

Violence against women surges in Fiji



People sit on a wall in Suva. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated longstanding problems of gender-based violence. (Photo: Lincoln Feast/Reuters)

Suva, February 27 (RHC)-- Much of archipelagic Fiji was forced indoors by lockdowns and a nationwide curfew in March last year when the South Pacific nation recorded its first case of COVID-19. The quick and decisive action by legislators was successful in helping contain the spread of a highly contagious virus and received international praise.

But in other ways, the policy has scarred the country. Civil society groups say that social isolation and confinement is proving far more dangerous for many of the country's women than the deadly virus stalking the outdoors.

Activists and non-governmental organisations report a "concerning increase" in violence against women and girls since the pandemic began in a country where rates of domestic violence were already among the highest in the world.

"It (the pandemic) has definitely increased [violence against women] compared with 2019 and last year – the frequency and intensity has increased," said Shamima Ali, the coordinator of the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC).

"The beatings are getting really bad too – there is punching and kicking, which was always there but also the use weapons such as knives and cases of forced prostitution of women and children."

The Pacific region, home to just 0.1 percent of the world's population, has some of the highest rates of violence against women and girls globally. On average, 30 percent of women worldwide experienced some form of physical or sexual violence, mostly by an intimate partner before the pandemic, according to the United Nations.

The figure was twice as high in Fiji, where some 64 percent of women said they had been the target of some form of abuse. The numbers were similarly high in other Pacific islands including Kiribati (68 percent), the Solomon Islands (64 percent) and Vanuatu (60 percent).

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