



## **Working Paper No 1.**

### **Domestic Abuse: Responding to the Shadow Pandemic Project.**

#### **Domestic Abuse-Family Violence, Disasters and Restrictions under Covid-19: An Overview.**

##### **Introduction**

The end of January 2020 marked the beginning of widespread social restrictions across the globe. These ranged from communities being placed under total lock-down to the introduction of somewhat less draconian ‘shelter at home’/‘stay at home’ directives as coronavirus (Covid-19) travelled the world. From January to June 2020 academic and media commentators became increasingly focused on the unintended consequences of these required changes in social behaviour. The potential for increases in violence(s) against women and children became an issue of focal concern.

To be clear, lock-down initiatives are not the cause of such violence(s). For instance, in 2019 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that during 2017 some 87,000 women and girls were intentionally killed worldwide with over 50% of those deaths occurring at the hands of a partner or ex-partner. This report concluded; ‘home’ remains the most dangerous place for women (and children). Such figures are repeated year on year. They are not the result of a new virus but are deaths which occur every year reflecting the fatal tip of the iceberg when it comes to violence(s) against women (and children). These figures, like the presence of covid-19, have costs. In 2014 Hoeffler and Fearon estimated that intimate partner violence cost the global economy in the region of \$4.4 trillion a year or just over 5% of the global GDP across every year.

It is also well documented that disasters, from tsunamis, to earthquakes and bushfires, have the capacity to add significantly to the toll paid by women and children at the hands of primarily male perpetrators. Work in India (Rao, 2016), the Philippines and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2018), Iran, (Sohrabizadeh, 2016) and Japan (Yoshihama et al 2019), all point to the increase in stresses placed on family life as a result of disasters. These events frequently take their toll on the poorest members of a community on a wide range of dimensions including economic abuse

and violence(s). The consequences are gendered (True 2013). Moreover, Lauve-Moon and Ferreira (2017) and Parkinson (2019) have pointed to the ways in which, when disasters happen, the vulnerabilities of those living with violence in their lives become compounded and their needs more complex. This finding is reiterated in the recent report by Pfitzner et al (2020) for women living under lockdown in Australia. In addition, evidence from other epidemics (like Ebola and Zika) pointedly indicates that access to health care as well as social protection, education, and justice becomes problematically compounded for women and children (Fraser 2020). Parkinson (2019) also observed that when disasters occur, in which the imperative is for everyone to pull together, violence against women and children can become invisible. Interestingly this has not yet proved to be the case under the conditions associated with Covid-19. Under these conditions home has become the central feature of public policy imperatives across the globe rendering home as a place of safety (from the virus) and unsafety (from violence) all at the same time. This contradiction has not gone unnoticed.

From the global to the local, concerns have been raised about the public policy embrace of 'stay at home' directives especially for women and children. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women stated that confinement would foster tension and strain created by security, health and money worries increasing isolation for women with violent partners. She described the situation as "a perfect storm for controlling, violent behaviour behind closed doors," naming the gendered consequences of Covid-19 isolation restrictions as 'The Shadow Pandemic' (UN Women 2020).

To be explicit, social distancing/stay at home directives have the capacity to put everyone under stress - not least for those whose jobs were lost or might be threatened as a result. Moreover there is evidence to suggest that violence against women does increase when partners are put under financial stress (see inter alia Fraser 2020 and the work cited above). When financial stresses are added to those lives for whom co-existence with an abusive partner might comprise surviving in the space afforded by routine times spent apart, then it is possible to get an insight into what those same lives might look like when those spaces are taken away. The insecurities felt by everyone during the first half of 2020 and ongoing, about money, jobs, health, food supplies are the kinds of insecurities felt *routinely* by women and children living their lives with an abusive partner. Such insecurities can be multiplied when the spaces afforded by work, school, meeting with friends and so on are taken away. As Williamson et al (2020) have pointed out, 'Perpetrators can use the lockdown measures as a tool of control and coercion by, for example, either insisting on strict lockdown or failing to protect the health of family members'. The question remains; have these kinds of consequences been realized?

### **Stay at Home Directives: Violent Consequences?**

Early evidence of the consequences of stay at home directives for women and children were voiced by UN Women and media coverage of the pressures being faced by support services. For example UN Women (April 2020) reported that incidents of domestic violence went up by 30% in France since the introduction of lockdown on March 17<sup>th</sup>, emergency calls for domestic violence went up in Argentina by 25% post lockdown on March 20<sup>th</sup>, Cyprus and Singapore logged an increase in helpline calls of 30% and 33%, with similar increases in demands in reports and requests for shelter being reported in Canada, Spain, the UK, the US,

and Germany (see also Usher et al 2020). Similar concerns have been aired in Australia (see inter alia Pfitzer et al 2020; Women's Safety NSW, 2020). Early media coverage pointed to an increase in domestic violence reports under lockdown in Hubei Province, China and particularly gave voice to the pressures faced by many non-statutory organisations in meeting the increasing demands for support. For example, widely reported in the UK media was the data from Refuge, a UK women's shelter organisation, which showed that on average calls and contacts to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline seeking their help had increased by 49% for the week commencing 6th April compared to pre-lockdown (Refuge, 2020). In addition, the UK Home Affairs Committee (2020: 8) reported,

The Men's Advice Line for male victims of domestic abuse had an increase in calls of 16.6% in the week of 30 March, and a 42% increase in visits to its website and the Respect phone line, which offers help for domestic abuse perpetrators who want to change and stop being violent, had a 26.86% increase in calls in the week of 30 March, while its website received a 125% increase in visits in the same period compared to the week before.

Thus at the same time as lockdown impacts on women's and children's lives, particularly in making it more difficult to report any abuse privately and with safety, it also carries consequences for the delivery of support services, pushing that support away from the face to face and more in the direction of web chats and so on. Whilst the evidence cited above points to increased demands on support services, evidence on changes in reporting behaviours to the criminal justice system, primarily the police, is yet inconclusive.

In a systematic review of 17 reports on Covid-19 and domestic abuse, Peterman et al (2020) point to the inherent difficulties in placing too much weight on administrative data in reporting behaviour now. Recognising that the under-reporting of violence against women is commonplace in a wide range of jurisdictions (the reasons for which are well-documented) they go on to point out that looking at such data on a month by month basis reveals little about wider trends over time and/or the accuracy of the data itself. This can produce contradictory findings. For example in two studies based in the US, one suggests a 10% increase in calls to the police for domestic abuse largely driven by households with prior calls of such abuse (Leslie and Wilson, 2020), the second reports a decrease in such calls in the two cities studied (Mohler et al 2020). In a study based in Dallas, Piquero et al (2020) report a short-term spike in reports followed by a decrease in reporting behaviour. Work by Campedelli et al (2020) indicates no significant change in reported incidents with Gerell et al (2020) reporting a decrease in reports of indoor assaults in Sweden. Freeman (2020) also reports no evidence of an increase in recorded incidents of domestic assault on the introduction of social distancing in New South Wales, including the figures for more serious assaults for which it is suggested police involvement might still be expected. Moreover, as the work of Fitzpatrick et al (2020) has demonstrated, reports of child abuse decline (in their study by 65%) when schools are closed. So when availability of services are added to what might amount to small changes in reporting behaviour (when women are reluctant to report in any event) administrative data over short time periods offers little reliable insight into the wider picture of events.

There is, however, increasing documented evidence concerning the impact of lockdown on the wider delivery of services for women and children. As has been mentioned above, Pfitzner et al (2020) have pointed to the increasing complexity of needs for support women are presenting to services: a finding also endorsed by the work of Sibley et al (2020) in New

Zealand and in New South Wales (WSNSW, 2020). With increased calls to helplines being documented in a wide range of jurisdictions across the globe, some governments have been pressed into providing (at least) additional financial support. For example, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2020 the UK Government announced a £76 million package for domestic abuse charities in recognition of the strains they were under.

Indeed, it is important to note that there has been a wide range of activity within different criminal justice jurisdictions endeavouring to ensure that the message that domestic abuse is unacceptable and remains a serious issue of concern is still visible. This has ranged from hashtag campaigns (the UK Government's #youarenotalone campaign), to the establishment of new policing taskforce in Victoria, Australia called Operation Ribbon focused on contacting high-risk perpetrators and their victims. Such initiatives have stretched out into wider, and in some instances new, community initiatives involving the use of pharmacies as safe places in which women are able to report abuse (UK and Australia), and hoteliers making empty accommodation available to women seeking safety from abuse (France). So it is evident that much activity is taking place, however as Ingala-Smith (2020) tellingly reminds us 'coronavirus doesn't make a killer out of a man who has never been controlling, abusive and/or violent to the woman he is in a relationship with'. Hence keeping the continuing nature of domestic abuse in view is important and keeping the perpetrator in view is equally important.

### **Conclusion: Unanswered Questions?**

Much has yet to unfold concerning the impact of this global pandemic on the lives of women and children. Evidence from disasters indicates that there are good grounds for believing that they as a group will pay a high price as a result of the unintended consequences of the policy directives adopted in response to this pandemic. That price will of course not be uniformly felt. Work already points to the disproportionate consequences for women whose migration/immigration/work permit status might be fragile (Segrave 2020) and for others for whom the only way out of life with an abusive partner under these circumstances might be suicide (Southall Black Sisters 2020) or to make themselves intentionally homeless. These women can also comprise those most hard to reach and support, which poses further questions for wider support services and the responses available to them. Questions also remain for how the police and the courts face the ongoing challenge of taking domestic abuse seriously and at the same time ensuring that they appropriately engage women and keep the perpetrator in view. The space for innovative practices has been created. It will be interesting to see how it unfolds.

The space has also been created for wider community engagement in tackling violence(s) against women and children as new initiatives by pharmacies in some jurisdictions demonstrate. This might also be the moment in which capacity for bystanders and other members of the community to be equally proactive could also be harnessed (Meyer and Fitz-Gibbon, 2020). In addition, general practitioners, hospitals, Accident and Emergency Centres, and schools are also important venues for women and children as well as being important centres for data collection, not just about the virus but also about the unintended consequences of policies put in place to tackle it. In many ways this moment has afforded a space to grapple with violence(s) against women and children in ways not foreseen at the beginning of 2020. That by 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2020, 27 women had already been killed by their partner or former partner

in Australia (Destroy the Joint 26/06/20) and that the Femicide Census in the UK had documented 51 such deaths awaiting further clarification on another 8 (date accessed 27/06/20) emphasises the ongoing imperative to continue to seek better outcomes for these women in the spaces provided by this moment.

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