

A Perfect Storm: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them

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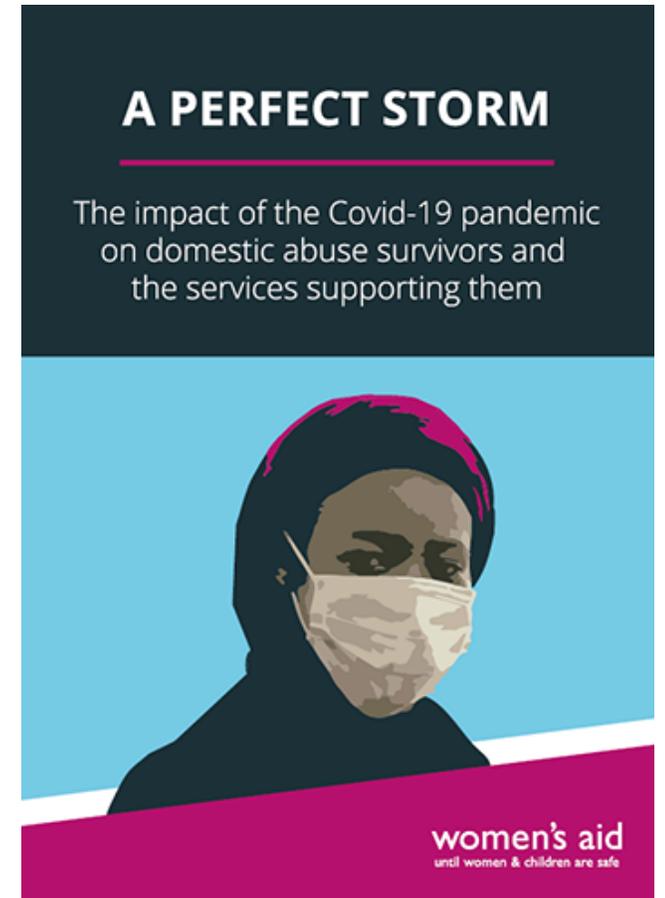
What is domestic abuse

- Domestic abuse takes place within an intimate or family relationship using a pattern of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading or violent behaviour making it very hard for women to end the relationship
- Coercive control is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.
- It can involve any or all of physical or sexual violence; emotional and/or psychological abuse; financial or economic abuse; harassment and stalking; and online or digital abuse
- Domestic abuse can happen to anyone, regardless of age, social background, gender, religion, sexuality or ethnicity". It is very common and in most cases is experienced by women and perpetrated by men.

A Perfect Storm: Women's Aid research on the impact of Covid-19

1. In what ways have abusers used the Covid-19 pandemic as a tool for domestic abuse?
2. In what ways have the choices and needs of women experiencing domestic abuse been impacted by Covid-19?
3. In what ways has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the specialist domestic abuse support sector?

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/evidence-hub/>



Abusers have used the pandemic as a tool for abuse

- 67% said that their abuser had used the pandemic as a tool for abuse in one or more way/s, including:
- 38% said their abuser refused to take precautions against the virus.
- 10% said they'd tried to leave and the abuser had used restrictions to stop them leaving
- 30% said their abuser had blamed them for the economic impact of Covid-19 on their household.

"I'm shielding and [my abuser] uses not getting me food or medication to control me".

"...my ex-partner has used his knowledge of my reduced support network to escalate his emotionally abusive & controlling behaviour - thinking that I have no one to turn to..."

(Women's Aid April and June Survivor Surveyw)

Survivors are experiencing increased isolation and fear

For women living with the abuser, since lockdown:

- 93% said the pandemic had impacted their exp of abuse in one or more way/s, including:
- 61% said the violence/abuse has got worse
- 55% felt more afraid
- 68% felt they had no-one to turn to
- 32% felt friends and family couldn't help them leave

(Women's Aid June Survivor Survey)

"I'm lonely, feel isolated, like a sitting duck."

"... when he had been abusive no-one would come and help due to the Covid-19..."

"I have nobody to tell what I am going through I am desperate to get out but he is always home".

Bringing back memories of past abuse

For women who had experienced abuse in the past:

- 53% said that the pandemic had triggered memories of abuse and affected their mental health.
- 23% felt more afraid
- 13% said their abuser had made contact again because of the pandemic

“Living with my ex felt like being imprisoned in my home, this lockdown has brought back feelings of fear, loneliness, isolation.”

, “I feel more anxious about going out and more worried he could find me as my normal routine has been taken away. I feel isolated”

(Women’s Aid June Survivor Survey)

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Survivors are seeing their means of escape reduced

For women living with the abuser:

- 48% felt they couldn't leave or get away because of the pandemic;
- 36% felt afraid of going to a refuge service during the pandemic; and
- 26% had tried unsuccessfully to access domestic abuse support.

"My partner was violent just before lockdown but because of social distancing I couldn't get him to go to his parents as he and his family said they were vulnerable."

"I am working from home and my partner is a key worker but been home all the time I can't get out to view flats and leave"

"Leaving hasn't been something I can consider because of the pandemic. Things are escalating and I'm sure it's going to continue getting worse."

Child survivors also experienced worsening abuse during lockdown.

Of survivors with children:

- 53.1% told us that their children have witnessed more abuse towards them
- 37.5% said their abuser had shown an increase in abusive behaviour directed towards their children.
- 47% expressed their fear that the children would be left alone with the abuser if they became ill

"I have two small children ... They are experiencing more [abuse] as they are witnessing it more"

"My biggest concern is that my child may be given back to our abuser if I were to become seriously unwell with the virus or not survive....."

(Women's Aid April Survivor Survey)

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Impact on local domestic abuse support services

Service providers have reported that their capacity to support survivors is impacted by Covid-19:

- Impact on fundraising, including concerns around future funding
- Impact on staff including challenges around caring roles and negative impact on mental health
- Challenges preparing for remote working
- Concerns around future demand
- All providers expect to see an increase in demand before the year is out (from June 2020)

“Remote working was a challenge which was difficult for some people, homeschooling and childcare has also disproportionately affected our staff as all women.”

“Balance of work and life has been difficult to achieve especially since 60 of our 61 staff are women and most are still in caring roles. Some are sole carer.”

Impact on demand – local service providers

- Reduced availability of refuge spaces and move on accommodation during first national lockdown
- In total, refuge services in England posted 1,281 vacancies during the full lockdown period. This was a 40.6% decrease from the same period in 2019, when providers posted 2,157 vacancies.

“We have found that more women referred to our community-based services have needed longer term and more in-depth support than before the pandemic. We think this is because they generally have complex needs and also there is a lack of availability of other agencies to support them. We need more trained staff in order to cope with demand in the future.”

Learning

New ways of delivering services through digital technology

“Some of our video group work has worked well for clients that would have found it difficult to attend a group for various reasons and I want to continue this as well as the valuable face to face work that benefits others.”

Improvements in IT and communications within the organisation

“New ways of working have been embraced and we now see the opportunities of using electronic communication methods more frequently.”

Better public awareness of domestic abuse

“I think the awareness of DA [domestic abuse] and the impact on victims has been raised significantly during the pandemic and public awareness has increased which can only be positive.”

Local support and better local partnership working

“Other organisations in the community reaching out, e.g. local museums, the huge increase in local volunteering and neighbourliness, which could aid DA [domestic abuse] survivors in the long run.”

Further information is available at:

Covid-19 impact resource hub:

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-resource-hub/>

Perfect Storm and other Women's Aid research:

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/evidence-hub/>

Contact us at researchandpolicy@womensaid.org.uk

Thank you



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