

When staying at home can mean danger

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Lockdown measures leave no life unaffected. The world is in uncharted territory, and many of us are struggling to adjust to a life that seemed unimaginable a few short months ago.

While all of us are impacted, we know that when the whole world shifts, the burden is not distributed equally. Instead, those already marginalised and at risk are often placed in further danger. For women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse, it is not an exaggeration to say that lockdown measures may truly be a living nightmare.

As well as the numbers of new covid cases and deaths each day, countries are reporting other devastating figures – increases in domestic abuse. The first indication was from Hubei province in China, the heart of the initial outbreak, where one county reported a three-fold increase in calls to their domestic abuse helpline (The Guardian 28 March 2020). As the virus sweeps across the world, other countries are showing a similarly alarming story. (New York Times, 6 April 2020) Domestic homicides in the UK are believed to have more than doubled since the beginning of the outbreak. (The Guardian, 15 April 2020)

It's crucial to remember that coronavirus does not *cause* domestic abuse. The virus, devastating enough as it is, does not also turn people with no inclination to control and harm their partners into abusers overnight. Those who use the virus as an excuse to terrorise their partner and children are the same people who blame alcohol, football results, even the weather – all of which have been pointed to as 'reasons' that domestic abuse happens – when in reality, there is no real reason other than choices made by an abuser. As Charlie Webster (broadcaster and survivor of domestic abuse) argues, every time we talk about coronavirus 'causing' domestic abuse, we excuse violence. We lift the accountability for the harm done to women and children from those who cause it, and place it on circumstances outside of our control. We do this because it removes responsibility; not just from perpetrators for their actions, but from us as communities and a society, to call violence against women what it is and to respond appropriately. This does service to no one; least of all to the women and children who are harmed or killed.

Children and young people have been largely absent from the reporting around domestic abuse. We know from the children and young people using our specialist domestic abuse services that

school and nursery can often feel like the safest places to be. The closure of these spaces, as well as other community spaces where children and young people get to enjoy their freedom, has particular impact on the safety and wellbeing of those experiencing domestic abuse. It's important to remember, particularly when the media portrays young people breaking lockdown restrictions as 'selfish' or because they think they are 'invincible', that for many of them, home is far more dangerous than any virus.

What the reported increases in calls, incidents, and murders of women and children do tell us is that lockdown measures facilitate perpetrators' control (a central tactic of domestic abuse), remove access to support networks, and aggravate existing patterns in perpetrators' behaviour. This is not just the case for women and children who live with their abuser; for those who are separated, or living apart, women and children being at home offers additional opportunities for surveillance and manipulation through arrangements like court-ordered contact.

Many of us may be concerned for someone we know or someone in our community and we may wonder what we can do. One of the most helpful things we can do is to try and maintain a relationship with women and children that we're already in contact with, but it's crucial that we do this in a way that does not inadvertently put them at even more risk. Perpetrators of domestic abuse often monitor the calls and texts that their partner or children receive, and a well-intentioned message expressing concern can be intercepted and used by perpetrators to force women and children into cutting off all contact with the outside world, or as justification for harm.

Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline offers 24/7 phone, webchat and email support for survivors (for under 16s, support is available from Childline), and it is also available to anyone who has concerns about another person. Call handlers will offer practical advice on the steps you can take to support, helping you to assess the risks in doing so. If you think that someone is in immediate danger, you should call 999.

Women's Aid's specialist domestic abuse services continue to offer their life-saving support in every local authority in Scotland. Bolstered by £1.3m emergency funding from the Scottish Government, services remain open and available to the women, children and young people who require them. Information on local groups can be found on the Women's Aid website: www.womensaid.scot It's also important that both survivors and perpetrators of domestic abuse know that Police Scotland are committed to keeping domestic abuse a priority at this

time. They have been clear: lockdown restrictions do not apply if somebody needs to leave their house for their own safety, and they will respond as robustly as before to anyone who perpetrates abuse at this time.

Long before covid-19 was in anyone's vocabulary, domestic abuse infected every part of our society. In the same way that it was not caused by coronavirus, it will not disappear when lockdown lifts, or when a vaccine is produced. As we move forward and rebuild our communities, it's more important than ever that we work to create a world where women, children and young people are able to live free from fear of violence.

Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline operates 24/7, on 0800 027 1234, or via webchat or email at www.sdafmh.org.uk.

Women's Aid specialist domestic abuse services: www.womensaid.scot

Childline offers phone and online support to children and young people. Visit www.childline.org.uk or call 0800 1111 to speak to someone.

References

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