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Five reasons why coercive control has increased during the COVID 19 pandemic

Keren Lloyd Bright and Louise Taylor

Introduction

When lockdown measures were [announced](#) by the UK government on the 23rd of March 2020, most understood these to be the inconvenient but necessary restrictions required to curb the spread of the [Covid-19 pandemic](#). However, for those living within a coercively controlling relationship, the government's order to stay at home has potentially put them at a greater risk of abuse.

While the UK has recently seen some easing to the lockdown measures, it is clear that the impact of lockdown on victims of coercive control has been significant. Indeed, [Refuge](#), the National Domestic Abuse charity has identified that calls to their helpline increased by 66% during lockdown and that there has been a [surge in women seeking refuge](#) from their abusers since measures have eased.

'Coercive control' is a term devised by forensic social worker, [Evan Stark](#), but also recently adopted by the UK Government as the core of the coercive control offence under [s 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015](#), and as part of the [statutory definition of domestic abuse](#) in the Domestic Abuse Bill currently passing through Parliament. Through his work, Stark has recognised that domestic abuse is not always physical, but can include a whole host of behaviours such as [surveillance, threats, humiliation and isolation](#). Indeed, Stark offers a wider understanding of the issues when he defines coercive control as:

'...a strategic course of oppressive behavior designed to secure and expand gender-based privilege by depriving women of their rights and liberties and establishing a regime of domination in personal life.'

Although Stark focuses on the oppression of women, it is appreciated that coercive control is done to [men](#) too...and to the [elderly](#), the young, to those of all races, religions, [sexualities](#) and identities. For the purposes of this blog, however, we will stay with Stark's definition in recognition of the fact that [most coercive control](#) is [perpetrated by men against a female partner](#).

So, what is it about living in lockdown that makes coercive control more likely? Here we set out five reasons why the incidence and severity of coercive control has increased because of the pandemic.

Reason 1 - Isolation

Isolating a person from their family and friends is one of the behaviours a perpetrator may use against their victim, as listed in the [Statutory Guidance Framework](#) to the Serious Crime Act 2015. In the first phase of lockdown, different households were unable to meet in outside space - as well as inside.

During lockdown and since its easing, social distancing rules have served to validate and worsen the isolating behaviour of perpetrators, as they have a justifiable basis on which to limit visits to shops, family and friends. Home confinement has also provided the opportunity for more control over access to the internet or to the phone.

Reason 2 - Emotional abuse

The emotional abuse inflicted by a perpetrator can take many forms and the COVID-19 pandemic has simply added more weapons to their armoury. This is well described by the [Battered Women's Justice Project](#). Perpetrators may, for instance, invent COVID-19 symptoms and fabricate test results. They may refuse to share sanitisers and soaps, refuse to socially distance, or refuse to wear face masks to deliberately make their victims feel fearful. This is particularly abusive where a victim needs to shield themselves or others.

Reason 3 - Micro-management-

The pandemic has also provided an air of legitimacy and increased opportunity for abusers to micro-manage their victims by insisting on excessive personal and domestic cleanliness, and to punish or shame victims for any perceived shortfalls. Such behaviour is a [well-recognised tactic](#) of coercive control, but the pandemic has meant that victims are likely to be spending more time at home with their abuser and have fewer chances to escape this type of behaviour.

Reason 4 - Financial abuse

Financial abuse is another of the behaviours listed in the [Statutory Guidance Framework](#). Lockdown has increased the range of [tactics](#) available to a perpetrator. For instance, a perpetrator may spend large amounts while in lockdown. They may refuse to work outside the home or remotely, or allow the victim to work, resulting in loss of income or even a job. They may give untrue COVID-19 reports to employers or customers intending to worsen the financial position of the victim.

Reason 5 - Limited avenues of escape

In recent years many charities have experienced cuts in their funding. ([Refuge](#), for example, has had funding cuts to 80% of their services and their refuge services cut by 50% overall.) During the pandemic, many domestic abuse services and shelters have struggled to provide even their [usual levels of service](#) due to staff shortages and social distancing requirements. The reduced availability of public spaces such as [libraries](#), [swimming pools](#) and [shopping centres](#) has also meant that victims have been left with fewer short-term avenues through which to escape their abuse.

Supporting victims of coercive control during the COVID-19 pandemic

The UK Government in general and its Minister for Safeguarding in particular, have been aware of the increased risk of coercive control and other forms of domestic abuse during the pandemic. Government [advice web pages](#) have been updated to take account of it and an [extra £30 million in funding](#) has been

announced. The UK Government has also made it clear that '[Household isolation instructions](#) as a result of coronavirus do not apply if you need to leave your home to escape domestic abuse'. Charities such as [Victim Support](#) and [Women's Aid](#) have provided advice and guidance on their websites about COVID-19 and domestic abuse and [Refuge](#) has set up a live chat box on its website to enable victims to communicate with them silently.

While these actions of charities and government are welcome, the advice and guidance can of course only reach those with access to the internet and who are not being closely monitored by their abusers. Those victims for whom English is a second language or who speak no English at all are [harder to reach](#) and those who are underprivileged may not even have smart phones.

The charity Hestia (in partnership with hundreds of other organisations) has been successful in campaigning for [safe spaces](#) for those experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence during lockdown. Consulting rooms in pharmacies in Boots, Superdrug and Morrisons were made available to those needing help. While this creative thinking provided a means of help and support, the degree of take up does not seem to be known and so its effectiveness during the first phase of lockdown cannot be measured.

Now that we are moving from lockdown into the 'new normal', charities supporting victims of coercive control and other forms of domestic abuse have called for [more substantial long-term funding](#). When the Domestic Abuse Bill becomes law, it will certainly be a cause for celebration, but only appropriate resources, funding and otherwise, will make a difference to the lives of victims of coercive control in these times of COVID-19 and beyond.