Promoting & protecting children's rights

Briefing: Children, domestic abuse and coronavirus

April 2020

Domestic abuse has a devastating impact on anyone who experiences it, but what is often overlooked is the equally devastating impact on children. It can be painful and traumatising for a child to see someone they love be abused, and there is also the danger that they might be try to intervene and come to harm. It can also have long term effects on children, increasing the risk of them experiencing poor mental health as they grow up. Nearly two thirds of women in hostels have children living with them, who will have experienced terrifying abuse and had to flee their homes[1].

Hundreds of thousands of children already experience Domestic Abuse in England – our Vulnerability Index found that 830,000 children experienced Domestic Abuse in their homes last year. Domestic Abuse is the most common reason for children to be classed as 'in need' by Local Authorities and to be allocated a social worker – with over half of all social work assessments identifying Domestic Abuse as a concern. However, there will still be hundreds of thousands of children experiencing Domestic Abuse who do not have support from social services.

And there is already evidence to suggest that, as in previous crises, rates of Domestic Abuse are increasing during the current situation – with some police forces in England already noticing an increase in reports of domestic abuse[2]. In France, after reports of Domestic Abuse increased by 36% in Paris, extra funding commitments have been made and hotels will be used to house victims[3]. Similar patterns are being seen in Australia[4], China and many other countries.

At the same time, the options available to alert someone to what is happening are decreasing. Children may well not be attending school where disclosures can be made or concerning behaviours noticed. Even vulnerable children who already have a social worker, and are still expected to be in school, are often not attending. Work is underway to follow these children up to make sure they are getting into school - or to keep an eye on them if they are not - but they are largely yet to bring results.

Self-isolation and social distancing rules play into the hands of those who perpetrate coercive control and already limit their victim's movements and what they allow them to do. 'Lockdown' means victims will be subject to even closer scrutiny and control by abusive partners - and have even fewer opportunities to seek out help. They will be less able to find time alone to contact helplines, look at online resources, call the police or ask advice from professionals.

Many of the routine contacts that they may have had with friends, family or members of the community will likely have reduced significantly, so fewer people will be able to identify problems. Many services – such as GPs, children's centres and health visitors – are now moving to remote provision or stopping routine checks when domestic abuse can be picked up. Pregnancy and the arrival of a new baby can be a trigger point for domestic abuse to begin, but without a reason to spend time alone with a health

[1] https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/impact-on-children-and-young-people/
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/26/warning-over-rise-in-uk-domestic-abuse-cases-linked-to-coronavirus
[3] https://www.france24.com/en/20200330-france-to-put-domestic-violence-victims-in-hotels-as-numbers-soar-under-coronavirus-lockdown
[4] https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/29/australian-government-to-pump-1bn-into-health-and-family-violence-services-as-coronavirus-spreads

professional, mothers may be unable to disclose it.

In addition, many families will have lost their usual sources of income, and be making a joint claim for Universal Credit together for the first time – leaving women more open to potential economic abuse because their benefits will all go to their partner.

The government has released some guidance acknowledging that home is not always a safe place, and that victims of domestic abuse should still leave if necessary – and call 999 if in danger[5].

With the increasing demand from people experiencing Domestic Abuse for the first time, or finding that things are getting even worse, charities and helplines are under intense pressure, warning that nobody should have to choose 'between Coronavirus and Domestic Abuse'.

More help is needed

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner has written to the Chancellor to request more funding for support services, and a coalition of Domestic Abuse charities have called for increased funding and public awareness raising.

The Children's Commissioner wants to see a powerful public campaign that makes clear what Domestic Abuse is (using the broad definition in the delayed Domestic Abuse Bill), and that it is never acceptable, and the devastating impact it has on children. This campaign would speak to:

Victims:

- To help them to identify that what is happening is abuse, and that it is harmful for them and their children.
- To provide them with information about where to get help – including calling 999 silently (calling and then pressing 55 to alert your local police force), the National Domestic Abuse helpline, Women's Aid etc.
- To make clear that the rules on staying at home do not mean you are not allowed to leave to seek help if you and your children are unsafe. Police forces should be involved in this messaging to make it clear that victims will get appropriate responses and not be fined or told to go home.

Perpetrators:

- To make clear that whatever the stress they may be feeling, they always have a choice and all forms of Domestic Abuse are a crime.
- To advise them to seek out help from eg Respect if they become worried about their behaviour.
- To make clear that exposing children to Domestic Abuse is also child abuse.

Communities:

- To highlight that Domestic Abuse is always a crime, and that if you are worried for someone's safety calling the police is the right thing to do.

[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-and-domestic-abuse

- To highlight to staff in shops, pharmacies and other essential services what the signs are, and provide them with information on how to respond if they are worried about someone

Funding and support for services

Additional funding for national and local helplines is required, and for Local Authorities to guarantee accommodation for those fleeing abuse. The Domestic Abuse bill would have introduced a requirement on councils to have sufficient accommodation for victims – it has been delayed just at the time when victims are likely to need that support most, so the Government should ensure that it is in place now. Local Authorities should also be funded to ensure the long term health of the domestic abuse charities and to support refuges that may have to close temporarily.

While children may be less at risk (though not immune) to the health dangers of the virus itself, vulnerable children face a cocktail of secondary risks. We are already seeing a rise in domestic abuse and the Government must stretch every sinew to ensure children are safeguarded in this time of crisis.