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Domestic Violence and Abuse, Coronavirus, and the media narrative

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Abstract:

Following lockdown in countries around the world come reports of a ‘surge’ or ‘spikes’ in the number of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) cases. It is critical to contextualise this – more men are not starting to be abusive or violent, rather the patterns of abuse are becoming more frequent. Spiking and surging make us think in terms of more one-off incidents – but it is more likely that the pattern of abuse already there is increasing in terms of frequency and type because both parties remain together at all times. Amidst such a crisis it is imperative that we continue to see the dynamics of DVA as both a pattern of abusive behaviours and a product of gendered social and cultural norms rather than a reaction to a specific factor or event such as COVID-19.

Key words:

Domestic Violence and Abuse,

Coronavirus,

Media

Word count:

2084

1 On Monday 23rd March 2020, the Governments in the UK issued a series of announcements asking the
2 public to stay at home during the coronavirus pandemic. Following lockdown in countries around the
3 world came reports of a 'surge' or 'spikes' in the number of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) cases.
4 In this article we argue that it is critical to contextualise these reports – more men are not starting to
5 be abusive or violent - rather the patterns of abuse are becoming more frequent and, in some cases,
6 being reported more readily. Spiking and surging make us think in terms of more one-off incidents –
7 but rather the pattern of abuse that is already there is increasing in terms of frequency and type
8 because both parties remain together at all times. As three experts in this area we urge the media to
9 make this distinction.
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19 From the outset, specialist DVA services were preparing for a potential increase in both the occurrence
20 and reporting of abuse. Concerns were raised by a number of charities, Women's Aid England, Scottish
21 Women's Aid, Respect UK, Safelives, and Rape Crisis (both Scotland and England/Wales), about the
22 potential problems they would face with increased demand given the already limited services they
23 were able to provide following austerity cuts to funding across the sector. ⁱ It was also likely that
24 without government intervention many key staff would be furloughed. Women's Aid (England) have
25 requested emergency funding of £48.2 million. ⁱⁱ The Scottish Government made available just over
26 £1.5 million to Scottish Women's Aid and Scottish Rape Crisis. ⁱⁱⁱ
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35 Early data from those countries who went into lock-down earlier than the UK has suggested that
36 during self-isolation, reports of DVA have increased. In China for example, a report suggests that
37 numbers of reports of abuse increased threefold when comparing figures from February 2019 to
38 February 2020^{iv}. Similarly, in France, reports of abuse increased by over 30%, while there was a 33%
39 rise in helpline calls in Singapore^{vi}. Spain has reported 18% more calls to emergency helplines in the
40 first 2 weeks of lockdown compared to the month before^{vii}, and reports from India suggest domestic
41 violence has doubled^{viii}. Finally, bearing in mind that data is emerging all the time, Australia has
42 reported a 75% increase in internet searches relating to support for domestic violence victims^{ix}. We
43 also know that some communities, who are subject to different types of social inequalities, will be
44 disproportionately impacted by covid-19 and therefore covid-19 and DVA. For example, women with
45 no resource to public funds, BME workers in frontline key services, those with underlying health
46 conditions and disabilities, and those living in poverty.
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As services have begun to address the impact of the current lock-down on potential victims-survivors^x and perpetrators^{xi}, many have moved to providing on-line support through on-line chat, video calling, and telephone. Women’s Aid (England) maintain that demand for these services has risen by 41% since the lockdown has been imposed.^{xii} Whilst on-line support may be helpful for many, replacing face-to-face support normally provided within communities is not ideal. The key principle of working in this field is to ensure that any intervention or support does not increase the risk to victim-survivor, something which is more difficult to establish when not meeting face-to-face in a safe space^{xiii}. Organisations have now issued guidance to victim-survivor to help them through this difficult time and further guidance has been issued for informal support networks such as family and friends^{xiv}.

One of the issues currently facing the DVA sector is that refuges and safe houses are unable to take new residents due to concerns about coronavirus contamination and sickness levels in key working staff. Residents in refuges are unable to leave and move on due to problems accessing other housing at this time. These problems, which mirror those experienced in the intersection between health and social care has led to suggestions that women and children fleeing abuse should be housed in hotels – away from their belongings and necessary means to exist – kitchens to cook food, washing machines, separate rooms, further isolating them during this difficult time. This has also opened up the perennial debate about who should be removed from a household with campaigners arguing for the removal of perpetrators into alternative accommodation so women and children can stay in their own homes. However, concerns have been raised about how this will work in practice and similar issues arise in terms of the availability of support for perpetrators to address and change their behaviour^{xv}.

Alongside these practical measures, we have witnessed an increase, as many in the sector feared, in the number of domestic violence homicides. In the three weeks following lock-down there were 16 domestic abuse murders in England and Wales^{xvi} – a figure which continues to rise alarmingly. This number is higher than the normal rates reported by counting dead women and the femicide census^{xvii}. As a result, DVA services have called on the respective UK governments to issue clear guidance to potential victim-survivors and perpetrators during this time. Government guidance^{xviii} recognizes that for some people social isolation is dangerous. It also makes clear that the police will come to assist in cases of DVA and that fleeing an abusive home is classified as essential travel.

Despite the efforts of frontline services to adapt to the current circumstances in order to continue to support victim-survivor, we have unfortunately seen a lack of understanding in the media reporting of the murders which have recently taken place. The media has referred to these cases as

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‘coronavirus murders’^{xxix} This is unhelpful and points to a much bigger problem in the way in which as a society we understand DVA and the reasons why it happens. If perpetrators see messages which identify the cause of abuse as an impacts of the virus, then this undermines the messages being presented by perpetrator services, which is that individuals have a choice whether to use violence and abuse and that help is out there if they want support to change^{xx}. It also further constructs the narrative that the virus is to blame and that ordinarily murders such as these – by ordinary men – would not be happening.

Whilst we are undoubtedly in unprecedented times, this type of blurring of causes and excuses is not new. This happens in relation to other situations where a seemingly erroneous context is presented as causing abuse. The current situation reminds us of earlier research projects^{xxixxii} we were involved in where we (the authors) received funding to study the apparent links between football and domestic abuse. This came about as a result of the narrative being taken forward by local and national media, based on quantitative data showing a correlation between football matches and DVA, which led to suggestions that football was a cause of DVA. A key conclusion of this research was that focusing on football - or other specific factors or events, in this case COVID 19 - as causative risks over-simplifying and ‘re-incidentalisng’ DVA; seeing it as one incident or set of discreet incidents rather than facilitating a more nuanced understanding of DVA as a form of ‘coercive control’ embedded within an ongoing pattern of behaviour and wider social relations of gendered power and other types of inequality. The findings of this original study can be applied to the current coronavirus pandemic and the daily updates that tell us that domestic violence rates around the world are increasing. While this increase may be linked to ‘triggers’ – isolation, pressure, boredom, frustrations, anger – coronavirus should not be positioned as a cause of DVA. The key here is how the public confuse ‘normal’ relationship tensions and strains – which are likely to be high during lockdown – with DVA. The linking of the term ‘domestic’ with the idea that we are all in our homes experiencing tensions needs to be separated. They are not the same. DVA is about power and control; and the use of that power to abuse and coercively control another person.

It is also important to note that media reports are not the same as prevalence. While other crimes are falling during this pandemic, DVA is not and the lack of alternative ‘news’ and increasing murders make it a more newsworthy issue. In non-virus times two women a week are murdered by their partners, these crimes rarely making the news^{xxixxiii}. So why are they being focused upon now? The ‘virus’ element and lockdown makes it more newsworthy. This creates a media loop in which the misreporting of these crimes perpetuates the incident based perception of abuse which subsequently

1 leads to further misreporting and misunderstanding. This is a problem because many statutory and
2 other agencies also continue to perceive this type of abuse in terms of incidents. Whether that is the
3 police, courts, or health practitioners, when the reality for victim-survivor is that this is an underlying,
4 on-going, fluctuating pattern of abuse.
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9 This means that the reality of abuse becomes hidden and the domestic abuse becomes invisible. The
10 naming of domestic abuse killings as 'Covid-19 murders' is therefore dangerous as, like links to
11 football, it masks the reality that perpetrator are everyday people. These men are not monsters, they
12 are your mate down the pub, the 'caring dad', the family next door. Much of the context of the
13 lockdown magnifies existing abusive behaviours: isolation from friends, family and employment; the
14 opportunity for constant surveillance; restrictions on access to the outside world and limitations on
15 food.
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23 A further problem which comes from the media focus on domestic abuse as individual incidents is that
24 it implies that we are in a situation that will dissipate after COVID when, in reality, DVA was there
25 before COVID and will be there after it. Whilst there may be increases in abuse and reporting, many
26 victim-survivor will use their many coping strategies to survive the coming weeks in social isolation
27 and not report, this explains why in some countries reporting has decreased. Specialist services know
28 from increases in reporting after school holidays and other times when families are in closer proximity,
29 that reports are likely to increase for a period of time after lock-down has ended. For many it will be
30 the time when they can leave the house, re-charge, and get support that they will find the strength to
31 report and leave an abusive situation.
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41 What we hope we have shown in this article is that COVID is not a cause of domestic abuse and that
42 focusing on external events – be it a health crisis, political instability, or football a match - masks the
43 underlying gendered causes^{xxiv} of DVA and potentially offers perpetrators excuses for their abusive
44 behaviour. Amidst such a crisis it is imperative that we continue to see the dynamics of DVA as both
45 a pattern of abusive behaviours and a product of gendered social and cultural norms rather than a
46 reaction to a specific factor or event such as COVID 19. If, as a society, we continue to offer excuses
47 to perpetrators we make it more difficult for victim-survivors to get help, pandemic or not.
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56 Sources of support:

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58 Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline is also available 24/7 via
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1 phone on 0800 027 1234, email helpline@sdafmh.org.uk or web chat at
2 www.sdafmh.org.uk. Specially trained staff are available to offer support and
3 information for anyone experiencing domestic abuse, those concerned about
4 someone else and professionals with questions.
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6 Women's Aid England. On-line chat services: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/chat-to-us/>
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8 Welsh Women's Aid run the Live Fear Free helpline on 0808 80 10 800. You can also access support
9 through their direct email service: info@livefearfreehelpline.wales. You can also contact the Live Fear
10 Free Helpline by text 24/7 on 078600 77 333.
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12 Respect UK run a helpline for perpetrators who want to change their behaviour: 0808 8024040.
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14 Male victims can access support through the Men's Advice Line on: 0808 801 0327.
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20 ⁱ <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Joint-VAWG-Sector-COVID-19.pdf>
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23 ⁱⁱ https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-calls-for-emergency-cash-injection-during-covid-19-crisis/?fbclid=IwAR38ihG9Vt2k4Eve8K24d_ByWgLT8Vd3aL75j9ugsGm21kUFGCNHA6wpU
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25 ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.scot/news/support-for-victims-of-domestic-violence-during-covid-19-outbreak/>
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27 ^{iv} <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic>
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29 ^v https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/domestic-violence-increases-in-france-during-covid-19-lockdown/
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31 ^{vi} <https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/03/isolated-with-your-abuser-why-covid-19-outbreak-has-seen-uptick-in-family-violence/>
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33 ^{vii} <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>
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36 ^{viii} <https://www.article-14.com/post/india-hit-by-global-domestic-violence-pandemic-in-lockdown>
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39 ^{ix} <https://www.france24.com/en/20200406-un-chief-decries-horrifying-rise-in-domestic-violence-amid-virus-lockdown>
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42 ^x <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-coronavirus-safety-advice-for-survivors/>
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44 ^{xi} <https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/covid-19>
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47 ^{xii} https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-calls-for-emergency-cash-injection-during-covid-19-crisis/?fbclid=IwAR38ihG9Vt2k4Eve8K24d_ByWgLT8Vd3aL75j9ugsGm21kUFGCNHA6wpU
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49 ^{xiii} <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/covid-19-new-evaw-briefing-urges-government-to-act-now-to-prevent-secondary-abuse-disaster/>
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52 ^{xiv} <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Friends%20and%20family%20blog%20covid-19.pdf>
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54 ^{xv} <https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/covid-19>
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57 ^{xvi} <https://twitter.com/CommonsHomeAffs/status/1250760207946440704>
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59 ^{xvii} https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-does-not-cause-homicide-abusers-do/?fbclid=IwAR0RwUok5XXZ4_0kikC1H1_KAT9c5BrjUy6GdnKGUujCZp5mn4nPFilRsr4
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2 ^{xviii} <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-and-domestic-abuse>
3 <https://www.gov.scot/news/support-for-victims-of-domestic-violence-during-covid-19-outbreak/>

4 ^{xix} [https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-does-not-cause-homicide-abusers-](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-does-not-cause-homicide-abusers-do/?fbclid=IwAR0RwUoK5XXZ4_0kikC1H1_KAT9c5BrjUy6GdnKGUujCZp5mn4nPFjIRsr4)
5 [do/?fbclid=IwAR0RwUoK5XXZ4_0kikC1H1_KAT9c5BrjUy6GdnKGUujCZp5mn4nPFjIRsr4](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-does-not-cause-homicide-abusers-do/?fbclid=IwAR0RwUoK5XXZ4_0kikC1H1_KAT9c5BrjUy6GdnKGUujCZp5mn4nPFjIRsr4)

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13 ^{xxii} Brooks-Hay, O. and Lombard, N. (2018) 'Home game': domestic abuse and football; the role of research in policy and
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17 ^{xxiii} <https://kareningalasmith.com/counting-dead-women/>

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19 ^{xxiv} McFeely, C., Whiting, N., Lombard, N., Brooks, O., Burman, M. and McGowan, M. (2013) *Domestic Abuse and Gender*
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