should be threatened.

-Caring: Practices of looking after others do not include only physical reproductive needs of people, for example cooking or cleaning, but also include forms of showing concern, empathy/or compassion for people/others in need. Care, however, can often be a burden, especially for women who are considered to be “naturally destined” by patriarchy to provide care even if they have very little time or are exhausted. Carers should have time and space of their own for homes to be safe. Care should be shared with one’s partner; care should be mutual.

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-Communication: “A safe home” is connected. To be able to communicate with (rest of) the people that cohabit this house, but also to reach out to people outside one’s home is crucial. Once someone becomes a victim/survivor, having access to services that can help them, such as feminist NGOs dealing with GBV or trusted/liable friends-family members of one's or an approachable police, is essential to escape violent and abusive relationships. If communication is cut, it is difficult to seek help and support. Communication should include acceptance and empowerment.

Communities: Communities can often be safe homes for people who are seeking refuge from GBV, especially when they are escaping abusive family relations. Communities organize different forms of self-care that help victims/survivors heal from the trauma of violence. They may also provide protection and support when formal structures for protection are missing. Communities, however, cannot fully replace formal structures that are needed to save victims/survivors of GBV especially during emergencies.

-Expression: In a safe home, one should be able to express herself/itself fiercely.

-Family: A safe home is not identical with a family home. Families are often dangerous and toxic environments for victims/survivors of GBV. It is very often within families that affective bonds that trap victims/survivors into relations of dependence and violence become possible. Families are often the institutions that are reinforcing patriarchal and heteronormative gender norms. To escape GBV, one has often to flee the tight control of family.

-Familiarity (not necessarily family): A safe home should be populated by friendly people. Families are often unfriendly because they do not accept their members for what s/he, it is or what they are. Families are often judging their members for what they are, and this is translated into different forms of violence towards them: from psychological and emotional violence to physical violence and sexual abuse. A sense of home is created on the contrary when people who are familiar come together and create bonds.

-Freedom: The ability to move without constraints, to go where one could be safe, but also where one desires is necessary for a safe home. For many women survivors of GBV this freedom does not exist. They depend on male husbands or other relatives that abuse them financially. Women in precarious jobs, women without jobs, women who are housewives, mothers or carers do not have an independent income and thus are not free to leave

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whenever they feel threatened, unsafe. Although all women can be victims of GBV, women who have no resources to support themselves are victimized more. Social class is important.

-Homeliness: To feel safe one needs a home first and foremost. Homeless people living on the streets cannot have a safe home because they do not even have a home. Forced homelessness was an experience that some LGBTQ+ people, especially young ones, experienced during quarantine, as they flee to escape toxic homophobic and transphobic families without access to support networks. Similarly, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who live in camps, do not have homes. They share tents or rooms, common bathrooms, and kitchens with others. They live in overcrowded conditions and are often under surveillance by guards.

-MeToo: “A safe home” cannot be isolated from the outside world and is never entirely safe as long as GBV is carried out outside. The MeToo movement made many people living in “safe homes” realize how rooted GBV is to their lives, even if it seemed remote. Images and narrations of GBV that filled Greek social and mainstream media reminded of past experiences of GBV that bring back traumatic memories. At the same time, many people living in safe homes were re-traumatized by listening to the experiences of GBV survivors. Considering the above, a safe home is a home, whose members are active in the fighting against GBV.

-No judgement: A “safe home” is a home where its members do not judge but accept each other for who they are. During the pandemic 2021, many women and LGBTQ+ people were locked inside homes where they were often judged and unwanted, without access to their communities who allowed them to be without judgement. LGBTQ+ people were forced to come out in these conditions without preparation and without being ready for it. In toxic, homophobic family environments, this was a violent experience.

-Protection: One should feel protected in a safe home. But a home alone cannot provide full protection, public structures are also needed to provide counselling and support to those who need to escape dangerous homes. Shelters are also necessary for those who have nowhere to live. A “safe home” can be a net of easily accessible structures for the protection of victims/survivors. These should include all those who are in need of support and protection irrespectively of sexuality, race, ethnicity, migrant status and class, including LGBTQ+ people and migrants, who are often excluded from female and citizen focused policies against GBV.

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-Respect: A safe home is about being treated with respect from others that we live with, but also about respecting oneself. Respect takes time and it is built through words but also through bodily gestures. When one is seeking help and support to escape a dangerous home, it is important to show respect. GBV victims are often used to self-censorship because they have experiences of discrimination that make them more aware of degrading words and gestures. A safe home is one that cultivates feelings of self-worth.

-Victimhood/Survival: In a “safe home” one should be able to express their vulnerability and feelings of physical and psychological pain without being afraid of being further victimised. At the same time, if one feels empowered because they have managed to survive GBV, one should be able to express it without being forced to abide to dominant representations of GBV victimhood. Who is a victim, who is a survivor is always a question of subjectivity and self-identification and safe homes are constructed when we avoid enforcing labels and stigmatising that may (re)enforce traumatisation and victimisation or conversely project notions of empowerment that deny experiences of vulnerability.

-Warmth: A safe home should be warm and comfortable for its members. Emotional warmth is vital for one to feel safe. Being in a home that does not have basic comforts, like drinking water, hot water, a roof that does not leak, a floor that does not get flooded, a bathroom that is not shared by men, women, and trans persons are important. A home should not be luxurious but it should safeguard basic standards of living otherwise it becomes dangerous for its people.

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