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Supporting victims of domestic violence at a distance during COVID-19: the impact of the pandemic on service providers in remote, rural and island communities in North-East Scotland and Orkney

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Supporting victims of domestic violence in rural and island communities during COVID-19: the impact of the pandemic on service providers in North-East Scotland and Orkney

Abstract

We investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic-violence service providers in rural and island communities in North-East Scotland and Orkney. Domestic abuse and violence in rural areas is typically underestimated and might be more hidden due to stigma, a surveillance culture, and the practical difficulties of accessing services. The geographical challenges of rural and remote areas in relation to domestic violence are, to some extent, further amplified in small island locations, given population sizes, terrain and separation by sea. In such communities, visits to a service organisation's offices, or a visit by one of their staff, might publicly mark a service user out as a domestic-abuse survivor. This article focuses on the move to digital and telephone provision of support in areas where broadband Internet access is inconsistent and service users may live many miles from sources of support. At the same time, the move to online modes of communication was welcomed by staff in relation to offering opportunities for training and networking. There was also use of social and local media to raise awareness of the prevalence of domestic violence in these locations and to counter the myth of idyllic and abuse-free rural and island communities.

Keywords: domestic violence; islandness, pandemic; telephone; connectivity

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 transformed lives throughout the world. With the imposition of lockdown in many countries, people were required to spend the majority of their time in their own homes. There was immediate concern that these restrictive measures would place women at greater risk of domestic violence (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Mutongwiza, 2020; UN Women, 2020), and that restrictions on leaving home decreased their ability to reach out for help (Bouillon-Minois et al., 2020). It quickly became clear that these fears were justified and that lockdown conditions were being used by abusers to intensify or conceal their violence, coercion and control since abusers were spending more time at home with their victim, with more opportunities for monitoring and control of their behaviour (Hohl & Johnson, 2021; Lyons & Brewer, 2021).

This article outlines some of the findings of a project investigating the impact of the pandemic on the work of organisations supporting women who are experiencing domestic violence in North-East Scotland and Orkney. The project encompassed the work of organisations supporting women in urban (Aberdeen), remote and rural (Aberdeenshire) and remote island (Orkney) locations in an area a considerable distance from the seats of government power in Holyrood and Westminster. A study of the provision of domestic-violence service provision in such locations contributes to the literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through a focus on geographically remote and island communities, particularly exploring how rurality and islandness shape responses to domestic violence. In particular, this study analyses the challenges and opportunities afforded by a switch to a purely digital-based provision during lockdown in an area where broadband coverage is not consistent. It also investigates how innovations introduced during lockdown have helped domestic-violence service providers work around a surveillance culture previously identified

by studies of domestic violence in remote communities and has facilitated wider opportunities for training and experience for staff working in these organisations.

There have been a limited number of studies exploring the nature of domestic abuse in rural, remote and island areas, or how the pandemic might have impacted the experience of survivors living in remote locations. This is despite the fact that 9.7 million British people, and 17 percent of the Scottish population, live in rural areas (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, 2021, Scottish Government, 2021). The Scottish Government (2018) classes ‘rural’ settlements as those with a population of less than 3,000. Drive times to larger settlements determine classification as ‘remote rural’ or ‘accessible rural’ (over and under 30 minutes from a settlement of at least 10,000, respectively). Our project area included both remote and accessible rural settlements, including islands only accessible by boat.

Orkney is an archipelago made up of about 70 islands situated off the north-east coast of Scotland. Around 20 of the isles are inhabited, with the largest island, Mainland, having an area of around 200 square miles. Mainland is home to 75% of Orkney’s population and its two main towns – Kirkwall and Stromness. Agriculture is the most important sector in the economy of the isles, with smaller numbers employed in fishing, in the islands’ whisky distilleries and in a growing tourism sector, which was hit badly by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

The Orkney Islands frequently top the lists of the happiest and best places to live in the UK and the best places to bring up children. In 2020, the Bank of Scotland Quality of Life survey named Orkney as the best place to live in Scotland for the eighth year in the row (*National Newsdesk*, 2020). The local tourism industry and Orkney Council use this rating of “happiest place” and its associated notion of the islands as a rural idyll in marketing the islands (Pedersen & Smith, 2018). It is perhaps not surprising that both the Council and the local tourism authority are pleased to promote the idea of Orkney as the best place to raise children given that Orkney had a rather different reputation in the early 1990s as one of the places where social services accused parents of being part of a Satanic abuse circle and nine children were temporarily taken from their families on the small island of South Ronaldsay. A later inquiry chaired by Lord Clyde, which published its report in 1992, criticized all those involved, including social workers, the police and Orkney Islands Council (The Clyde Inquiry, 1992).

From March 2020 onwards, the Scottish government introduced a variety of public-health measures to address the pandemic, including lockdown, working from home, closure of schools, nurseries and childcare provision, social distancing and reductions in the work of the courts. As Scottish Women’s Aid (2020) pointed out, “Some of these measures have provided additional tools and opportunities for abusers to exercise control”. In addition, because of the nature of women’s work – more likely to be in the types of informal work such as childcare or the hospitality industry and thus less possible to be telecommutable – more women became economically dependent on their male partners. This increased the risk of gender-based violence and made it more difficult for them to leave their partners (Mittal & Singh, 2020).

Domestic violence and remote communities

This project uses the UK Government definition of domestic violence and abuse:

Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate

partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass, but is not limited to, the following types of abuse: psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022).

This definition includes so-called ‘honour’ based violence, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

Domestic abuse and violence in rural areas is typically underestimated and might be more hidden and underreported. This has been attributed to the character of gender relations in such areas, which can remain particularly conservative and patriarchal (Terry, 2020) and might involve a blurring of boundaries between violence and non-violence behaviour in the home (DeKeseredy et al., 2007). In addition, domestic abuse and violence by men have been linked to the decline in farming and other rural industries and the concomitant loss of traditional rural masculinity (Carrington & Scott, 2008; Little, 2017). Contemporary crises, such as the impacts of COVID-19 and Brexit, further threaten rural communities and livelihoods. The close-knit and usually supportive relations that characterise many rural and island communities can in fact obscure the recognition of violence and inform whether it is likely to be challenged (Little, 2020; Terry and Williams, 2019). The close interrelations typical of such environments can increase surveillance of domestic-violence victims by perpetrators, as well as shaping the experience of young people, who can experience a sense of scrutiny and lack of privacy (Little, 2017). Social stigma and senses of alienation and isolation, and the practical difficulties of accessing services, are compounded by the stress and danger of encountering perpetrators and their supporters (Scottish Women’s Aid, 2019), but also by pressures to uphold the ‘myth’ of rural community (Little, 2020).

Little (2017) identifies a ‘cloak of silence’ regarding domestic abuse in English rural locations, contrasting assumptions of rural idylls with the reality of remoteness from support agencies, conservative views of gender roles, and a culture of surveillance. Similarly, Moffitt and Fikowski (2017) describe the challenges relating to anonymity and confidentiality when reporting abuse in small, tight-knit communities in remote, rural northern Canada, and similar issues relating to transportation, communication and access to emergency housing. There are suggestions that women who live in rural and remote areas are more likely than women in urban areas to experience domestic and family violence (Campo & Tayton, 2015) and that this violence may be at higher levels of severity (Peek-Asa et al., 2011).

Focusing more specifically on the impact of the pandemic, Hansen and Lory (2020) suggest that the historical under-resourcing of rural service providers in the US left them in a precarious position to deal with increased demands for their services in lockdown. Moffitt et al. (2020) emphasised the need for service providers in rural, remote Canada to ‘think outside the box’ while working to educate on the warning signs of domestic abuse and how to reach out safely during a pandemic.

The geographical challenges of rural and remote areas in relation to domestic violence are, to some extent, further amplified in small island locations, given small population sizes, terrain and, importantly, separation by sea. Just as rural areas might be imaged as “idyllic”, portrayal of island locations have been shaped by tropes of isolation and backwardness. While earlier studies of small islands have rendered them as places of insularity, as “a neatly bounded piece of land, surrounded by water” (Grydehoj, 2017, p. 5), island studies has demonstrated the complexities, differences and connectedness of such locations and the contingent relationship between land and sea that characterise these locations. The concept of the aquapelago has moreover drawn attention to the ways in which aquatic spaces are “utilised

and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging" (Hayward, 2012, p. 5).

Despite such re-conceptualisations, power relations, social inequalities and hierarchies in islands have remained virtually unstudied, including around gender relations (Karides, 2017). However, islands are gendered places and islandness shapes gender constructions and sexualities (Gaini & Nielsen, 2020). Karides (2017) develops island feminism as an approach that enables critical analysis of such gendered inequalities and dynamics, taking islandness as part of an intersectional analysis, and calls for the application of this approach to the issue of domestic violence and criminal justice responses to support victims in small islands.

The history of Orkney has played a large part in shaping islanders' cultural identity. The islands were part of the kingdoms of Norway and Denmark from the ninth century until 1468. The fact that the islands were therefore part of the Scandinavian kingdoms for 500 years continues to allow islanders to distance themselves from both the UK and Scotland (Lange, 2006). The islands' Viking cultural heritage is extensively used to promote brands such as alcohol and jewellery made on the islands, while the largest local primary school has a Viking longship as its logo (Ljosland, 2013). While the stereotypical image of the Viking male as "sea-faring, sexist and blood-thirsty men raping and pillaging" (Halewood & Hannam 2001, p. 566) has been nuanced in recent years, he is still encoded as essentially masculine (Scully, 2018). Kølvråa (2019) notes that the far-right Nordic Resistance Movement uses the hyper-masculine identity of the Viking in its communications to model ruthlessness, brutality, hierarchy and ultimate self-reliance. It might be suggested that the plethora of Viking imagery surrounding islanders, and a drive to identify as different to the rest of the UK, might well result in some normalisation of aggressive masculinities.

A number of challenges have been documented in relation to domestic violence and to support for domestic violence victims in small islands. Domestic violence shelters are less likely to remain hidden in smaller islands (Karides, 2017). In her analysis of policing on the Shetland isles in Scotland, Souhami (2020) notes that the lack of specialist facilities and limited resources mean that survivors of sexual offences have to travel to the mainland for examination, which can add to victims' trauma. The weather, darkness and light, though often underappreciated in studies of island locations, also play a crucial role in shaping residents' experiences (Ingold 2005). This has been explored in relation to policing and officers' experiences of work in a remote island context (Souhami, 2022). Adverse weather increases the vulnerability of remote islands and they can become experienced as "places of confinement" (ibid.). It has been noted that extreme weather conditions can curtail the ability of islanders to travel to the mainland, with victims potentially not able to access services for an extended period of time (Souhami, 2020). But beyond these challenges, there is little understanding of how weather systems and darkness might shape domestic violence victims' experiences and the support they may receive. In addition, policing in a remote island setting such as Shetland has been argued to have a distinctive mode that emphasises under-enforcement and discretion, due to the isolation of island police officers and the complexity of their relationships with local communities (ibid.). This island-specific mode of policing may well shape whether and how victims report domestic violence.

The shift to digital

As Emezue (2021) notes, in recent years there has been a growing use of digitally delivered interventions in support for those experiencing domestic violence, and there is evidence to

show that some survivors prefer the practicality and confidentiality of technology enabled interventions in comparison to face-to-face services such as counselling and individual therapy. However, before spring 2020, such provision was offered as an option and in addition to face-to-face support, and the value of remote provision was not universally accepted (Cortis et al., 2021). In particular, there have been concerns about conducting what is relationship-based work (Byrne & Kirwan, 2019; Pascoe, 2021) without physical connection and proximity, and the impact this has on observing and interpreting clients' non-verbal and physical cues (Bayles, 2012).

The advent of COVID-19 brought about a whole-scale move to virtual and digital delivery. Examining social workers' shift to remote engagement with service users in Northern Ireland, Pascoe (2021) finds overwhelmingly negative impacts, such as the exclusive reliance on technology inhibiting relationship building and the quality of interactions. Cortis et al. (2021) note that many service providers moved to providing online support through online chat, video calling and telephone, but suggest that replacing face-to-face support normally provided within communities is 'not ideal'. They note, in particular, that it is more difficult to ascertain whether an intervention or support increases the risk to service users when not meeting face to face in a safe space. Similarly, Pentraki and Speake (2020) argue that online and digital provision of support might not be the most effective response in cases of domestic violence. Problems identified include the ability of service users to access online support because of the imposed restrictions and surveillance of their abuser (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020); the difficulty of achieving a safe and confidential space in which to access support (Pentraki & Speake, 2020); and the digital divide, which means that not all service users will have sustained access to the internet (Ragavan et al., 2020). In the context of rural or remote service users, there are added barriers relating to connectivity and technology (Emezue, 2021). Emezue (2021) suggests that digital provision has the potential to offer 24/7 support via hotlines, but also notes issues relating to user safety, user burden, gender digital divides, data privacy and confidentiality. In addition, the increase in use of digital tools for support offers opportunities for an increase in cyber abuse by abusers (Emezue, 2021; Ragavan et al., 2020).

As far as service organisations are concerned, issues with digital support relate to the burden on staff to upskill, cost of hardware and broadband issues (Emezue, 2021). The shift to digital has been shown to take a significant toll on practitioners and their wellbeing in a range of contexts (Cortis et al., 2021; Pascoe, 2021; Pfitzner, Fitz-Gibbon & True, 2022), where the blurring of personal and professional boundaries and senses of isolation from colleagues have been found to constitute barriers to self-care and professional development (Pascoe, 2021). On a more positive note, in research with domestic-violence service providers in Australia, many practitioners and service managers felt that remote service delivery improved accessibility and efficiency (Cortis et al., 2021). For rural or isolated clients in particular, videoconferencing has been found to improve access (Burgoyne & Cohn, 2020, cited in Cortis et al., 2021). While face-to-face contact decreased during the pandemic, some studies found *overall* increases in practitioners' frequency of contact with clients, and more time to spend directly with them (Cortis et al., 2021).

Study design

This study consisted of 12 semi-structured interviews with managers of domestic-abuse service providers in Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Orkney between April and May 2021. These interviews were undertaken online to cater to the lockdown restrictions and social-distancing measures put in place by the Scottish Government to manage COVID-19. The

platforms Zoom and Microsoft Teams were utilised to conduct these interviews as they were selected by the participants and had readily available recording facilities to be used for transcription. While authors disagree over the appropriate number of interviews that are necessary to reach data saturation (see Saunders et al., 2018 for an overview of debates around saturation), information was repeated and no additional issues were identified after about 10 interviews.

Participants were initially recruited through their membership of Violence Against Women Partnerships (VAWP) in Orkney and Aberdeen. Overall, twelve participants were recruited: ten female and two male. These individuals were identified by the lead researcher, who is a member of the Aberdeen VAWP. It should be noted that AVAWP, Orkney Women's Aid, Grampian Women's Aid and Aberdeen Cyrenians had supported the original bid for funding, particularly noting the lack of research specific to Scotland and to rural, remote and island communities. Once data collection was underway, snowball sampling was utilised to gather additional participants, including those from local government departments, rape and sexual assault, and victim support services. Participants were required to be managers from a variety of domestic-abuse service providers across Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Orkney. Length of service in these organisations varied amongst the managers, with some having held their posts for a number of years and others being appointed to their post during the pandemic. While participants were managers, the majority of interviewees were based in organisations with small numbers of staff, meaning that they worked directly with service users as well as performing managerial functions.

Procedure

Each of the interviews were led by a research assistant. These interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide created by the research team. The guide was informed by an initial literature review and covered a variety of different topics such as: impact on the service, impact on staff, impact on service users, vaccination, funding, emerging best practice and an open-ended question to finish which asked participants if they had any additional information they wished to add to the study. Throughout the course of the interview, the researcher asked probing questions around each of these topics to promote an in-depth discussion on the issues at hand and to seek clarification from the participants where necessary. Participants were aware that they could pause or take a break at any time, however all participants completed the full interview without exercising this option.

Each of these interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length and were audio-recorded through Microsoft Teams or Zoom, depending on the platform chosen by the interviewee, before transcription. Based on the nature of online interviews, there were a few instances where connectivity caused some parts of the audio to cut out, especially considering the rurality of many of the participants. In this instance, the researcher repeated the question for participants if they were unable to hear due to issues with the signal. However, this was not a major issue as the interviews ran smoothly for the most part.

The analysis of the interview transcripts was guided by Charmaz's (2006) interpretation of constructivist grounded theory. This approach highlights the reflexive meanings and meaning interpretations that individuals assign to their subjective realities and how these are used to give a true representation of their experiences. Interview transcripts were analysed manually by the research team through what Charmaz (2003) refers to as meticulous 'line-by-line' coding. This process involved reflexive reading to identify different codes from the interview transcripts based on the interpretations of the research team. In the initial stages, these codes

were somewhat similar to the topics in the interview guide, however, additional themes emerged throughout the course of data analysis.

A wide range of issues was raised by the interviewees, including pressure on staff, the problems associated with the closure of courts in the region, funding issues and cooperation between agencies. The discussion in this article focuses on issues relating to the move to a distanced and digital provision of service and its impact on service users and staff, particularly in remote, rural and island locations where broadband access can be challenging.

Imposition of lockdown

The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, announced the introduction of lockdown in a televised address on 23 March 2020. This included a ‘stay at home’ order with employees working from home where they could. People were only to leave their homes to shop for essential food and to undertake exercise once a day. Non-essential shops, schools and childcare facilities were closed. Domestic-violence service providers in North-East Scotland and Orkney faced an increase in demand for their services at the same time as needing to move to providing an online and telephone-based service. As detailed below, the pandemic impacted the type of support and advice that could be offered to service-users. However, the move away from face-to-face provision also offered new opportunities for staff and resource efficiencies for services. Providers also reported a more flexible approach being welcomed by some users, relating this to the surveillance culture of remote communities. For this reason, many of the innovations introduced during the pandemic will continue to be part of their provision moving forward.

All interviewees reported an increase in demand for their services after an initial drop-off in the early months of lockdown, with one organisation reporting a 400% increase in referrals over the year from March 2020. Several organisations also reported an increase in high-risk referrals requiring the use of multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs). However, in line with patterns identified elsewhere in the UK (Halford et al., 2020; Hoehn-Velasco et al., 2021), it was noted by an interviewee on Orkney that, while demands for their service had increased by 48% on the previous year, the local police had seen a reduction in reports, which she suggested was related to the practicalities of making a report to the police during lockdown.

Because of this increase in demand, the majority of service providers had introduced waiting lists – for some for the first time in several decades of service. Those on waiting lists were prioritised by need, but some survivors were left waiting for months before they were assigned a key worker. At the same time, refuge provision became difficult as women could no longer move on to other housing. When accommodation did become available, it was difficult to ensure repairs and refurbishment in lockdown since rules limited the number of workmen that could be in a house at the same time. This was particularly the case on Orkney, where it was difficult to get new carpets laid and furniture delivered because it needed to be transported by sea to the islands. The closure of the local laundrette in Kirkwall also impacted on changeovers, with staff resorting to the purchase of new towels and bedding for each change of user.

The few services that covered rural Aberdeenshire found their services were in particularly high demand as other support services in the region, such as those related to mental health, struggled or closed down entirely during the pandemic. On Orkney, some services reported

that they had to widen their area of coverage to include the Shetland isles, over 100 miles to the north, because the pandemic made it impossible to recruit new staff onto the islands.

There were also concerns that, because physical offices were closed, it might be perceived that help was not available. Service providers worked together as members of VAWPs to raise their profile on social media and in the local press and get the message out that support was still available. They also worked with local police forces and media to make those suffering abuse aware that they were allowed to leave lockdown to seek shelter. For example, an interviewee from Orkney described a situation where a service user was worried that she would get into trouble with the police because her controlling abuser insisted on staying at her house. The interviewee collaborated with a local chief inspector of police on an interview in the local newspaper emphasising that victims of domestic abuse would not get into trouble if they came forward for support. This echoes Moffitt et al's (2020) discussion of the need for service providers in rural and remote areas in Canada to work with communities and educate on how to reach out safely during a pandemic.

One unexpected finding was that lockdown had led to an increase in the number of historic abuse cases being reported on Orkney. The experience of lockdown and furlough gave survivors the necessary extra time to re-visit buried memories, and service providers reported survivors coming forward with stories of abuse that had occurred up to forty years previously. Thus some service providers had seen an increase in older users reaching out to them. In terms of timing, links could be made to the afore-mentioned Clyde Inquiry (The Clyde Inquiry, 1992), which criticized policing and social-work practices on the Islands in the early 1990s.

There were also reports of a decline in demand for children's services and from younger service users, which interviewees suspected was linked to the closure of pubs and clubs. Although, as one interviewee pointed out, this did not necessarily mean that abuse was not happening:

[P]eople are more scared about reporting it because there shouldn't have been a party or they shouldn't have been out socialising with their mates (Interview 1, Orkney).

There was also a suggestion from several interviewees that users were waiting longer before making contact with organisations:

People are waiting a bit longer until they think, "This is it, I can't cope anymore." ... They're feeling they almost have to stay where they are and enduring more until it gets to that point they think "No, I need to go." (Interview 4 Aberdeen).

The move to online and telephone provision of support services

The majority of interviewees reported that their staff had already been using laptops and had experience of software such as messaging apps, and so these were repurposed for online provision of support services. However, some providers, particularly those based in council services, did not have immediate access to laptops. On Orkney, workers initially used laptops from some of the local schools, which had been closed. This highlights issues around equitable service provision in remote and island communities, but also demonstrates the ways in which different public services moved swiftly to share resources and to prioritise domestic violence support in light of warnings from organisations such as Scottish Women's Aid.

Interviewees from third-sector organisations reported that their funders had been flexible and proactive, allowing money allocated for travel, for example, to be spent instead on the provision of tablets and phones for both staff and service users.

However, while the majority of staff were already proficient users of computer technology, third-sector organisations reported problems with volunteers, some of whom were resistant to the use of technology such as apps. It was mentioned by several interviewees that it was their older volunteers who struggled the most, particularly when apps were to be used on mobile phones.

A number of interviewees reported problems relating to connectivity, particularly in relation to broadband. This was a common theme amongst domestic-abuse services in remote island locations, such as Orkney, or rural communities in Aberdeenshire. This issue was highlighted by one interviewee in discussion about the obstacles faced by service providers in the transition to working from home.

Connectivity as well, we had some staff that, although we had a particular type of mobile, it didn't work in the area that they lived. So, they had a mobile, but it didn't work (Interview 7, Orkney).

Working from home also brought problems relating to confidentiality, particularly as some staff juggled their work responsibilities with home schooling and childcare.

[F]inding space and privacy at home to have the kind of conversations we would have with people has been a bit of a challenge at times for staff. And broadband as well, one of my members of staff has five adults working from home in their house, and so getting broadband and getting a spare space to put your laptop in a normal-sized home is quite difficult (Interview 1, Orkney).

However, after the initial months of lockdown, it became possible to allow staff members to access offices on a rota basis, which was particularly helpful as far as broadband access was concerned for workers in rural and island locations. Interviewees also noted the benefits of home working during the winter months, when travel to and from work or to meetings in rural and island locations can often be difficult.

For some organisations there was a concern that users might miss out on support because they had neither internet access nor a telephone. However, for those based in rural and remote communities, not having to arrange face-to-face meetings could be an improvement on the pre-pandemic situation. An interviewee based on Orkney reported that her service had actually been able to reach more people because those on the outer isles had been difficult to support in the past. Similarly, an Aberdeenshire service noted that women based in the north of the shire did not have to wait until a support worker could travel the distance to see her or she had the resources for the long drive south to Aberdeen.

There are women that just can't leave the house to go to an appointment, but they can email us. Or when their partner is out of the house for whatever reason, whether he goes to work or he's nipping to the shops, they've got a couple of hours that they can hold a Zoom call with us (Interview 3, Aberdeenshire).

I covered Aberdeen and shire before the pandemic, so my travel time to get to some service users was horrendous. I can get more appointments in a day because I'm not travelling so far so that's really good (Interview 11, Aberdeen & Aberdeenshire).

Preference for telephone

We thought a lot of people would drop out when it changed to telephone counselling, but nobody dropped out at all (Interview 6, Aberdeen & Aberdeenshire)

All interviewees reported finding that service users expressed a preference for telephone contact instead of online – and to a certain extent instead of face-to-face meetings.

I think we assumed that everybody would be really happy to go onto Zoom and do video discussions for support and emotional counselling, and we just didn't find that's what people wanted. We had one or two people that were happy to continue doing that, but most people, it was too overwhelming, they couldn't get a safe space, it was easier for them to speak on the phone. So, we offer it to people and say "what would you prefer?" and everybody said telephone (Interview 1, Orkney).

This preference for telephone rather than online was related to many of the issues identified by previous researchers, including ease of use, concerns about privacy, lack of easy access to a computer, and fears that it was easier for an abuser to track a woman's contacts online. Interviewees also suggested that discussions by telephone could be more flexible in terms of length of time taken and availability, not being reliant on access to a meeting space. "So, we've been able to keep in touch with people as much as possible, and how often that they wanted" (Interview 1, Orkney). Moreover, interviewees reported broadband problems in rural and island areas, which impacted on survivors' ability to access online services as well as professionals' ability to provide them. Again, this finding emphasises inequities in terms of service provision in island and remote communities.

Interviewees also had the impression that many service users preferred to access support and counselling via the telephone rather than in face-to-face meetings. Several interviewees suggested that the public nature of such meetings in small communities was the reason for this. For example, on Orkney, organisations such as Women's Aid and Victim Support held meetings in their offices on the main street in Kirkwall and interviewees acknowledged that the public nature of even walking into the office could be off-putting for some potential users.

Similarly, while organisations such as Grampian Women's Aid and Fear Free (a service supporting domestic abuse survivors in the LGBT+ community) had previously travelled to meet with survivors in their own communities, it was suggested that, in a small rural community, this might publicly mark the service user out as a domestic-abuse survivor.

[W]hen we are going to these really rural locations where towns are really small and everyone sees a new person in town with a person, sort of gossip and stories can arise. So, I think that there's the counter-balance which is that it's good that we don't have to go and necessarily visit those places and cause a scene or... not cause a scene, but just draw attention, that sort of thing (Interview 11, Aberdeen & Aberdeenshire).

This echoes Moffitt and Fikowski's (2016) description of the challenges relating to anonymity and confidentiality when supporting victims of abuse in small, tight-knit, rural communities in northern Canada.

All the organisations interviewed had taken on board what they perceived to be their service users' clear preference for the opportunity to seek support via telephone and planned to be much more flexible in offering a choice of options, including online and via telephone, in the coming years.

Communication difficulties

Echoing the findings of previous studies, one of the main challenges relating to the distanced provision of support raised by the interviewees was the difficulty of forming a connection with service users and other staff members without face-to-face meetings. Interviewees commented on the difficulty and stressful nature of trying to support a survivor by telephone only, without the ability to read body language.

[W]hen you undertake an interview with somebody and you've got them sat across the table from you, you pick up such a lot from somebody's body language, just looks and things like that. And at the moment because we're doing interviews over the phone, ... [staff] just feel there's a barrier there.... So, when you're explaining something to somebody where you might notice in an interview "okay, they look as if they've not quite got that, I'll try it a different way", you don't necessarily pick up on those cues over the phone (Interview 7, Orkney).

Interviewees noted that the need to concentrate hard on the telephone meant that staff were exhausted and found it more difficult to make a friendly connection with service users. They also commented that it took more time and greater flexibility to support a service user by telephone only and that it was harder to build up a rapport with someone over the telephone. In addition, because staff were working from home, they did not have an immediate support system to turn to after such calls. While a staff member who had experienced a difficult meeting in an office setting could look to her colleagues to debrief, it was more difficult to provide a similar support network at a distance. Organisations had responded by introducing more frequent supervision sessions and staff meetings, but interviewees were aware that these were insufficient and that staff were stressed and exhausted by the demands being made on them. There was particular concern for new staff who had been recruited during lockdown and who had little experience of the support of an office setting.

Online opportunities

For some interviewees, one of the changes brought by a move to digital and online provision was that there was less need to be so geographically specific. While provision needed to stay within Scotland, because advice and support had to be positioned within Scottish government policy and the legal system, it was possible for telephone and online advice and support to be provided over a much wider area. Thus, for example, some of the interviewees who worked in Victim Support in the region were required to give some time each week to the provision of support via a Glasgow-based national helpline. While interviewees had mixed feelings about having to commit a day a week to the helpline, one acknowledged that it had given her experience of situations and a more mixed demographic that she would normally deal with in her usual role in a remote community.

I'm talking to people about issues which we wouldn't necessarily get up here. I'm talking to people who watched someone get stabbed to death right in front of them and things like that, things that don't really crop up in a place like Orkney (Interview 8, Orkney).

The move to a digital service also meant that service users who were no longer local could continue to make use of services based in north-east Scotland and Orkney. For example, Orkney service providers reported users who made use of island-based telephone support despite being based on the mainland or, in one example, in London. These were users who

had a previous history with the service who were able to continue relying on its support despite not being geographically local – location did not matter when the support was not provided face to face. Interestingly, two different service providers – one on Orkney and one covering Aberdeenshire – told us that, pre-pandemic, younger people would often wait to find support related to domestic or sexual violence until they moved to one of Scotland’s big cities for work or university. However, with the move to online and telephone provision, they were now more likely to seek support whilst still living in their rural or remote community.

Interviewees were also positive about the possibilities of online training. For both staff and their managers, pre-pandemic training often required long periods of travel, usually down to the central belt of Scotland to headquarters of organisations such as Scottish Women’s Aid in Edinburgh or Glasgow. Interviewees reported that up to three days might be spent in travelling to and from the central belt from Orkney for a few hours of training or a meeting. Since training was now provided online instead, this saved both time and money. Online meetings also allowed managers from different parts of the country to share experiences and support more easily, either within their different national organisations or as part of VAWPs. It was noted that, before lockdown, meetings of the Aberdeen VAWP might attract six participants, but once the meetings were transferred online they attracted up to 30 attendees. It was the fervently expressed wish of the managers we interviewed that such meetings and training sessions would continue to be offered online. These findings are in contrast to the work of scholars such as Pascoe (2021), who highlight the negative impacts of isolation from colleagues through working at home, arguing that these constitute barriers to self-care and professional development. For those based in remote, rural and island locations, professional development opportunities had actually become easier or grown in some cases.

Challenging the rural idyll

Digital communication was also used to raise awareness of the existence of domestic violence, even in remote and rural places. During the pandemic, service providers, local media and the police on Orkney collaborated with a local university student on the ‘Tak A Stand’ initiative, a social-media project that offered an anonymous space to share lived experience of sexual abuse, violence and rape, and to combat the idea that such things did not happen on Orkney. Echoing previous studies’ findings of a ‘cloak of silence’ (Little, 2017) around domestic violence in rural and remote locations, one interviewee noted “the community didn’t really want to acknowledge that this is the scale of things” (Interview 1 Orkney). On a small group of islands it had been difficult to raise awareness of survivors’ stories while also keeping them anonymous. The project’s Instagram account received over 300 submissions in the six months after December 2020 (Napier University, 2021). One interviewee noted that this has raised questions with the local police force about why these people had not made official reports, but suggested that this was easily explained by a fear of loss of anonymity: “[T]hey ... really struggle staying in Orkney and being visible as a survivor... even just amongst their peer group”. She also suggested that it was difficult to avoid the family and friends of an abuser, even if a prosecution was successful, in a small rural area: “Seeing them at different places and feeling that they know something about your life when you really would have liked to avoid them (Interview 1, Orkney).

This initiative challenges the tropes of a rural idyll - of island communities as places where gender-based violence does not happen. It also raises the issue of islands as bounded places in which the close-knit character of community relations means that the needs of the collective to conceive of itself as a safe and protective community are prioritised over the needs of

individuals and of less powerful groups and their lived experiences. What is more, Orkney's tourism industry packages the islands in ways that are closely aligned with this notion of rural idyll, drawing heavily on the imagery of Vikingness. Both of these constructions are threatened by the realities of existing island gender relations and of domestic violence. It is worth noting that tourism has already been heavily impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions

This article outlines findings from an academic study that investigated the impact of the pandemic on the work of organisations supporting women who are experiencing gender-based violence in three distinct locations in Scotland: urban (Aberdeen city), rural (Aberdeenshire) and island (Orkney). Comprising geographically remote and dispersed communities, the north east of mainland Scotland and the Orkney islands have presented particular service-provision issues for domestic-violence organisations, even in pre-pandemic times. This study analyses the challenges and opportunities afforded by a switch to a purely digital-based and telephone provision during lockdown in this area.

The research documents an increase in demand across the three types of locations, including in the reporting of historic-abuse cases, although this increase in demand was not necessarily reflected in higher reporting rates to the police. In the opinion of interviewees, reporting to the police was negatively impacted by close-knit rural and island communities and the need to keep living with the friends and families of abusers. This supports the arguments of previous researchers (Little, 2017; Little, 2020; Terry & Williams, 2019), but the special circumstances of the pandemic meant that victims might be even more afraid to report domestic violence because of fears that they themselves would be implicated in breaches of lockdown rules. The move to online provision of services was complicated by connectivity issues in the more rural and island communities that organisations supported, and by challenges relating to staff needing to work from home. These challenges were exacerbated by the caring and home-schooling responsibilities of the overwhelmingly female staff interviewed, with the burden of unpaid care during the pandemic disproportionately carried by women. At the same time, the move to online modes of communication was welcomed by staff in relation to offering opportunities for training, wider experience, networking and VAWP meetings. Staff based in rural, remote and island locations were able to access support and training quickly and flexibly and without devoting excess time and money to travel and accommodation. There was also use of social and local media to raise awareness of the prevalence of domestic violence in these locations and to counter the myth of idyllic and abuse-free rural and island communities.

Interviewees reported service-users' preference for telephone contact instead of online services – and, contrary to the findings of other studies (Cortis et al., 2021; Emezue, 2021), instead of face-to-face meetings in some cases. Reasons for the preference of telephone over online contact included ease of use, concerns about privacy, lack of easy access to the Internet and connectivity issues in rural and island areas, as well as fears that it was easier for an abuser to track a woman's contacts via the Internet. In relation to face-to-face meetings, the reason that some preferred service provision via the telephone was again related to the particular contexts of our research locations. In small communities, visits to a service organisation's offices, or a home visit by one of their staff, might publicly mark the service user out as a domestic-abuse survivor. Despite this preference for telephone contact by some service users, some staff found that telephone-based provision was rendering it more difficult to build a rapport with service users and left them exhausted. It also raised issues relating to privacy and security of data if telephone conversations were overheard.

While island studies has served to critique the trope of islands as isolated and bounded, COVID-19 has in many ways amplified the potential insularity of remote and island living, increasing the sense of islands in particular as “places of confinement”. Already extant fears of the repercussions of reporting domestic violence in a small, isolated community were increased by the difficulty of moving away from an abuser or their family during lockdown and concerns about reporting abuse in circumstances that might be considered by the police to having broken lockdown rules. The material realities of separation by the sea were highlighted, for example, by the difficulties of having refuges furnished.

However, it is also clear that the challenges of lockdown led to innovative and beneficial practices that helped service providers support victims of domestic violence while working around the confines of lockdown. The benefits of offering digital and telephone support were made clear to service providers during lockdown, leading to decisions to continue offering a flexible approach in a post-pandemic world. The pandemic also offered new opportunities to raise awareness of domestic violence in remote and island locations that are often portrayed as idyllic locations with low crime rates – particularly those like Orkney which have a growing tourism industry. Campaigns such as ‘Tak a Stand’ used digital spaces to allow victims to share their experiences anonymously while police, local media and service providers worked together to get the message out that it was permissible to break lockdown to escape domestic violence. At the same time such initiatives might conflict with local government and tourism industry’s needs to promote the islands as a “rural idyll”.

Focusing on the issue of domestic violence and domestic violence support services during a global pandemic, this article contributes to the scholarship on domestic violence in rural and remote locations. It particularly adds to the very recent literature on gender relations and inequalities in island communities, demonstrating the ways in which responses to domestic violence during COVID-19 have been shaped by and reflect Orkney’s islandness.

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