



Domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) during COVID-19 lockdown for the period 30/3/20 - 22/05/20



CRIME AND JUSTICE

Domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) during COVID-19 lockdown, for the period 30/3/20 – 22/05/20

Justice Analytical Services

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1. Introduction

The following paper outlines emerging trends that have been identified from qualitative research on the experience of individuals and families experiencing domestic abuse.

The research took place over the initial 8 weeks of the COVID-19 'lockdown', with week 1 being considered to commence on 30/03/20 and week 8 commencing 18/05/20.

Evidence for this report has been gleaned from three sources:

- Semi-structured telephone interviews with Scottish statutory and third sector organisations involved in supporting people experiencing or perpetrating domestic abuse or other forms of VAWG;¹
- Documentary evidence provided by organisations involved in supporting people experiencing or perpetrating domestic abuse or other forms of VAWG; and

¹ 42 third sector and statutory organisation/services provided evidence via telephone interviews.

- Written qualitative empirical examples provided by members of Police Scotland's Domestic Abuse Champions' network.

The services/organisations involved in the research have been anonymised. The majority of organisations that participated primarily supported female victims of domestic abuse and the majority of incidents referred to involved a female victim and male perpetrator.² Where possible, the terminology of "victim" and "perpetrator" has been used throughout the paper in order to maintain the anonymity of the small number of organisations that support all genders of victim.

2. Limitations of the research

There are a number of important caveats to this research.

This was a qualitative evidence-gathering exercise, and while it provides valuable insights into the experience of victims and families living with domestic abuse, it provides only a partial picture. As with other Scottish Government research on domestic abuse, it should be noted that even the most detailed and high quality measure of domestic abuse will only relate to a small proportion of the total domestic abuse experienced in Scotland. Domestic abuse is an under-reported and often hidden crime. The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey, for example, estimates that the police came to know about just under one-in-five of the most recent incidents of partner abuse during 2016-17 and 2017-18, therefore there will clearly be some limit to the value of any single measure as an accurate reflection of total domestic abuse in Scotland.

For this evidence-gathering exercise, there are also a number of specific caveats that limit the reliability of this research:

- The organisations sampled varied in their remit, client base and institutional processes, which may significantly affect the reporting of their and their clients' experience, and the reliability and robustness of data provided;
- The majority of local women' aid centres were not included in the sample;³
- Some organisations provided intelligence more frequently than others;
- Organisations varied in the data metrics they provided;
- The research reflects only the voice of victims engaged in services.⁴

3. Summary of main findings

² This is consistent with reported domestic crime statistics for Scotland.

³ Scottish Women's Aid advised that local centres were unable to participate in the research due to prioritising frontline work.

⁴ Some research suggests victims of domestic abuse do not always engage in specialist services. SafeLives Whole Lives Survivor Survey 2020, for example, found that "67% of victims had never accessed support from a specialist domestic abuse practitioner".

While there are some anomalies in the trends identified (particularly in the experience of minority groups), there are several consistent trends reported by services that relate to victims' and children's experience.

The key points emerging from the research are as follows:

Referrals:

- Referral rates for the majority of organisations decreased, significantly for some, in the initial 2-3 weeks of lockdown, but there were some indications that referrals are increasing as lockdown progresses.
- The view of the majority of services was that there may be an increase in reporting and referrals once lockdown restrictions begin to be relaxed.

Support for victims:

- The mental health impact of lockdown was a significant concern for many organisations.
- Digital exclusion was reported as a barrier to engaging with some clients
- Across the board there were continued reports of clients contacting domestic abuse services for general support, particularly around gas and electricity, housing and food access.

Risk and safety planning:

- Many services reported that, although perpetrator tactics did not change significantly, the impact and risk of domestic abuse has been magnified by lockdown.
- The service-generated risks of safely contacting victims who reside with/are being monitored by an abusive partner was a major challenge for many organisations.
- Throughout the initial phase of lockdown, innovative options for safety planning were fairly limited.
- During lockdown, services reported it was more difficult for victims to separate from an abusive partner.
- There are some specific challenges related to lockdown for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women

Criminal Justice:

- Services consistently communicated a number of concerns related to the impact of amended criminal justice procedures on women's risk of domestic abuse.

- Some services communicated concerns that the “business as usual” message was not being transmitted effectively to victims.

Perpetrator tactics

- There were some instances in which perpetrators of domestic abuse used abusive behaviours that were apparently specific to lockdown.

Children:

- Services report that, in some cases, children have experienced domestic abuse more severely during lockdown.
- Children’s support services reported challenges experienced around engaging with and supporting children remotely.

Child contact:

- Services reported a range of abusive behaviours apparently specific to lockdown related to conflict over child contact.
- Services reported some ambiguity in the available guidance and legal advice relating to conflict over child contact during lockdown.

Prostitution and Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE):

- Organisations reported a significant economic impact of lockdown for women in prostitution/CSE. Services had concerns that women were entering/re-entering prostitution and CSE as a result of these economic challenges.
- Services reported concerns that, due to the decrease in people in public, women in prostitution were resorting to higher-risk practices
- A number of services report that the stigma associated with working during lockdown prevented women in prostitution from safety planning as effectively as usual.

Experience of support services/organisations:

- Overall, services had limited operational capacity during the initial phase of lockdown.
- As lockdown progressed, many services explored creative ways of engaging with clients.
- Some domestic abuse support staff reported experiencing vicarious trauma.

The remainder of this paper provides additional information on identified trends within each of the identified thematic areas.

4. Referral rates

Referral rates for the majority of organisations decreased, significantly for some, in the initial 2-3 weeks of lockdown but there are some indications that referrals were increasing as lockdown progressed. Services provided that referrals reduced from between 25% to 100% compared to equivalent periods prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

Services that receive referrals from criminal justice partners, such as court advocacy organisations or perpetrator programmes, reported significant reductions related to the disruption in criminal court processes. Services that primarily offered telephone outreach (prior to the lockdown period) experienced a less significant decrease in their referral rates compared with organisations that primarily offered face-to-face engagement.

By week 3, referral rates became more varied across the board. It was perceived that this was due to information about different communication methods being cascaded to clients and more widely publicised. Some organisations reported slight increases from the initial weeks of lockdown, but still far below their "usual" rates. Between weeks 4 and 8, some organisations reported referrals returned to "pre-lockdown" levels.

The view of the majority of services was that there may be an increase in reporting and referrals once lockdown restrictions began to be relaxed. There was also a perception there may be an increase in the need for emergency housing due to more people fleeing abuse. From week 7 onwards, services started to report engagement with a number of victims who were making plans to leave their abusive partner once lockdown restrictions eased.

In the first three weeks of lockdown, referrals to domestic abuse services came from a narrower range of partners. After week 4, some services reported referrals from sources that did not usually refer to them. Some perceived this was due to a heightened level of anxiety around the risks related to domestic abuse for families in isolation. As lockdown progressed, a number of services reported an increase in self-referrals from existing clients whose cases had been closed. Many clients reported they felt they needed additional emotional and economic support and were negatively affected by isolation. Organisations reported different trends related to self-referrals, with some observing an increase and some a decrease. One organisation reported an increase in self-referrals from women in employment from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵

Referrals to DSDAS, perpetrator programmes and Marac have continued during lockdown. Police Scotland highlighted an 22.75% increase in requests under their domestic abuse disclosure scheme during the start of the lockdown (between 23 March and 1 June 2020), compared to the same time period last year.⁶ The majority of requests were made by police officers and other professionals (including social

⁵ The service perceived that remote/online engagement provided an increased opportunity to engage with the service anonymously, hence the increase.

⁶ Care must be taken to avoid assumptions about trends and the impact of coronavirus restrictions as this information covers a relatively short period of time, and the number of requests increased by around two-thirds between 2018-19 and 2019-20.

work and NHS) raising a concern about someone they think may be at risk of domestic abuse. In week 4, the Caledonian System reported there was an increase in self-referrals to a voluntary domestic abuse perpetrator programme which the Local Authority runs in Edinburgh from men concerned about their own abusive behaviour.⁷ In general, Multi Agency Risk Assessment Meetings (Maracs) observed a decrease in referrals for April and early May meetings, however referrals started to increase in week 7.⁸

5. Mental health impacts of lockdown

The mental health impact of lockdown was a significant concern for the majority of organisations. Services reported that, in many cases, those with pre-existing mental health conditions were negatively affected, with anxiety and depression being exacerbated by isolation and living with domestic abuse. Services also report more general reports of low mood, depression and isolation among clients. In the latter weeks of lockdown, organisations reported significant increases in suicidal ideation amongst clients. In some cases, services made direct reports to police/ambulance services as clients were attempting suicide or self-harm during calls. In response to this identified need, many services increased the number and frequency of welfare calls they made to their clients.

Some domestic abuse support staff report experiencing vicarious trauma. After the initial two weeks of lockdown, following organisational processes and remote working being agreed, a number of services communicated concerns about the impact of vicarious trauma on staff because they were engaging with distressed clients, working alone without the usual support of colleagues, “bringing [trauma] into their home”⁹ and unable to separate the spaces of work and home. A number of organisations introduced additional guidance, training and therapeutic inputs (such as mental health first aid or mindfulness and yoga sessions) to staff and volunteers to deal with the impact of clients’ mental health deterioration while in lockdown.

6. Accessing support

Many services have engaged with victims who have reported it is not safe for them to contact support services due to the constant presence, and in some cases monitoring behaviours, of the perpetrator. Many organisations reported support calls were being cut short or that they were unable to make contact with victims, who later communicated that they had been unable to respond due to the presence of the perpetrator in the house.

Digital exclusion has been reported as a barrier to engaging with some clients, particularly as Wi-Fi and video-conferencing apps are relied upon for contact with support services. This was particularly challenging for women staying in temporary accommodation due to fleeing abuse. In some cases, where women had some

⁷ While this service is voluntary, it is noted that in some cases men self-refer following encouragement from Children and Families Social Work services or for the purposes of improving access to children.

⁸ Data provided from SafeLives Marac Coordinators Forum, 6th May 2020”.

⁹ Scottish Maracs - Covid Overview, SafeLives April 2020

limited device/internet access, this was prioritised for their children to allow them access to home schooling.

7. Requests for general support

Across the board there were continued reports of clients contacting domestic abuse services for general support, particularly around gas and electricity, housing and food access. Some services reported clients finding the situation of lockdown and the risk posed by the virus very difficult to understand due to literacy issues, learning difficulties, and digital exclusion. Services reported some clients' confusion about how to manage everyday tasks such as shopping, posting mail, and paying bills. Some services also reported clients who were confined to their house due to fear of the virus and its impact. From week 5 onwards, services noted women facing increasing economic challenges, namely struggles accessing food and fuel. Services reported this to have a significant impact on women's mental health and resilience. Some services reported increased applications to destitution funds/resources.

8. Risk and safety planning

Many services reported that, although risk to victims did not change significantly, the impact and risk of domestic abuse was magnified by lockdown, the isolation of victims and increased control of the perpetrator. Many organisations reported that while there were few changes in perpetrator behaviour specific to lockdown, victims' safety planning options, ability to access usual sources of support, freedom to engage with services and ability to effectively safety-plan were significantly curbed.

The service-generated risks of safely contacting victims who reside with/are being monitored by an abusive partner was a major challenge for many organisations, particularly in the first two weeks of lockdown. Many organisations required to amend working protocols on how and when they contacted clients, and some services extended their operational hours (to early mornings, late evenings and weekends) to better manage client safety and improve accessibility.¹⁰

Throughout this phase of lockdown, innovative options for safety planning continued to be fairly limited. Services reported safety-planning must now take into account the dual risk from the perpetrator and COVID-19, particularly for those in shielded groups. A number of services reported some of the usual safety planning options, such as leaving the house, attending neighbours' houses, or seeking assistance in public spaces (such as cafes or shops) were significantly curbed. A number of organisations experienced challenges in conducting risk assessment and safety planning with victims, due to sporadic communication, the presence of children in the house, or being unable to safely contact them.

During this phase of lockdown, services reported it is more difficult to separate from an abusive partner, particularly where couples resided together. Services

¹⁰ This was also to accommodate clients who had children, allowing women to contact services before children were awake or after they were in bed.

consistently reported a number of cases whereby the victim was choosing to remain with the perpetrator for the duration of lockdown, but planned to separate once restrictions were eased. In many of these cases, victims' decisions to stay were influenced by the lack of temporary housing options during lockdown. Throughout the initial 8 week period, there were continued reports of clients with additional needs, housing issues, addictions and/or who were severely isolated being coerced into returning to abusive partners, with perpetrators moving back into the victim's house in some cases. Services perceived this was due to victims having fewer sources of support during lockdown.

There were some specific challenges related to lockdown for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women, particularly related to legal applications and appeals, and separation from abusive partners. BME support organisations reported that women who are European Economic Area (EAA) nationals were not meeting habitual residency criteria and this was impacting on access to universal credit. This was exacerbated by lockdown due to delays in legal applications and the lack of employment opportunities. Services also reported that gaining access to the necessary documentation required for legal appeals (such as banking documents, proof of income, housing information) has been particularly challenging during lockdown. Services that support women in prostitution/CSE report that a significant proportion of women applying for destitution grants are those with insecure immigration status.¹¹

9. Criminal Justice

Services consistently communicated a number of concerns related to the impact of amended criminal justice procedures on women's risk of domestic abuse, particularly around early prisoner release, delayed court cases (and associated special bail condition periods, bail reviews, etc.) and the impact of extended periods of police undertaking on victim risk. Court advocacy support services reported continuing challenges related to the frequently-changing landscape of the criminal justice system and how information was being shared. Throughout the 8 weeks, many services reported an increase in prolonged exposure to stress/anxiety for clients due to rescheduled court cases, particularly petition cases.

In week 3, services reported an increase in calls regarding the early release of prisoners who were domestic perpetrators. There were reports of high levels of anxiety among clients over whether or not those convicted of domestic abuse would be released and clients were relying heavily on information from the Victim Notification Scheme, despite this not being the correct route to obtain information regarding prisoners on early release. Some services reported they did not receive clear communication about prisoner release. Services also reported clients' concerns regarding prisoners' access to mobile phones and how their use was being monitored.¹²

¹¹ One organisation reported about 21% of applications came from women who had insecure immigration status.

¹² Scottish Prison Service confirmed mobile phones will be monitored in exactly the same way as the standard outgoing phone system so there is no additional risk to victims compared with the previous system.

Some services communicated concerns that the “business as usual” message was not being transmitted effectively to victims. Particularly in the first four weeks of lockdown, there were repeated reports of perpetrators telling victims the police were too busy to attend, or victims choosing not to report because they did not want to burden the police service. In the final three weeks of lockdown, court advocacy services began to report concerns about perpetrators perceiving the consequences of a breach of order were likely to be less severe. Services reported a general perception that perpetrators were unlikely to be remanded/imprisoned during lockdown. There were some reports of men pushing the boundaries of orders, bail conditions not complying with DTTO requirements, etc. in these instances.

In general, Police Scotland have received reports that are consistent with some of the experiences reported from domestic abuse support organisations. Police Scotland shared qualitative data with JAS on domestic abuse incidents where the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown has impacted on victims, families or perpetrators. A number of reports included incidents where the perpetrator did not allow the victim to leave the house. Some incidents were reported following arguments over lockdown restrictions (e.g. partners arguing over allowing friends into the house; leaving the house unnecessarily; meeting with friends in public). Police Scotland also received calls regarding conflict over child contact and attended some incidents where children had witnessed physical violence.

10. Perpetrator tactics

In some cases, victims and their children were at greater risk due to the increased time spent in isolation with the perpetrator. Many services reported that, although perpetrator tactics have not changed significantly, the impact and risk of domestic abuse is magnified by lockdown.

Research suggested there were some instances in which perpetrators of domestic abuse used abusive behaviours that were apparently specific to lockdown. These include: spitting at victims or within the house; coughing on or at victims/children; threatening victims with infection; and coercing victims to allow access into their home. As mentioned, a number of perpetrators stated to victims that police would be too busy to attend should they choose to report. Domestic abuse support services also reported an increase in reports of perpetrators causing visible injuries during physical assaults, sometimes to victims' faces or other areas unconcealed by clothing. The perception of services/clients is that perpetrators were less cautious as the victim had far fewer social interactions, thus the chances of detection were fewer. Domestic abuse services also reported perpetrators threatening to report their partner/ex-partners over alleged breaches of the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020.¹³

¹³ For example, where victims would leave the house to get away from their perpetrator, the perpetrator would threaten to report the victim's “flouting of the rules” to the police.

There were continued reports of stalking behaviours by perpetrators, both online and in person. A number of services reported victims felt like “sitting ducks”¹⁴ within their homes as they perceived the perpetrators knew their whereabouts at all times.

Throughout the 8 week period, some clients reported an escalation of perpetrators’ alcohol use, exacerbating the frequency and severity of abuse. There were continued reports of perpetrators who had been furloughed/made redundant due to lockdown, whose behaviour was previously stable but who had now started to behave abusively.

Conversely, some victims and perpetrators reported lockdown eased coercive controlling behaviours because perpetrators felt more in control of their victim as they were confined to the house, had no contact with others, and the perpetrator knew their whereabouts and what they were doing at all times. For some who did not reside with the perpetrator, lockdown offered more security as the perpetrator could not illegitimately attend their house and they experienced fewer instances of stalking/harassment.

11. Children

Services report that, in some cases, children have experienced domestic abuse more severely during lockdown. There have been several reports of children being present in the room during domestic abuse, including physical violence.¹⁵ Many services perceive that because children do not have access to safe spaces or other trusted adults, there are fewer opportunities for them to report and therefore the perpetrator is less cautious.

Services report a number of difficulties related to engagement with children during lockdown. From the start of lockdown, organisations that provided child support services reported significant difficulties in engaging with children by telephone or other digital platforms, particularly younger children. Particularly in the latter four weeks of lockdown, there were a number of reports of women struggling to keep children entertained and engaged in activities. This challenge is compounded by managing abuse within the home.

12. Child contact

Across the board, services reported similar trends relating to challenges experienced around child contact in cases of domestic abuse. Services reported that, in some cases, parents who had been advised to shield were experiencing conflict over child contact as they felt unsafe to facilitate contact despite court orders/informal agreements. There were continued reports of domestic perpetrators socialising with friends and family in different households and thus exposing their child/children to other people during contact visits. In some cases, perpetrators were communicating

¹⁴ This phrase was used in a number of telephone interviews with domestic abuse support/advocacy services.

¹⁵ In these cases the victims reported the perpetrator would not usually behave abusively in the presence of the children and that this was specific to lockdown.

their activities to their ex-partner, causing high levels of stress and anxiety, and in some cases this prompted mothers to stop contact.

Services have reported a range of abusive behaviours apparently specific to lockdown related to conflict over child contact. A consistent trend, reported across a number of different areas in Scotland, related to perpetrators asking children to show them round the house during video-contact. Services and clients perceived this as a means of extending their abuse by monitoring the victim and/or establishing where they live. There were some reports of abuse, mainly verbal abuse although a small number of reports of physical assaults, taking place during handovers, particularly in cases where handover was usually facilitated by third parties such as schools. In the latter weeks of lockdown, a number of services reported that women were facilitating child contact outwith the conditions of agreements/orders, in order to placate perpetrators and manage abuse.

Services reported that guidance and legal advice from solicitors in family court cases was very varied, particularly for those who are not in shielded groups. Some solicitors provided that clients may stop contact if they have concerns the child will be exposed to the virus, and in other cases solicitors advised clients to facilitate contact regardless of identified risks.

13. Women in prostitution and Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

The experience of women in prostitution/CSE differs in a number of ways from those experiencing domestic abuse. Evidence on women in prostitution/CSE began to be collected and collated in week 4 and was informed by telephone interviews with support services in the Click and Encompass network, and other specialist organisations engaged in supporting sex workers.

Robust and reliable data on prostitution and CSE is difficult to obtain and there is no identified, consistent data collection in this area. Lockdown presented a number of additional restrictions in monitoring and reporting on the experience of women in prostitution and CSE. A number of services usually collect intelligence on women in prostitution through direct observations by their workers. From the initial weeks of lockdown, services across a number of local authority areas reported there were limited mechanisms for them to observe and record the demand for street prostitution as their staff were restricted to working from home. One service has usefully conducted a national scoping exercises of online advertising sites, and this data was used to inform this report.

Organisations reported a significant economic impact of lockdown for women in prostitution/CSE. In some cases, women were not registered as self-employed and thus not eligible for governmental support, and many experienced significant financial challenges in depending on universal credit, particularly when their usual household income was higher.

Support services reported concerns regarding women who were entering or re-entering prostitution and CSE as a result of the economic challenges experienced during lockdown, including moving from online work to direct contact. A number of

organisations reported there was a new demographic of women entering prostitution/CSE who were not involved prior to lockdown. For some women, opportunities for shoplifting, begging and personal thefts were vastly reduced as retail/service industries were closed and there were fewer people in public places, thus they were relying more heavily on prostitution/CSE as a source of income. The national scoping exercise of online adverts provided that online sites were flooded with new images and there was a higher level of competition for income. In some cases this was resulting in men pushing boundaries and women engaging in riskier practices, often within their own home. A number of online advertisements made reference to Coronavirus. Services observed women advertising that they are new to the sector and many justified their involvement due to unemployment/financial difficulties related to lockdown.

Services reported concerns that, due to the decrease in men out in public, women in prostitution were resorting to higher-risk practices, and throughout lockdown there were increased reports of women offering unprotected sex. Services reported significant concerns for those women who continued to work in public and their exposure to Coronavirus.¹⁶

A number of services report that the stigma associated with working during lockdown prevented women in prostitution from safety planning as effectively as usual. Prior to lockdown, women in prostitution used various screening apps and networks within their community to screen men before meeting them. Women are not screening in the same way during lockdown. Similarly, when in public, women often work in pairs for safety, but have been unable to do so during lockdown because of the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020. Services reported that women were not accessing sexual/reproductive health services as frequently during lockdown, due to the stigma associated with continuing to work.

There are a number of risks for women online. A number of women reported having their online images stolen. In some cases, individuals were threatening to out women to their friends and family.¹⁷ Organisations reported significant challenges in effectively advocating for women in these cases, particularly due to a lack of appropriate legal protections for women in these specific circumstances.

14. The experience of domestic abuse services

Overall, services had limited operational capacity during the initial phase of lockdown with most stopping all face-to-face provision and providing support by telephone/text. Some services continued to provide face-to-face engagement only in the most high risk cases, and where organisations made deliveries (of food parcels etc.) to clients' households. Operational capacity has improved in the latter weeks as services established home working arrangements and agreed communication protocols.

¹⁶ There were some reports of women taking precautionary measures such as asking punters to take their temperature or shower prior to engagement, however there is no evidence to suggest these precautions would be effective.

¹⁷ Women and services perceived the main motivation for this was power and control, though in some cases women were being extorted. In Glasgow, it was reported that one individual had threatened over 30 different women.

Many services explored creative ways of engaging with clients, including using video-conferencing platforms for group and therapeutic work, and there were some very positive reports of online engagement. In some cases, clients who may not have engaged in face-to-face support have sought online support and reported the anonymity of services is beneficial for them and allows them to engage.

Marac and Matak processes continue to operate during lockdown. Despite some challenges around technology and communication with victims, Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (Maracs) are operating well overall. Multi Agency Tasking and Coordination (MATAC) processes are also continuing, using teleconference/Microsoft Teams software.

Some organisations have faced challenges relating to client need and resources during lockdown. Following the increased demand for emotional support and welfare calls, some services reported they did not have the capacity to provide clients the level of welfare support required. Some services reported that, due to the high threshold for accessing mental health services, organisational funding was being dedicated to accessing private mental health services for some clients. A small number of frontline third sector services reported that the funding process during COVID-19 seems complicated, bureaucratic, and time-consuming.

Services reported limited absences due to staff suffering ill-health, and there were a very small number of reports of clients who have contracted COVID-19. Services continued to report challenges due to staff members' caring responsibilities, with some staff unable to facilitate online sessions due to the presence of their children within the house.



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