

MONASH GENDER AND FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION CENTRE

Family and Domestic Violence, Disasters and the COVID-19 Restrictions

Introduction

The end of January 2020 marked the beginning of widespread Government enforced social restrictions across the globe. These ranged from communities being placed under total lockdown to the introduction of 'stay at home' directives as coronavirus (Covid-19) travelled the world. Academic and media commentators have become increasingly focused on the unintended consequences of these required changes in social behaviour, within which the potential for increases in violence(s) against women and children has become an issue of focal concern.

It is 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). 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 recent reports by Pfitzner et al (2020a, 2020b) 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.

From the global to the local, concerns have been raised about the impact of 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).

The impact of the Covid-19 Stay at Home directives: Early evidence

Early evidence of the consequences of stay at home directives for women and children were voiced by UN Women and in 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 17 March, emergency calls for domestic violence went up in Argentina by 25% post lockdown on 20 March, 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 emerged in Australia (see inter alia Pfitzner et al 2020a, 2020b; Women's Safety NSW, 2020).

Early media coverage particularly gave voice to the pressures faced by many non-statutory organisations in meeting the

increasing demands for support. For example, data from Refuge, a UK women's shelter organisation, showed that on average calls and contacts to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline seeking their help had increased by 49% for the week commencing 6 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 abuse, it also carries consequences for the delivery of support services, pushing that support away from the face to face. 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 not yet conclusive.

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. 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 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, while Gerell et al (2020) report 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 evidence concerning the impact of lockdown on the wider delivery of services for women and children experiencing violence. Pfitzner et al (2020a, 2020b) 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 globally, some governments have responded by providing additional financial support. For example, on the 2 May 2020 the UK Government announced a £76 million package for domestic abuse charities in recognition of the increased demand.

There has been a wide range of activity during the restrictions from 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 in Victoria (Australia) of Operation Ribbon, a police run initiative on contacting high-risk perpetrators and their victims. Community initiatives include the use of pharmacies as safe places in which women are able to report abuse (UK, France), and hoteliers making empty accommodation available to women seeking safety from abuse (France).

Conclusion: Unanswered Questions?

Much has yet to unfold concerning the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the lives of women and children. Research on the impacts of previous disasters evidences that women and children as a group will likely 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, cited in House of Commons, 2020). These women can also comprise those most hard to reach and support, which poses further questions for wider support services. Questions also remain for how the police and the courts face the ongoing challenge of taking domestic violence 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. This might also be the moment in which capacity for bystander interventions could be harnessed (Meyer and Fitz-Gibbon, 2020). In addition, general practitioners, hospitals, Accident and Emergency Centres, and schools are important venues for women and children as well as being important centres for data collection, not just about the virus but also the unintended consequences of the policies put in place to tackle it.

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