

***The Shadows Within the Shadow Pandemic: The Rise of Domestic Violence in Lockdown - are some in a greater quarantine?***

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The UN has described the worldwide increase in domestic abuse as a "shadow pandemic" alongside Covid-19. There has been a marked rise in reports of domestic abuse during lockdown, as many people are trapped at home with their abuser.

But are all those in peril empowered to have their voices heard and properly supported?

There has been stark commentating that compared to other countries like New Zealand, Germany, Italy and Spain who set up specific housing provisions for victims of domestic abuse, the UK has done very little.

By July 2020 it was reported that in the UK: 26 women and girls had been killed in domestic abuse lockdown cases.

Real concerns were raised that the National Oversight Group on Domestic Abuse — a cross-party advisory group set up under former Prime Minister Theresa May — which last reported in December 2014 -had not convened once during the pandemic.

The Government through the responsible Minister on domestic violence: Victoria Atkins; disputed the criticism and said support had been provided during the last few months and there was a commitment to "bringing perpetrators to account."

But do such groups properly envelop all? The links on that Government website page speaks only of violence against women and girls.

The conversation is often thus exclusively framed as commitments to do so for women and girls. But even there much more is to be done, campaigners point to the failure to ratify a landmark European treaty on violence against women signed by the Government eight years ago. The Domestic Abuse Bill before Parliament it is said does not ensure protection for all women and girls. The recent lockdown has raised concerns of disparity for those from BAME backgrounds known to have far worse effects from Covid 19, in accessing support and help for domestic abuse, a common theme being a lack of access to phones or devices to even seek that help.

Domestic Abuse helplines often feature only women and their stories. These are so important to encourage others who may be suffering in silence to come forward and seek help and justice.

But there is the other more taboo side of the coin which is now shining. Men equally can be the victims of domestic violence at the hands of their female partners, and male partners too. But these reported cases are rarer as there always is an aroma of stigma attached to any victim coming forward, but even more so if he is a man.

Society more readily recognises the fact of domestic violence against women, although the recent law on controlling and coercive behaviour and the recent case of Sally Challen shows this is still evolving.

But doctrines of machismo and undermining masculinity feeds into the belief that domestic abuse in truth only happens to women. There has been recent academic studies from the Universities of South Wales and Bristol that show that disparity in attitudes and treatment borne out.

Men have a founded fear they will simply not be believed and be subject to ridicule by society at large and in particular by those tasked with investigating precisely these sorts of offences. Many conscious of gender stereotypes do not see themselves as victims, when they should, and wrongly but understandably feel a sense of shame and embarrassment about their situation which stops them coming forward.

However, statistics show the prevalence of domestic abuse against men. In 2014/15 half a million men as well as 1.1 million women were victims of domestic abuse as recorded by the Office for Statistics for England and Wales. We know this but what is the number for male victims since lockdown?

Even where reports are made there is inequality in provision for support services. In 2018 it was reported that London had no safe houses for men, where conversely Northamptonshire opened their first male refuge which could also accommodate children.

Cases involving male victims actually coming to court still strike a novel chord when reported in the media. I was part of the team prosecuting the Alex Skeel case where his partner Jordan Worth was sentenced to 7.5 years for repeated domestic abuse against him which led to national headlines and a BBC 1 Documentary. My recent cases involving controlling and coercive behaviour have also garnered national interest.

There are efforts to properly recognise and support men who seek the protection of the law but many would say the reality still needs a change to the unconscious bias that often exists.

Thankfully there are a number of organisations who are hard at work to change attitudes amongst male victims themselves and to those who offer support and justice.

The Government has published recent guidance on domestic abuse and how to get help during the coronavirus outbreak- this guidance was last updated on the 15th of July 2020.

It provides definitions of abuse and behavior and support and links to organisations and helplines; it importantly offers links to groups offering help where English may not be the first language and speaks of honour based violence, forced marriage and controlling behaviour.

But it is of note that it cites only one helpline for men- part of a wider domestic abuse charity, dedicated organisations for men like the MenKind Initiative are not yet linked.

Thus, within the shadow pandemic -work still needs to be done to challenge the isolation of victims and to quarantine those gender stereotypes that still prevail.

**Maryam Syed 28th July 2020**

