

Surviving Two Pandemics: The Impact of COVID-19 Emergency Measures and VAWG on Women's Services

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The violence against women and girls (VAWG) sector in the UK and globally has been addressing two pandemics – violence against women and Covid-19. In 2013, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared VAWG a global health pandemic and the UN called violence against women the 'shadow pandemic'. Women have disproportionately been affected by the effects of Covid-19 and are subsequently trying to simultaneously survive two pandemics. Over a 12 month period just prior to COVID-19, 243 million women and girls around the world were subjected to physical and sexual violence, 87,000 women were killed by intimate partners or family members, 40% of women reported violence to support agencies seeking help, and the global cost of addressing violence against women was over £2 trillion.¹ When the COVID-19 pandemic spread, and as security, health and financial situations worsened, violence against women increased exponentially.² Women trapped in homes were (and still are) at serious risk as COVID-19 became weaponised by perpetrators who used control, fear and intimidation tactics to abuse, leaving women with little opportunity to escape the violence as the lockdown became official government policy.³

The nature of the two pandemics and the impact on women and girls becomes more severe as women's insecurities and vulnerabilities increase.⁴ For black and minoritised women and girls, the risk of violence and exposure to COVID-19 is also racialised due to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on BAME populations (due to the nature of structural inequalities, not pre-existing health conditions). From a policy perspective, there are already a number of concerns regarding the two pandemics that require a more effective policy response from government as emergency policy measures designed to support the population through the COVID-19 crisis are simply not effective to support women at risk of VAWG. BME women are further subjected to racialised inequalities and other women who have disabilities are subjected to intersectional oppression. This blog focuses on the UK situation and discusses the following gaps in policy:

1. Restrictive measures such as lockdown which increase all forms of VAWG such as sexual violence, sexual harassment, racial discrimination (racialised VAWG) and other forms of violence as "COVID-19 does not cause abuse, it creates a conducive context".⁵
2. Lack of violence prevention measures which are impacted by the breakdown of safety nets and other social protections which increase risks and exacerbate inequalities under the two pandemics.
3. Lack of government response to calls for data disaggregation which could help understand the impact of the two pandemics and disproportionality leading to improved policy responses and resourcing for the women's sector

Women living in refuge accommodation during lockdown become destitute.

For women fleeing domestic violence, women's refuges are places of safety which enable women to get the support they need, to recover and rebuild their lives from violence and move on to independent and sustainable

¹ UN Women. 2020. The Shadow Pandemic: Violence and Against Women and Girls and COVID-19.

² Ibid.

³ DFID. 2020. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ EVAW. 2020. EVAW Briefing on COVID-19 and the Duty to Prevent VAWG. London.

housing of their own. Addressing homelessness through refuge accommodation and the prospect for independent safe housing are critical for women fleeing domestic violence enabling them to stay safe. Housing is a violence prevention measure that should be a central part of the government's VAWG response.

Before COVID-19, there were already major concerns about local authority responses to addressing women's housing and homelessness needs under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. For example, many women moving from refuges often found it difficult to secure affordable housing in suitable areas and the situation for black and minoritised women was more difficult because of "patterns of systemic and institutional failures and discrimination by public authorities".⁶ Housing department gatekeeping practices resulted in the rejection of homelessness applications based on local connection.⁷ During the COVID-19 crisis, government addressed some of the shortfalls in the Act by changing the rules on 'priority need', which has enabled all women fleeing domestic violence to be considered 'priority need' for housing. However, the change in policy did not go far enough to protect women trapped in their homes under the emergency measures. The two pandemics highlight the need for a review of housing policy that continues to place responsibility for homelessness on women fleeing domestic violence. While the temporary change in the definition of priority need is welcome, there are deeper structural and institutional concerns that require redress because the housing crisis women face requires longer-term intervention and the barriers are systemic.

For women already in refuges when the lockdown happened, the risk of returning to perpetrators is higher because of the lack of income and other resources available to them during the emergency. COVID-19 crisis has had a devastating impact on economic growth and development, but it has disproportionately impacted women in precarious and insecure employment. Some women living in refuges may have been employed in zero hours contracts or held other precarious and insecure jobs which disappeared as lockdown was introduced. Due to the nature of their employment, these women did not benefit from the government furlough scheme as employers were reluctant to apply for the benefit. Consequently, the furlough scheme exacerbated existing gendered and racial inequalities by excluding this segment of the working population from the benefit. The other avenue available to women when they lost employment was Universal Credit; however, making an application through the system that was near collapse due to over demand was difficult. This meant that when the lockdown happened, women in refuges immediately lost their source of income and struggled to register on the benefits system. Once women register on the system, the waiting period for Universal Credit (before COVID-19) is five weeks. The delay in receiving Universal Credit has become a large barrier for women aiming to flee domestic violence as many women have little income reserves to be with. COVID-19 has significantly increased pressures on the system and infrastructure. This has left women with no cash to purchase goods such as food, cleaning and sanitary products, in order to support children's needs and meet other necessities. Ultimately, the crisis has impacted women's decision making. The socio-economic circumstances of women in refuges increased their exposure to poverty which has been weaponised by perpetrators. For example, women in refuges considered returning to the perpetrator due to the situation of destitution they faced. Many perpetrators contacted women in refuges and pressured them to return by saying the situation of destitution would worsen during the crisis leaving them in poverty and their longer-term housing in jeopardy.

The refuge service itself is reshaped. The shaping impacts the way safeguarding and health and safety assessments are done. Continuous maintenance, furniture replacement and other minor refurbishments are all put on hold until after the crisis. This means that in addition to the cumulative effect on demand, women's organisations will have to undertake major investment in refuge infrastructure. Lockdown have had a significant impact of emotional and mental health and wellbeing, both for women in refuges and for refuge keyworkers. Increased need for clinical supervision for staff and increased counselling and therapeutic support and other direct support needs for women and children will require additional resources but none of these services were funded to meet the emergent need of the two pandemics and women's organisations will struggle to obtain funding after

⁶ WAHA. 2019. Women against Homelessness Action. A Roof Not a Home. London.

⁷ Ibid.

the COVID-19 crisis. Reflecting on increased demand for women's services during and after COVID-19 when the COVID-19 crisis ends, the violence against women and girls' pandemic will continue.

Digital inequality is gendered and racialised and the result of wider structural inequality.

The refuge under lockdown is a different place. While government recognised refuge keyworkers as essential workers, women's services struggled to source PPE and without this equipment, refuge keyworkers were unable to provide direct face to face support to women and children. Refuges were re-shaped. For example, women's organisations had to invest in mobile phones, purchase and/or extend mobile phone plans, and purchase I Pads and laptops to enable video conference calling with residents. Conference call facilities had to be purchased to enable an online environment. Refuge keyworkers who were now working from home also required digital and other equipment to be purchased. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the funding shortfall for black and minoritised women's organisations was 39%⁸. At the start of lockdown, these organisations became cash strapped very quickly as they struggled to meet the needs for reshaped services through digitalisation. 25% of these organisations feared that they would not survive another 6 months⁹ because of the pressures on reserve income to meet the needs of reshapes services. Government COVID-19 emergency funding to the sector was announced on 2 May 2020, 6 weeks after lockdown. The allocation is not expected before the end of May. By this time, the cumulative effect, or period of increased exponential demand for services will be evident. This means that the emergency fund will not sufficiently address the historical funding shortfall, or the period of the cumulative effect. In assessing the situation of digital inequality in relation to the two pandemics, the lack of resourcing to the sector in a policy response is glaring but not surprising. The Domestic Abuse Bill 2019 omitted funding provision to the specialist women's sector. During the current crisis, while emergency funding has finally been made available, the longer-term funding requirements to address the two pandemics, or the cumulative effect, have still not been addressed by government. Digital inequality reflects wider structural and socio-economic inequalities and the result of years of government decommissioning and underfunding of women's services.

As a society we cannot accept that women are trapped at home with violent perpetrators. We must call for a commitment to a comprehensive violence prevention strategy during the two pandemics.

At the time of writing this, 18 domestic homicides had already been recorded and that is 3 times higher than in the pre COVID-19 period. For some women, lockdown meant being trapped at home with violent perpetrators. However, this situation did not result solely from the current response to COVID-19, it was created in times of austerity when the Conservative government pulled funding for community outreach services. Black and minoritised women's services had used this funding to undertake deep community outreach, establishing links with women in the community and creating pathways to support especially for those women who were subjected to greater exclusion. Before COVID-19, 60% to 70% of referrals to Black and minoritised women's organisations came from self-referrals as a result of the violence prevention strategies these organised employed through deep community outreach. The current response by government contains little reference to violence prevention. The Home Office has been undertaking an awareness raising campaign. Campaigns by Police directed to neighbours have also encouraged third-party reporting if neighbours or those passing by see or hear violence. However, a more comprehensive approach to violence prevention is lacking in policy. An emphasis on community surveillance will not address the needs for violence prevention. The question – what can be done for women trapped at home – has been raised numerous times. A response could be that during Police callout, women must have online or telephone access to specialist women's organisations who can ensure their safety and protection. Such organisations would require resources to meet the needs of services reshaped in the emergency environment.

⁸ Data from a report on BME women's refuges by Sheil, F. 2020 as referenced by Banga, B. and Roy, S. 2020. The Impact of the Dual Pandemics: Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls. London. Imkaan.

⁹ Ibid.

The prevention strategy must be comprehensive and centre women's services at the heart of delivery. It is not enough to accept that women will be trapped in homes.

We must have data disaggregation so that we can arrive at deep understanding of the impact of the two pandemics.¹⁰

No one is immune to COVID-19, but structural inequality is disproportionately reproduced across diverse communities and exacerbates existing racialised inequalities. Before COVID-19, the specialist black and minoritised refuge sector experienced decommissioning at disproportionate levels. In 2018, 25 black and minoritised women's refuges shared an income of £10 million (or an annual turnover of £400,000 on average). Ten generic refuges shared an income of £25 million (or an annual turnover of £2.5 million on average).¹¹ The generic organisation was awarded 6 times more funding than the specialist black and minoritised woman's organisation on average. Leading into the COVID-19 pandemic, Women's Aid, reported that 41% of women supported by the No Woman Turned Away project were BME highlighting that BME women faced additional barriers in accessing safe accommodation.¹² This is in line with one-third of specialist refuges for black and minoritised women being decommissioned since austerity resulting in a reduction of 50% bedspace capacity. During COVID-19, there is an increase in demand for black and minoritised women's refuges which is exponential that is, Black and minoritised women and girls' organisations have noticed weekly increases in need for refuge space. The lack of disaggregated data to fully identify the scope and scale of the problem invisibilises the racial, gendered and intersectional impact of the crisis. Where the invisibilisation continues, black and minoritised women will fail to be recognised in responses by government to address the crisis deepening the sense of systemic discrimination and exclusion that occurs from the existing situation of inequality.

The two pandemics highlight gaps and inconsistencies in response. As COVID-19 spreads, violence against women and girls increases exponentially and existing inequalities are exacerbated. The structural nature of inequality is exposed requiring a different approach that will not be business as usual. We must think about reimagining our society, the structures and institutions that produce and reproduce inequality and oppression for vast segments of the population. During the COVID-19 crisis, safety nets have become overburdened and stopped working. Emergency policy measures have not addressed those subjected to marginalisation, exclusion, and disenfranchisement. These were pre-existing conditions before COVID-19 and are disproportionately evident now.

Blog Note

At the time of writing this blog, the position paper *Impact of the Dual Pandemics: Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls (2020)* by Banga, B and Roy, S was published and served as a critical context for this blog. The section on data disaggregation is sourced directly from the position paper. The paper is available at www.imkaan.org.uk

¹⁰ The section is extracted in full, from Banga, B. and Roy, S. 2020. *The Impact of the Dual Pandemics: Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women and Girls*. London. Imkaan. The references are kept as per the original.

¹¹ Imkaan. 2018. *From Survival to Sustainability*. Black Services Matter. London.

¹² Women's Aid Federation of England. 2019. *No Woman Turned Away*. Bristol. Women's Aid Federation of England.