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A toxic mix: the impact of COVID-19 lockdown measures on the post-separation experiences of domestic abuse survivors

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Abstract

Reports of an intensification of domestic abuse under COVID-19 restrictions has been described by the UN as a 'shadow pandemic'. Drawing upon interviews with domestic abuse survivors (n=11), plus interviews (n=18) and surveys (n=22) with support service providers in Scotland, this paper develops a nuanced understanding of how the conditions created by the pandemic interacted with existing experiences of domestic abuse, highlighting the relatively overlooked experiences of survivors who have separated from their abusers. The findings reveal how pandemic conditions triggered, mirrored, and amplified experiences and impacts of domestic abuse through the complex interplay between isolation, anxiety, lone-parenting, financial concerns, and protective requirements such as mask wearing. Participants described an increase in economic abuse, abuse online and the manipulation of child contact arrangements as the restrictions imposed by the pandemic facilitated perpetrator behaviours. However, survivors' resilience, coping mechanisms, and in some cases enhanced feelings of safety, were also notable. These findings generate insights into the evolving but persistent nature and dynamics of domestic abuse through the pandemic, including how domestic abuse interacts with, creates, and is compounded by gendered inequalities irrespective of whether survivors have separated from their abuser.

Key words/short phrases:

Domestic abuse, COVID-19, gender inequality, post-separation abuse, coercive control

Key messages

- Domestic abuse transgresses pandemic conditions and certain forms of abuse - such as online and economic abuse, and the exploitation of child access arrangements - are facilitated by these conditions, even when survivors have separated from their abuser.
- Pandemic conditions trigger, mirror, and amplify experiences and impacts of domestic abuse through the complex interplay between isolation, anxiety, lone-parenting, financial concerns, protective requirements and survivor coping mechanisms.
- When domestic abuse is understood through a feminist lens as a consequence of gender inequality, we should be especially concerned about the deepening of gendered social and economic inequalities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Shortly after the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11th March 2020, UK governments introduced social measures to suppress the transmission of the virus. As in other countries, these measures included social distancing, staying at home for all but essential purposes, and closing school, nursery, leisure, entertainment, and support service premises. Implementation of the restrictions had a profound effect on survivors of domestic abuse and the agencies that support them. Alongside high levels of media coverage and international concern about domestic abuse (Peterman et al, 2020; United Nations, 2020), particularly in the pandemic's initial stages, evidence about survivor experiences was drawn primarily from third parties such as the police or service providers (BWJP, 2020; Women's Aid, 2020; SWA, 2020), or survivors' friends and relatives (Gregory and Williamson, 2021). Early academic contributions to understanding the impact of COVID-19 on domestic abuse have emerged primarily from health orientated disciplines (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; Usher et al, 2020; Gelder et al, 2020). This paper draws from one of the earliest social science studies to undertake direct research with survivors (Armstrong et al, 2020) and contributes to understanding of the impact of the pandemic on survivor experiences by highlighting the intersecting nature of COVID-19 suppression measures, domestic abuse, and gendered inequalities, drawing attention to the longer-term implications of the pandemic for domestic abuse and those who experience it.

The impact of COVID-19 suppression measures on domestic abuse

In the pandemic's early stages considerable attention was given to its impact on reports of domestic abuse. Increased reports to the police and support services were documented within the media and across a number of countries though some countries also witnessed an initial drop in reports (Brooks-Hay et al, 2020; Lobnikar et al, 2021; Peterman et al, 2020; Williamson et al, 2020). Varied official definitions of domestic abuse, pre-existing trends in data, heightened publicity during the crisis, and well documented challenges in reporting even in non-pandemic conditions, however, mean that drawing conclusions from this data is problematic. Indeed, a wealth of feminist scholarship has consistently pointed to the shortcomings of administrative data sources on domestic abuse (Walklate, 2021).

Preoccupation with fluctuations in reported rates of domestic abuse also overshadows pressing questions about what is happening behind these figures. While media reports have suggested that the social conditions created by COVID-19 have created a 'surge' in domestic abuse, as a result of factors such as heightened strain on family living conditions (Eisner and Nivette, 2020), service providers and researchers have been at pains to explain that the pandemic has not caused domestic abuse; rather it has *exposed* (Hohl and Johnson, 2020) and *intensified* it for survivors (Brooks-Hay et al, 2021; Gregory and Williamson, 2021; Williamson et al, 2021). For example, following an online survey with survivors and specialist support services in England Women's Aid (2020) reported that domestic abuse intensified during lockdown, particularly for those living with their abusers, and that lockdown restrictions and/or the COVID-19 virus were being used to extend abuse. Consequently, survivors reported worsening mental health which was also associated with triggering memories of abuse brought on by the pandemic. Scottish Women's Aid (2020) flagged concerns about abusers using Covid suppression measures as a tool in their abuse, by increasing their control of women's movement, keeping them isolated, threatening to expose them to the virus, or discouraging women from seeking help by telling them that services will not respond (SWA Submission to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, 27 May 2020). Meanwhile, organisations including Imkaan (2020) and Sisters of

Freida (2020) reported on the ways in which existing structural inequalities intersected with domestic abuse during the pandemic to disproportionately impact black and minoritized, and disabled survivors.

Justifiable concern exists in relation to the impact of the pandemic on how domestic abuse is perpetrated and experienced by survivors. As yet however, there is limited qualitative research data providing depth of insight on the lived experiences of survivors during the pandemic and the accounts of those who have separated from their abusers remains relatively overlooked. This paper seeks to contribute to research knowledge on this topic through nuanced analysis of qualitative data gleaned from survivors of domestic abuse and the agencies that support them during the first COVID-19 lockdown in [LOCATION]. Though capacity to access support and protection via refuge services, and through civil and criminal justice routes is an important aspect of survivor experiences, this is not the focus of this paper. Rather we focus on the ways in which perpetrators used opportunities offered by lockdown to perpetuate abuse and how domestic abuse and safety was experienced by survivors' post-separation in ways that intersect with wider gender inequalities. We outline our methodological approach before discussing the research findings, and their implications in relation to longer-term concerns regarding domestic abuse.

Study design

The data presented in this paper are drawn from a wider study that examined the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on four diverse groups with common experiences of exclusion, isolation, and marginalisation in [LOCATION]: survivors of domestic abuse or sexual violence; people with a disability or long-term health condition; refugees and asylum seekers; and people who are criminal justice involved (Armstrong et al, 2020). This rapid study was completed between July and December 2020 by researchers at the University of Glasgow in partnership with 20 third sector organisations.

We adopted a feminist ethics of care, which understands people as fundamentally interconnected, and ways of caring for research participants, to whom there is a commitment to allowing articulation of their experiences in a safe and empathetic setting. It also extends to research users, committing to openness, transparency and accessibility; and to the research team itself, encouraging a supportive, collegial ethos (see for example Edwards and Mauthner (2012) on how ethics of care philosophies can be applied to, and enhance, the empirical process of social research). We adhered to principles set out in the Research Integrity Framework (RIF) produced by the UK Federation of Women's Aid (2020) on good practice in research, taking power asymmetry into account in our research design, with attentiveness to participant safety, sensitivity to risk, and choice and flexibility in approach. Given the potential sensitivity of speaking with survivors, further interview safety guidelines were used and adapted from WHO (2001). Ethical clearance was gained from the College of Medical, Veterinary & Life Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

Participant Recruitment

An online survey was distributed to organisations across [LOCATION] that provide support services to survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence. The survey gathered data on: the work of the organisations; service provision during COVID-19; service user needs and concerns; and the wider service landscape. Completed surveys were returned from 22 organisations. Of these, 16 were third sector community-based and two were local authorities. Whilst responses were received from larger national organisations, most were small, locally based projects servicing diverse communities (including BAME, asylum-seekers and LGBTQ+). [LOCATION]A small number of organisations did not respond, and in some cases replied that they were unable to engage in the study because of reduced

staff capacity, suspension of services due to Covid-19, and/or they were already supporting prior research requests.

Eighteen practitioners participated in an online qualitative interview, designed to elicit information about the impact of lockdown on their own experiences and those of their service users, and adaptations of service provision and sustainability. Five described their role as independent domestic abuse advocates (IDAAs) or advocacy workers; four as support workers; three as project coordinators; eight as project managers; with one counsellor; and one service improvement officer.

Contact with survivors of domestic abuse was set up through organisations that supported them. Twelve women were recruited for interview, one of whom was currently living with their abuser. Recruiting more participants who were still living with their abusers would undoubtedly have yielded valuable insights into their experiences but there were practical, ethical and safety concerns about doing so. While this might be considered a limitation of the study, interviews with service providers working with those still living with abusers helped to mitigate this limitation. Moreover, recruiting survivors who were no longer living with their abusers provided valuable insight into their unique and often overlooked experiences. This paper focuses specifically on the accounts of the 11 participants who had separated from their abuser. Of the 11 who were separated from their abuser, all were lone parents and six were experiencing ongoing abuse (through stalking and online abuse) from their ex-partners at the time of interview. All 11 had school-age children; six had ongoing child contact issues with their ex-partners. These characteristics significantly shaped experiences of living with COVID-19 restrictions. Participants ranged from 31–56 years old.. Five described their ethnicity as White Scottish, British or Irish and four identified as BAME (two participants did not provide this information).

Data collection and analysis

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time of fieldwork being conducted, all interviews and surveys were completed remotely. While doing research during a pandemic and conducting interviews remotely brings ethical and practical challenges, it also facilitated participation for some e.g. those living in rural areas or those with employment and/or childcare responsibilities. All survivor participants opted to be interviewed either by telephone or via Zoom, and interviews lasted between 30 and 87 minutes. Challenges arose during interviews, including interruptions by children and home deliveries; language barriers (ameliorated by having a translator); poor phone connections and, in one case, the interview was cut short by a school emergency. The participant contacted the interviewer to rearrange but asked to cancel at the last minute because her child was unwell. No further contact was made following this communication as the interviewer did not want to overburden the participant, though data from this interview is included in the paper.

Prior to interviews being arranged, interviewers established survivors' preferred method of contact (email, text, phone call) and the best times to reach them. During interviews and pre/post interview contact, interviewers asked if survivors were still happy to speak with them, and if they would like to decide a codeword that indicated it was no longer a good time to talk. They were also asked if they had someone they could contact if they needed help or did not feel safe during the interview, or if the interviewer could contact someone on their behalf. Follow-up emails or texts were sent to all participants a few days after interviews had taken place to ask if they had questions or would like to discuss any issues regarding their participation.

Practitioner and survivor interviews were transcribed by a secure third-party transcription service and NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software was used for coding. An iterative categorisation coding

frame (Neale, 2016) was devised with 18 overarching codes relating to the project-wide interview themes (e.g., perceptions of Covid and Covid risk; social situation; routines and rhythms; safety; technology and digital issues; service access). Transcripts were coded using these top-level nodes and further thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) more tailored to the specificities of domestic abuse was undertaken. Framework analysis principles (Ritchie et al, 2003) were applied to survivor interviews using an excel spreadsheet. Framework is a matrix-based approach for analysing qualitative material that facilitates the synthesis and charting of data in a way that allows researchers to read across data without losing sight of the complete narrative belonging to individual participants (Ritchie et al., 2003). Using this approach provided a means to retain a focus on each survivor's story while also identifying thematic commonalities or differences across the accounts of different survivors.

Findings

Findings from interviews with survivors and service providers are presented under two broad themes: perpetrator behaviours facilitated and inhibited by pandemic conditions; and how domestic abuse and safety was experienced by survivors during lockdown.

New means for perpetrators to further abuse

Service providers described an intensification of abuse noting that, '*abuse went up a notch*'. All service providers emphasised that domestic abuse was not caused by the pandemic; rather, it 'shone a light' on domestic abuse as an issue grounded in unequal gendered power relations exacerbated or altered due to COVID-19 measures. Service providers told of how lockdown was used as a way for abusers to re-exert control and capitalise on the increased isolation survivors may be experiencing due to a lack of contact with support services and personal networks:

The behaviours of abusers were horrendous. And they were using lockdown as a tactic to get back in the home, with women and children [...] Manipulating, and trying to make the women believe that they wouldn't cope during lockdown ... lockdown was a new excuse for perpetrators to get back, get the victims back under their control (DA-S-2)

This resonates with Stark's (2007) characterisation of coercive control whereby perpetrators deploy a range of tactics, including isolation, to facilitate control over everyday behaviours in intimate relationships. While online platforms have proven crucial for many to sustain contact with others during lockdown, survivors and service providers reported that these platforms were increasingly being used by perpetrators to extend or re-start abuse. Service providers described '*a push into online abuse, online harassment, [and] use of online tools*' (DA-S-16) to further abuse and as one survivor stated: '*he started the abuse again, through emails*' (DA-P-4).

Both survivors and service providers described how abuse continued from a distance in the form of financial and economic abuse, which a service provider noted '*had soared*' (DA-P-2) during lockdown, and were an ongoing form of abuse for survivors no longer living with abusers:

I'm separated for two years now, so there's no physical violence, but there's emotional violence, there's mental violence, there's financial abuse. (DA-P-7)

Child contact was a pressing concern, and it was described as being used by ex-partners as a means of manipulation and control that had worsened during the pandemic. Delays to civil justice proceedings and the postponement of child contact hearings were perceived by service providers as impacting survivor's feelings of safety, as ex-partners attempted to make contact and '*continue abuse...put*

pressure on and manipulate the situation' (DA-S-3), use children 'as part of a game plan and a tactic' (DA-S-2), and make false claims about the need to self-isolate to 'keep the kids'.

The closure of child contact and family mediation centres was problematic and interacted with online forms of control and manipulation. One survivor, who left her abuser just prior to lockdown and has been in a women's refuge since, had to facilitate online child contact sessions on her own due to being unable to access a child contact and mediation centre. She described having to maintain regular email contact with her abuser, who used these interactions to continue abuse online and manipulate their child, and also raised her concerns about the potential for him to identify where she and her son were living:

I was given advice that for separated families, for the other partner to have some sort of access or contact ...it was, sort of, presented to me that if I didn't make Zoom calls available to my husband, that there might be some court proceedings later [...] It feels like living in the Big Brother house...So whenever there's a Zoom call, I think, oh God, I feel completely exposed...He is physically seeing where we live...He's seen every room where we are. He's seen the view out the window...I feel exposed. I feel scared. I don't know what my husband's potential is. (DA-P-5)

In addition to extending abusive behaviour through the exploitation of child contact arrangements, perpetrators were also said to be putting women and children at risk of COVID-19 due to breaching lockdown guidance in some instances:

There's huge issues around the guidance and how people have interpreted it and then how women have felt pressured to facilitate contact when maybe they were in a shielding household, there's women have had to phone the police because of it [...] but they wouldn't go out and investigate it, which left a bit of a gap for domestic abuse, so where women are saying this is putting me at risk, it's putting my children at risk, never mind the child that's getting taken out and going maybe to other households. But it was putting the whole family at risk, and I don't think that was recognised at all. (DA-S-7)

However, some survivors also reflected on feelings of increased safety resulting from lockdown rules, particularly around restrictions of movement imposed upon perpetrators.

The only one thing I will say which was wonderful about the lockdown was that given that we'd just moved, it did mean that my husband was 30 miles away and I...in that sense, I felt physically safe for me and my child. That is the one thing which was really, really...a real bonus. (DA-P-5)

An increased sense of safety was also experienced in some instances due to the level of protection provided by limitations on child contact. One survivor spoke of the positive effect and sense of relief felt due to her ex-partner not seeing their daughter during lockdown:

Having lockdown [...] it was quite good because it took the decisions out of me and my daughter's hands whether she had to see him or not but then lockdown eased up and it all kicked back in again (DA-P-7)

For some then, the distance from abusers created by the pandemic provided protection and respite, accomplishing the protective work that the civil and criminal justice system is supposed to do, but which it does not always provide (Brooks-Hay et al, 2019; Burman and Brooks-Hay, 2021; Goodmark, 2021; Hester, 2006), or which women do not access due to a reluctance to engage with the criminal

justice system and 'criminalise' their partner or ex-partner who may also be the father of their child (Herman, 2005; Holder and Daly, 2017; Hoyle and Sanders, 2000). Hence DA-P-7's relief at decisions about contact being taken out of her and her daughter's hands.

Changes in how domestic abuse and safety was experienced by survivors during lockdown

Pandemic conditions as triggering

The conditions of the pandemic were experienced by some survivors as 'triggering' due to mirroring the experiences and impacts of abuse such as isolation, mask wearing, and heightened anxiety resulting from increased media attention to domestic abuse. Service providers reflected on how the panic and discourse of risk surrounding COVID-19 'triggered a lot of fears for women'. One survivor described being negatively affected by the heightened media coverage of domestic abuse, which a service provider described as 'shock horror journalism' (DA-S-10):

I actually had to stop watching some TV, and on my social media ... as much as it's great to see the awareness about domestic abuse, there was, if I read a certain thing, or I see something, it triggers me [...] it's everywhere (DA-P-4).

One survivor, a frontline health worker, highlighted the specific triggering effect of having to wear a mask everyday:

... going for mask fitting in itself brought back many, many, many horrendous miseries and things because the masks ...remind me...I've been strangled and suffocated when I was in a relationship. (DA-P-8).

Most survivors had long experienced a sense of isolation that was now compounded by reduced contact with face-to-face services and social support networks, which had wide reaching impacts on their financial situations and childcare, and their emotional wellbeing:

... because of the boys' situation, it just means that I wasn't getting a break or time for me. It just made my world a lot smaller and then, already it was pretty isolated before that and it just ...intensified that so much more and just very isolated and alone. And there was a lot of stress and pressure to deal with on my own and not really having the support, or a break, or not having that emotional support from other people (DA-P-06)

Another survivor's experience highlighted how lockdown coupled with her lack of English proficiency, increased existing experiences of isolation and barriers to accessing services. Lockdown measures also heightened, or served as a reminder of, the restriction and isolation experienced as a result of abuse; some survivors reflected on the similarities between lockdown and being trapped in an abusive relationship:

...because I was in this relationship for 28 years and particularly, you know, as time went on, it got more and more restrictive, but because you don't really realise it's becoming more restrictive, you sort of just adapt [...] the sort of parallels between that and lockdown have been quite stark. (DA-P-3)

Covid restrictions as compounding economic difficulties and the responsibilities of lone parenting

It is well-established that, on average, women earn less, hold less secure jobs, and are more vulnerable to poverty than men (Gregory, 2011; Cameron, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified gendered structural inequalities, with women disproportionately impacted due to the compounding

of economic and social factors (Fawcett Society, 2020; UN Women, 2020). Women are bearing the brunt of the negative impacts of COVID-19 and its associated restrictions, which have led to increased workload for women in the home and workplace, increased their caring responsibilities, and rendered low wage jobs ever more precarious (Wenham et al, 2020). Our data reveals how the experience of domestic abuse further compounds these existing inequalities.

The difficulties faced by some survivors prior to and during lockdown resulted from the economic abuse they had endured. Economic abuse, which includes financial abuse, can incorporate a range of strategies employed by the perpetrator to control, exploit or sabotage survivors' lives (Postmus et al, 2012) by restricting their capacity to acquire, maintain or use economic resources (Adams et al, 2008). The extract below highlights the repercussions of the economically abusive tactic of 'coerced debt' (Littwin, 2012):

It was really, really, difficult because I'm living kind of on the bread line, like I've got [daughter's] birthday coming up, I've got Christmas coming up, but I'm still paying off £800 of debt that I've still got to pay. I'm on Universal Credit, so every single penny is tied up practically on debts for him, because he didn't just borrow from companies, he borrowed from family too. It's all borrowed in my name. (DA-P-7)

Ten survivors were lone parents due to fleeing or separating from their abusive partners and were therefore disproportionately impacted by childcare and financial concerns. Existing economic challenges closely tied to their experiences of abuse and responsibilities as lone parents, were heightened during lockdown:

The biggest thing for me at the time was more about the financial aspect because financially I'd been in a bad position the last three years, so when lockdown happened financially, I got really, really terrified, thinking, what am I going to do? Can I still feed my kids? What if there's no food to buy? (DA-P-7)

Service providers recognised that economic inequality had 'been laid bare' (DA-S-10), as the conditions created by the pandemic exacerbated experiences of poverty. The increased time that children spent in the home during lockdown had significant financial implications for lone parent survivors, exacerbated by the increased need for digital connectivity. Mobile phones and computers are lifelines, providing the means to gain information about the pandemic and access to critical services, as well as supporting home-schooling. The pandemic has exacerbated the (already wide) digital gender divide (Sey and Hafkin, 2019; Pawluczuk et al, 2021) and service providers raised the impact of their clients' lack of access to digital technologies. As one service provider put it:

... we became more aware of just the level of digital poverty. So, you know, we'd have women who'd be phoning us from a borrowed phone because there's no credit in their own phone to say that they've been waiting, you know, hours, literally hours, on the universal credit helpline trying to get through and they couldn't get through and they didn't have a tablet or a laptop to be able to do an online application. (DA-S-3)

Refugee and asylum-seeking survivors experienced unique financial difficulties and challenges in accessing resources during lockdown (Scottish Refugee Council, 2020), which interacted with the structurally imposed conditions of poverty and the poor housing available to them to create very difficult conditions. One woman who fled to [LOCATION] to escape domestic abuse was surviving with money, food and phone top-ups provided by charities. Isolation was a key feature of her experience, affecting her mental health.

For some survivors, informal networks and friendships strengthened as a result of Covid-19 but concerns about burdening people at this time inhibited others from reaching out. The closure of schools, lack of formal and informal childcare support, and diminished social networks increased stress and placed heightened pressure on survivors who were lone parents and/or providing care for elderly relatives:

I went for about seven months just looking after my son 24/7. And he's a wonderful, lovely boy, but ...your energy can only stretch so far. So, I think if the lockdown had lasted any longer...I don't quite know how long it might have taken until I cracked. (DA-P-5)

'I'm the person that's picked up all the pieces [...] it's just making sure that I'm trying to keep everybody safe' (DA-P-9)

One survivor (DA-P-8) described how she had to 'send her children away' for three months since she was unable to care for them whilst continuing her role as a frontline health worker when their grandparents were shielding. The intersection of physical and mental health concerns was prevalent for both survivors and their children. For example, one woman who suffered from a respiratory condition described how she was unable to continue shielding due to her status as a lone parent and concerns about her eight-year-old daughter's mental health.

Resilience and coping mechanisms learned in response to domestic abuse as helping to deal with the pandemic.

While the negative consequences of experiencing domestic abuse are well documented, personal strengths developed in response to abuse or in the aftermath of an abusive relationship are less well understood (Flasch et al, 2017). Despite profound challenges, some survivors discussed how they were able to draw upon coping strategies and strengths learned as part of surviving domestic abuse, to help them handle the conditions provoked by the pandemic.

I think, me being a survivor has given me lots of coping mechanisms and tools in my box prior to the lockdown that's allowed me to already have those...I've already had my own bubble...prior to being told what I can and can't do. (DA-P-8)

... the domestic abuse had made me resilient. More resilient [...] I don't know if that makes any sense, but a pandemic is nothing compared to what I've been through. (DA-P-7)

... although you are a victim and you're in the situation, you're also a survivor ... you may have periods of extreme powerlessness, but you're still trying to work out ways of surviving, even if that's just surviving the next second or minute or hour. And that quick thinking, I guess, feeds into your inbuilt reserves of resilience ... it makes you more adaptable to things like lockdown and stuff (DA-P-3).

In keeping with earlier research on surviving violence and trauma (Ai and Park, 2005; Flasch et al, 2017), survivors described having more adaptive responses to life, heightened resilience, and a 'toolbox' of coping mechanisms. These strengths were developed by survivors in response to abusive and controlling behaviours that curtailed their 'space for action' (Kelly, 2003) or, in other words, their ability to live their lives free from constraint. Survivors were able to draw upon their prior experience of diminished 'space for action' to cope with the daily restrictions brought about by pandemic.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings presented here from one of the earliest social science studies conducted with survivors and service providers during the pandemic, underscore the evolving but persistent nature and dynamics of domestic abuse under COVID-19. Just as gendered violence is known to transgress times of social or political crisis and peace or war-time societies (Barberet, 2014), it is apparent that domestic abuse transgresses pandemic conditions and certain dimensions of this abuse are in fact facilitated by these conditions. These findings build upon the work of support organisations worldwide who report that virus suppression measures created conditions of greater risk for violence against women and their children (United Nations, 2020; Women's Aid, 2020; Scottish Women's Aid, 2020) though the picture that emerges from these conditions is more complex than simply an increase in domestic abuse.

Our research generated in-depth empirical insights into how survivors experienced and attempted to cope with new, ongoing, and intensified forms of abuse alongside deepening gender inequalities during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Scotland, even when survivors have separated from their abuser. A great deal of attention has (understandably) been paid to the experiences of survivors living with their abusers during the pandemic, whilst our findings provide a focus on post-separation experiences and the coping mechanisms survivors draw upon to deal with the conditions facilitated by the pandemic. These conditions interacted with those of privation and lack of material resources, and mirrored impacts of abuse including fear, anxiety, and isolation - and in some cases had a 'triggering' effect. However, survivors' accounts also revealed immense strength, resilience, and evidence of coping mechanisms developed when navigating through prior unprecedented hardships and uncertainty, compounded by the pandemic.

Perpetrators were able to establish new channels to exert their control by re-starting or extending abuse, including through the use of digital technology to coercively control, threatening to expose survivors and/or their families to the virus, and exploitation of child access arrangements and the means to perpetrate economic abuse. This finding resonates with recent accounts of the pandemic as producing a 'conducive context' for abusers to extend control (SEA, 2021) and with Gregory and Williamson's (2021) observation, based on research with people who knew someone who had experienced domestic abuse, that perpetrators were 'exploiting the pandemic'. The perpetrator tactics discussed in this paper demonstrate how domestic abuse may traverse physical and digital social space and be experienced as omnipresent, as found in existing research exploring abuse facilitated by technology and child contact arrangements (Harris and Woodlock, 2019; Woodlock et al, 2020; Morrison, 2015). These findings complicate the imagined safety and protection offered by the home in government and public health messaging to suppress the spread of COVID-19. Further, the accounts of survivors who have separated from their abusers trouble the assumption that they will be safe if they 'just leave'. It is evident that separation from an abuser is only the first step and rarely means that the abuse will stop (Kelly et al, 2014). Within the context of the pandemic this is especially true in relation to abuse perpetrated by digital and economic means since physical proximity is not required (Harris and Woodlock, 2019; Sharp, 2008). Further research on these evolving dynamics of domestic abuse is required, especially within the context of post-separation abuse.

However, for some survivors, lockdown measures were felt to provide a level of protection and increased safety because of restrictions on movement and limitations to child contact. In effect, COVID-19 restrictions were providing this group with the protections that the civil and criminal justice system is intended – but often fails - to provide. This has implications for reports made to the police during periods of lockdown since the number of reports made may be artificially low if the need for

protection is temporarily diminished. Close attention should be given to variation in survivor experiences and responses according to whether they are living with the abuser if data about reports of domestic abuse during the pandemic are to be understood (see Hohl and Johnson, 2021 for further discussion of police reports).

The adverse impacts of COVID-19 restrictions were compounded by the existing and intersecting inequalities of poverty and lone parenting responsibilities, both of which are disproportionately experienced by survivors who were no longer living with abusers. Given that financial hardship is already a recognised consequence of domestic abuse even out with pandemic conditions (Smallwood, 2015), the worsening of pre-existing gendered inequalities during the pandemic is a matter of serious concern (Shreeves, 2021). Both socioeconomic constraints and COVID-19 restrictions make leaving abusive relationships more difficult (Armstrong et al, 2020; Hohl and Johnson, 2021). Moreover, when domestic abuse is understood through a feminist lens as a consequence of gender inequality we should be especially concerned about any deepening of such inequality. While Sharma and Borah (2020) argue that increased domestic abuse resulting from COVID-19 is a driver of economic and social crisis, we contend that gendered social and economic inequalities resulting from COVID-19 are a potential driver of further domestic abuse. Sustained investigation of social and gendered inequalities resulting from the pandemic and their implications for domestic abuse is required.

Looking ahead, survivors expressed a profound sense of anxiety regarding the possibility of future lockdowns and the subsequent effects on the safety and mental health and wellbeing of survivors and their children – this was felt acutely in relation to criminal and civil justice delays; school closures; lack of childcare provision; child contact arrangements; and limited access to digital communications technology. Service providers interviewed feared that the longer-term impacts of the pandemic - a social version of ‘long covid’ (Armstrong et al, 2020) - would lead to survivors’ heightened trauma and hardship and therefore unprecedented demand on already stretched services.

Overall, the challenges experienced by survivors during the pandemic are interlocking, and therefore require a holistic response that foregrounds safety as underpinned by social connectedness, accessible forms of support, and basic securities of money and housing. Our findings support the calls of others, including the European Parliament (Shreeves, 2021), in advocating for policy and practice responses that are committed to challenging and addressing the unequal gendered outcomes of the pandemic and deep-rooted gender inequalities.

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