

# Crises Colliding: COVID-19 and domestic abuse

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*“It’s hell on earth living 24/7 now with my abuser & can’t get out to escape, [to] put distance between us when I feel tension rising.”* Survivor quotation (Women’s Aid, 2020a)

In times of crisis our attention focuses upon the issue thrust into the spotlight, in this case the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent impact it has had on everyday life across the world. In January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that a virus outbreak had become a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (WHO, 2020b). Only a couple of months later the WHO issued a statement categorising the outbreak of COVID-19 as a pandemic (WHO, 2020c). The latest figures to be released indicate that the number of deaths resultant from the virus have now exceeded half a million worldwide (WHO, 2020a).

As countries across the globe have mobilised to tackle the worldwide outbreak of the virus some actions have been accompanied by negative consequences from which additional crises have stemmed including economic instability, job losses, and of course physical and psychological health risks. However, what about the impact that COVID-19 is having upon other pre-existing phenomena, such as domestic abuse, which in itself should be recognised as a crisis?

Governments across the world have been forced to respond to the pandemic and in many countries the actions taken have included the imposition of lockdowns and enforced restrictions, predominantly urging people to remain at home in order to keep populations safe by attempting to contain the spread of the virus. This approach, however, positions the home as a place of sanctuary and safety, but for those experiencing domestic abuse the home can be the polar opposite. Consequently, the restrictions imposed to reduce the risk of contracting the virus and to protect populations have, in contrast, actually increased risk for some, namely victims of domestic abuse who were already being subjected to another crisis of pandemic proportions.

From the very beginning of the outbreak a wide range of specialist domestic abuse service providers and those researching violence against women and girls (VAWG) have articulated their concerns about the harmful consequences of the lockdown for those experiencing domestic abuse. A VAWG Helpdesk rapid research query report (Fraser, 2020) produced by the Department for International Development, identified increased incidents of domestic abuse in China and Italy during the early stages of the pandemic. Drawing on the situation in Italy, di Redazione (2020) suggested that an increase in domestic abuse incidents may have been contributed to by forced cohabitation, increased economic stress combined with other factors such as home working.

In the UK, Women's Aid (2020b) identified that domestic abuse perpetrators have been employing the rules relating to both social distancing measures and self-isolation as additional tools of coercive control. In addition, Women's Aid suggested that lockdown measures have effectively closed down routes victims can take to access much needed support or to attempt to escape their abusive relationships.

The Welsh Government identified a range of ways in which the lockdown restrictions could affect survivors of domestic abuse including reducing contact survivors are able to have with friends, family and professionals who could monitor their safety. They also suggested that increased stress might contribute to the perpetration of abuse including stress arising from job losses, anxiety over the virus itself and confinement to the home. Perhaps most importantly the Welsh Government (2020) also drew attention to the impact of widespread school closures leading to the increased likelihood of domestic abuse occurring in the presence of children who have been unable to attend school.

In April 2020, Women's Aid conducted a survey, the purpose of which was to monitor and assess the impact that the measures introduced to combat the spread of COVID-19 have had on those experiencing domestic abuse. Of those survivors of domestic abuse who responded to the survey 67.4% reported that their abuse had worsened during the COVID-19 period. Furthermore, over three quarters of the survivors also reported that due to COVID-19 they had been forced to spend more time with their abuser (Women's Aid, 2020a). The survey also highlighted that another consequence of the lockdown measures has been that survivors are finding it more difficult to escape

their relationships (Ibid). The report concluded that the measures imposed to combat COVID-19 had exposed survivors of domestic abuse to worsening levels of victimisation whilst also restricting their access to help. Women's Aid identified that perpetrators of domestic abuse have been utilising the restrictions imposed to suppress the spread of the virus to facilitate further control over their victims as well as using the virus itself as a tool to induce fear. Finally, they also evidenced that the negative impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent actions taken by governments to combat the virus have not been limited to women alone. Children, at home whilst schools have shut, have consequently been exposed to domestic abuse themselves and, furthermore, perpetrators have employed child contact arrangements as another mechanism of abuse.

In the weeks since the lockdown measures were introduced, attention has also been drawn to the numbers of domestic homicides that have taken place during this time. In April 2020 Karen Ingala Smith, who tracks men's fatal violence against women in the UK for The Femicide Census, identified that in the first three weeks of lockdown fourteen women and two children were murdered in domestic homicides (Smith, 2020). Comparing this figure to the number of women's deaths at the hands of men for the last ten years the average number of murders within a three-week period would be expected to reach around seven homicides. Therefore, the deaths of women and children at the hands of their abusers during the first weeks of lockdown were double the hypothetical average of the deaths recorded in the last ten-year period (Ibid).

It is of course imperative to state that coronavirus itself does not create violent men, cause domestic abuse, nor was it responsible for the deaths of those women and children, the perpetrators of the abuse were. What the COVID-19 crisis has exposed, however, are the dangers that women and children are subjected to on a daily basis, something that was not created, but has been exacerbated, by this worldwide crisis. Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on domestic abuse has consequently demonstrated the disproportionate affect the lockdown has had on women and children, resultant from the increased frequency and severity of domestic abuse on a scale that should itself be labelled a public health crisis.

It is not yet possible to present a comprehensive picture of the impact the coronavirus pandemic has had, and continues to have, on survivors of domestic abuse as most of

the evidence thus far has been acquired via news and media sources and the perspectives of those working at the frontline of the VAWG sector. Therefore, what this article presents is an early indication of the evidence that has begun to emerge. Funding has become available to ensure research can be carried out in this area to enable us to capture more detailed information pertaining to the effects of COVID-19 on survivors of domestic abuse.

In summary, the COVID-19 outbreak, a global pandemic, has not only created new crises but also exacerbated existing ones, traversing all sectors including health, education, employment and criminal justice. It could be argued that for survivors of domestic abuse the COVID-19 outbreak should be described as a situation of crises colliding, with the actions taken to address the pandemic and reduce the risk of the spread of the virus has actually increasing the risk for survivors of domestic abuse. Traditionally, responses to tackle domestic abuse have often been confined to criminal justice interventions, which have of course been significantly affected by the pandemic; however, it is also important to recognise the much wider impact of domestic abuse victimisation on women and children including on their health and wellbeing.

It is therefore imperative that we recognise domestic abuse as a continuing criminal justice and public health crisis of pandemic proportions. Domestic abuse is an ongoing crisis that will persist long after a vaccination has been developed for coronavirus, long after medical progress has been made to be able to adequately treat the virus and life begins to return to 'normal' for some people. What should also be considered is the life-threatening nature of domestic abuse, which is evident across the globe. The United Nations identified that in 2017 alone 87,000 women were intentionally killed and 58 percent of these women were killed by family members or intimate partners. This translates to the murder of 137 women, murders perpetrated by women's family members or intimate partners, every day across the world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019) and these figures of course do not take into account the other myriad effects that domestic abuse can have upon women and children's lives.

In conclusion, domestic abuse should be viewed as a crisis of pandemic proportions, which needs to be addressed, and eradicated, using a multi-agency, cross-sector response; it is not something that can be resolved via the criminal justice system alone.

Responsibility must also be placed upon the root cause of the problem, those perpetrating abuse. This is in stark contrast to placing the burden of responsibility on survivors and their children to take action to escape or cope with domestic abuse.

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<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/group-intervention-for-men>

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