

THE INTERPRETER

A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide

Movement restrictions aimed to stop the spread of the coronavirus may be making violence in homes more frequent, more severe and more dangerous.

By Amanda Taub

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Add another public health crisis to the toll of the new coronavirus: Mounting data suggests that domestic abuse is acting like an opportunistic infection, flourishing in the conditions created by the pandemic.

There was every reason to believe that the restrictions imposed to keep the virus from spreading would have such an effect, said Marianne Hester, a Bristol University sociologist who studies abusive relationships. Domestic violence goes up whenever families spend more time together, such as the Christmas and summer vacations, she said.

Now, with families in lockdown worldwide, hotlines are lighting up with abuse reports, leaving governments trying to address a crisis that experts say they should have seen coming.

The United Nations called on Sunday for urgent action to combat the worldwide surge in domestic violence. "I urge all governments to put women's safety first as they respond to the pandemic," Secretary General António Guterres wrote on Twitter.

But governments largely failed to prepare for the way the new public health measures would create opportunities for abusers to terrorize their victims. Now, many are scrambling to offer services to those at risk.

But, as with the response to the virus itself, the delays mean that irreparable harm may already have occurred.

Lockdown and 'Intimate Terrorism'

As cities and towns across China locked down, a 26-year-old woman named Lele found herself entangled in more and more arguments with her husband, with whom she now had to spend every hour in their home in Anhui Province, in eastern China.

On March 1, while Lele was holding her 11-month-old daughter, her husband began to beat her with a high chair. She is not sure how many times he hit her. Eventually, she says, one of her legs lost feeling and she fell to the ground, still holding the baby in her arms.

A photograph she took after the incident shows the high chair lying on the floor in pieces, two of its metal legs snapped off — evidence of the force with which her husband wielded it against her. Another image documents Lele’s injuries: Nearly every inch of her lower legs was covered in bruises, a huge hematoma blooming on her left calf.

Lele — her full name is not being used for her safety — said that her husband had abused her throughout their six-year relationship, but that the Covid-19 outbreak made things far worse.

“During the epidemic, we were unable to go outside, and our conflicts just grew bigger and bigger and more and more frequent,” she said. “Everything was exposed.”

As quarantines take effect around the world, that kind of “intimate terrorism” — a term many experts prefer for domestic violence — is flourishing.

In China, a Beijing-based NGO dedicated to combating violence against women, Equality, has seen a surge in calls to its help line since early February, when the government locked down cities in Hubei Province, then the outbreak’s epicenter.

In Spain, the emergency number for domestic violence received 18 percent more calls in the first two weeks of lockdown than in the same period a month earlier.

“We’ve been getting some very distressing calls, showing us clearly just how intense psychological as well as physical mistreatment can get when people are kept 24 hours a day together within a reduced space,” said Ana Bella, who set up [a foundation](#) to help other women after surviving domestic violence herself.

On Thursday, the French police reported a nationwide spike of about 30 percent in domestic violence. Christophe Castaner, the French interior minister, said he had asked officers to be on the lookout for abuse.

“The risk increases due to confinement,” he said in an [interview on French television](#).

No Escape

In Spain, with the help of women’s associations, The New York Times contacted women stuck at home with an abusive husband or partner and conducted interviews over WhatsApp.

One of them, Ana — who asked that her full name be withheld — shares an apartment with her partner, and says he has been regularly abusing her. He insists on total surveillance at all times. If she tries to lock herself in a room, he kicks the door until she opens it.

“I can’t even have privacy in the bathroom — and now I have to endure this in a lockdown,” she wrote in a message sent late at night, to hide the communication from her husband.

Judith Lewis Herman, a renowned trauma expert at Harvard University Medical School, has found that the coercive methods domestic abusers use to control their partners and children “bear an uncanny resemblance” to those kidnappers use to control hostages and repressive regimes use to break the will of political prisoners.

“The methods which enable one human being to control another are remarkably consistent,” she wrote in a widely cited 1992 [journal article](#). “While perpetrators of organized political or sexual exploitation may instruct each other in coercive methods, perpetrators of domestic abuse appear to reinvent them.”

In addition to physical violence, which is not present in every abusive relationship, common tools of abuse include isolation from friends, family and employment; constant surveillance; strict, detailed rules for behavior; and restrictions on access to such basic necessities as food, clothing and sanitary facilities.

Home isolation, however vital to the fight against the pandemic, is giving still more power to the abuser, Dr. Hester said. “If suddenly people have got to be at home,” she said, “that gives him an opportunity, suddenly, to call the shots around that. To say what she should be doing or shouldn’t.”

The isolation has also shattered support networks, making it far more difficult for victims to get help or escape.

Fragile resources, overwhelmed

After her husband attacked her with the high chair, Lele limped to the next room and called the police. When they arrived, however, they only documented the attack, then took no further action.

Next, she hired a lawyer and filed for divorce — only to find that the epidemic had cut off that avenue of escape, too. Her divorce proceeding was postponed until April. She is still waiting for the court’s decision.

And finding a new home amid the outbreak proved difficult, forcing Lele and her daughter to continue to live with their abuser for weeks.

It is a pattern playing out around the world.

Institutions that are supposed to protect women from domestic violence, many weak and underfunded to begin with, are now straining to respond to the increased demand.

Feng Yuan, a co-founder of Equality, the Chinese advocacy group, said she had one client who called an emergency line only to be told the police were too overstretched to help her. “We can come to your place after the crisis,” she recounted the operator saying.

In Europe, one country after another seems to have followed the same grim path: First, governments impose lockdowns without making sufficient provisions for domestic abuse victims. About 10 days later, distress calls spike, setting off a public outcry. Only then do the governments scramble to improvise solutions.

Italy was first.

Its lockdown began in early March. Soon after that, domestic violence reports began to rise, but there was nowhere for newly desperate women to go. Shelters could not take them because the risk of infection was too great.

So the government said local authorities could requisition hotel rooms to serve as makeshift shelters where victims could quarantine safely.

Spain announced its lockdown on March 14; France’s began three days later. About two weeks later, with abuse reports soaring, officials there announced that they, too, planned to turn vacant hotel rooms into shelters, among other emergency efforts.

In Britain, the authorities waited longer before imposing a lockdown.

Ten days before it began on March 23, The New York Times contacted the Home Office about what it planned to do about domestic violence. The response: Only “existing sources of advice and support” would be available. The government later published a [list](#) of hotlines and apps that victims could use to call for help, but only one was specifically tailored for the Covid-19 crisis.

By a week into lockdown, Avon and Somerset, in the southwest of the country, said domestic abuse reports were already up by 20 percent, and local forces elsewhere were bracing for the same.

Last week, after dozens of civic groups signed an [open letter](#) to the government calling for action, officials pledged to respond, without offering specifics.

“Supporting victims of domestic abuse is a priority for the home secretary, and she is fully aware of the distress and anxiety this period may cause to those suffering or at risk of domestic abuse,” the Home Office said in a statement. “We are working with the police, domestic abuse charities, help lines and front-line workers to support and protect people.”

It also said victims could “disregard orders to stay at home if they need to seek immediate refuge.”

Eventually, the lockdowns will end. But as the confinement drags on, the danger seems likely to intensify. Studies show that abusers are more likely to murder their partners and others in the wake of personal crises, including lost jobs or major financial setbacks.

With Covid-19 ravaging the economy, such crises are set to become much more frequent.

Reporting was contributed by Raphael Minder from Spain, Vivian Wang from Hong Kong, Constant Méheut from France and Elisabetta Povoledo from Italy.

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>.