

The impact of Covid-19 on survivors: findings from Women's Aid's initial Survivor Survey

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Introduction

Home is not a safe place for many women and children and we knew that the government's Covid-19 lockdown would have a direct impact on women and children experiencing, or who had experienced domestic abuse. Women's Aid has begun to assess and monitor the impact of Covid-19 on domestic abuse services and survivors. In April 2020 we carried out a survey of survivors of domestic abuse to investigate the initial impact lockdown measures are having on them. This document sets out the findings of this survey. The first part looks at survivors' experiences of abuse, and some of the ways in which perpetrators are using Covid-19 as a tool for coercive and controlling behaviour. The second part looks at the impact Covid-19 has had on survivors' ability to access support, from specialist domestic abuse services and their informal support networks such as friends and family.

Methodology

The survey was designed to help us build a picture of the impact of Covid-19 on survivors' experiences of abuse, their children and their ability to access support. The survey was circulated via Women's Aid's Survivors Forum, and survivor Facebook groups. It could be completed between 6th and 19th April 2020. These findings reflect the concerns of survivors at that time and do not take into account any developments after 19th April. The analysis below is broken down by survivors who are currently experiencing abuse and those who have experienced domestic abuse in the past. The findings from this survey are used to inform all of our work on behalf of women and children experiencing domestic abuse and the lifesaving local services which support them.

Who responded to the survey?

We asked survivors responding to the survey whether they are currently experiencing domestic abuse, or whether they had experienced it in the past. Survivors were able to interpret this question in the way they most identified with. It became clear when analysing qualitative response that survivors experiencing post-separation abuse had identified with both categories. Of our respondents 46 identified as currently experiencing domestic abuse and 247 as having experienced it in the past. We also asked survivors questions about their demographics. All survivors included in this analysis identified as women. Almost 40% of survivors had a disability or long term health condition. The majority of respondents were white, and thus the experiences of Black and minoritised women are under-represented in this sample. A full breakdown of demographic information is provided in the Appendix.

Part 1: The impact on domestic abuse

Survivors' experiences of abuse has got worse

Of the survivors who told us they were currently in an abusive relationship, 67.4% (31 out of 46) told us that the abuse had got worse since Covid-19.

The lockdown has meant that over three-quarters of survivors (76.1%, 35 out of 46) are having to spend more time with their abuser. Unsurprisingly, many survivors told us they are feeling trapped, with nowhere to go to escape their abuser:

"It's hell on earth living 24/7 now with my abuser & can't get out to escape, [to] put distance between us when I feel tension rising."

"I feel like my partner is behaving worse because he is frustrated about being stuck in the house. He takes it out on me. Before I could escape for a break by going out for a while, now I just feel trapped."

"More time at home magnifies the issues, you can't get away from it, I have to work harder to keep him happy."

"The abuse is basically walking on eggshells being called stupid, gaslighting, being screamed at, stopping me from going out, taking my money, forcing me to have sex, physically trapping me. Threatening to throw me out if things are not done 'his way', calling me a bitch stupid and saying I'm mad and it's all in my head. I was suffering from stress and anxiety and depression he said he would help. But I am supposed to be 'his woman' and make him happy, if he is angry or unhappy then that is my fault."

The worsening of abuse is not limited to survivors currently in abusive relationships. Many survivors experience post-separation abuse: 13.7% (34 of 247) of survivors who said they'd experienced abuse in the past also told us the abuse had got worse since Covid-19.

"Abusers like the control, and since Covid-19 I have experienced more contact than I'd like, more dictatorship, using child as a weapon and feeling more alone without my support group around to be there."

"My abusive ex who I'd not heard from in years tried contacting me as the country was going into lockdown."

Covid-19 makes it harder to leave the abuser

Over three quarters of survivors (78.3%, 36 out of 46) told us that Covid-19 has made it harder for them to escape abuse.

"I wanted to leave the relationship. However, since Covid-19 and the lockdown coming into effect it has made it harder to leave. I am a keyworker who is around Covid +ive patients, so I don't feel like I could go home and stay with my parents. My family don't even know what's going on and I'm too scared to tell them."

Perpetrators are using Covid-19 as a tool for abuse

Over 70% (33 out of 46) of survivors experiencing current abuse told us that their abuser has more control over their life since Covid-19.

"Covid-19 traps you in the house because you can't get always go elsewhere our when my partner starts to get angry. Also the situation is perfect for enhanced control as well as the abuser feeling a great lack of control due to the uncertainty. His anxiety results in me being his emotional punch bag. It's not physically violent, but aggressive and undermining. It is exhausting and relentless."

Furthermore, 45.7% of survivors currently experiencing domestic abuse told us that their abuser has made them feel bad for being scared or worried about Covid-19 and over one third said their abuser has made them feel more scared or worried about Covid-19. Some perpetrators are blaming women for the economic impact of Covid-19 on their household: 30.4% (14 out of 46) of survivors told us their abuser had done this. A full breakdown of the number of survivors reporting each impact is given in Table 1 on the next page.

Table 1: Impact of Covid-19 on abuse

| Impact | # survivors | % survivors |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|
| My abuser now has more control over my life | 33 | 71.7% |
| My abuser has made me feel bad for being scared/worried about Covid-19 | 21 | 45.7% |
| My abuser has made me feel more scared/worried about Covid-19 | 16 | 34.8% |
| My abuser has blamed me for the economic impact on our household | 14 | 30.4% |
| My abuser has blamed me for not having enough food/essentials or for not being able to buy non-essential items | 9 | 19.6% |
| My abuser has withheld medication from me more often (e.g. saying unable to obtain due to lockdown) | 4 | 8.7% |
| My abuser has blamed me for not being able to get hold of the medication we need | 3 | 6.5% |
| Total number of survivors currently experiencing domestic abuse | 46 | |

Worryingly, four women told us their abuser has withheld medication from them, and three had been blamed for being unable to get hold of required medication.

“I am reliant upon my abuser to get food and medication as shielding for 12 weeks. This is being used against me.”

Survivors have limited access to essentials

Over 60% of survivors told us they have experienced increased financial hardship and almost a third of survivors told us they had not been able to get hold of essential food and supplies they need for themselves and their family. A full breakdown of the number of survivors reporting each impact is given in Table 2.

“As a single parent with respiratory issues, it's very hard to get food. My son has food allergies and it's almost impossible to get him what he needs.”

Table 2: Impact of Covid-19 on survivors' access to basic essentials

| Impact | # survivors | % survivors |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|
| I have experienced increased financial hardship | 28 | 60.9% |
| I have not been able to get hold of the essential food and supplies I need for myself or myself and my family. | 13 | 28.3% |
| I am concerned that I might lose my home | 8 | 17.4% |
| I have been unable to apply for the destitute domestic violence (DDV) concession | 4 | 8.7% |
| None of these | 9 | 19.6% |
| Total number of survivors currently experiencing domestic abuse | 46 | |

Survivors also told us of difficulties accessing prescription medication. Twenty-one survivors told us they were unable to access prescribed medication for themselves and 19 told us they were unable to access prescribed medication for their children.

“My mental health and PTSD has got worse and I am struggling to get repeat prescriptions for medication for these conditions due to GP restrictions.”

“I already struggle to access services as I find everything very difficult. I had to ring the GP last week for medication but I was on hold for so long I ran out of credit.”

Part 2: The impact on access to support

Survivors may access a range of support from specialist domestic abuse services to informal support networks such as friends and family. This section explores how Covid-19 has impacted on survivors' ability to access these support options, and how this has affected them. The impact of the reduction in all types of support is summed up by this survivors' comment:

"I just feel alone."

"Being isolated takes away your support system. We don't normally stay at home we're out as much as possible in case he decides to turn up. But during this time we're stuck inside and there's only a front door between us if he decides to try and kick it in again."

Covid-19 makes it harder to access specialist domestic abuse services

Over 60% of survivors who are currently experiencing abuse told us they felt that Covid-19 made it harder to access specialist support services. Over 40% of survivors who had experienced abuse in the past also thought Covid-19 had made it harder to access support.

"He could walk in the room at any time and check history etc."

"I feel guilty to use the service, I know domestic violence has increased by 25% and there are women in more danger than me, esp if they still live with their abuser."

"The police are involved in my abuse so I can't call them to help."

We asked survivors what would made it easier for them to access specialist support services during lockdown. Survivors suggested more online support, such as extending Live Chat hours to evenings as well as during the day.

"More online direct contact."

"Live chats in evenings."

Survivors also spoke of the need for there to be more support, so that they did not need to feel guilty accessing the support, lest it be taken away from someone else.

"To know there is enough support and I am not taking it away from someone who needs it more than me"

Covid-19 makes it harder for survivors to access mental health services

Two thirds of survivors (21 out of 31) currently experiencing abuse who need mental health support were unable to access it since Covid-19.

"The counselling service has stopped. We were going to do online but I can't because he's here all the time and I'm looking after the children full time. I have no time to myself in private."

The need for mental health support is not limited to survivors currently experiencing abuse; this need often remains once the abuse has ended. Just over half of survivors (74 out of 141) who experienced abuse in the past that need mental health support were unable to access it due to Covid-19.

"NHS counselling was cancelled - only had 5 out of my 8 sessions. Would have to go back on waiting list to access again."

Covid-19 makes it harder for survivors to access informal support networks

Accessing support from informal networks such as friends and family can be crucial for survivors.

Unsurprisingly, most survivors who had face to face support networks told us this had stopped completely or decreased (60.7%, 144 out of 237). One survivor is a keyworker so told us that their face to face support had continued:

"As a keyworker my profession is fairly sociable, so I have still been able to chat to my colleagues."

Many survivors also told us that phone contact with informal networks had also reduced. 36% of survivors currently experiencing abuse, who used to have phone contact with friends and family told us this had decreased or stopped completely or decreased. Some of these survivors, who were living with the abuser, explained that it is harder to speak on the phone without being overheard by their abuser. Others said that their abuser tries to restrict their contact with their informal support networks.

"Harder to talk to people as he's always around."

"He doesn't like it when I call family or friends, it makes him worse."

"I just can't reach out, let my guard down, I am constantly alert, ready to keep him happy."

54.5% of survivors who had experienced abuse in the past told us that the phone contact with their informal support networks had decreased or stopped completely.

Survivors' experiences of online contact with informal support networks varied. 78% of survivors currently experiencing abuse, who could access online support said they had maintained, started or increased online contact with informal support networks. However, 55.1% of survivors who experienced abuse in the past told us their online contact had stopped or decreased.

"It has triggered lots for me. I am a survivor of domestic abuse. Being trapped in and feeling isolated from my friends triggers flashbacks and thoughts of being alone. Although my abuser does not know where I live I have a permanent sense of anxiety about my flashbacks and trying to deal with these alone."

"It's brought back feelings of being trapped and suffocating. Difficult to adjust to isolation as only just got used to being free."

In Part 3 we will explore the impact on child survivors.

What can be done to help?

What can the government do to help?

We asked survivors, "What one thing can the government do to help?" Survivors had a broad range of suggestions. Providing resources for support services came up in many survivors' comments:

"Provide more money for domestic abuse charities"

"Funding for organisations"

"Make more funding available for women's aid etc to be able to offer longer hrs via web chat"

"More funding for escaping abuser."

Some survivors also suggested that the government could do more to raise awareness.

"Perhaps let it be known that getting help doesn't breach the Government regulations."

"Highlight, raise awareness, understanding of coercive control, emotional and psychological abuse and provide support."

Some survivors recommend the need for training in domestic abuse for the Family Courts.

"For family courts to educate themselves on narcissistic abuse and parental alienation"¹

¹ For more information about parental alienation, see Barnett, A. (2020), Parental alienation and the family courts, Women's Aid's Safe Blog, available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/parental-alienation-and-the-family-courts/>

What can Women's Aid do to help?

We also asked survivors what Women's Aid can do to help. Similar to the suggestions for government, some survivors suggested increased awareness raising.

"Continue to raise awareness, it took me a long time to realise I was in an abusive relationship, abuse is not always physical"

Survivors also asked for support from Women's Aid to continue providing support.

"Keep going doing your best all help is always appreciated."

Another recurring suggestion was to provide more online support to survivors, such as by extending our Live Chat hours.

"You are doing your best longer live chat hours would be helpful at this time for others."

"Online chat service with trained counsellors and legal advice. Impossible to get through the phone line anyway at the moment."

"Increase online chat service availability."

Preliminary conclusion

The Covid-19 lockdown measures expose survivors to worsening domestic abuse, whilst restricting their access to support. Perpetrators are using Covid-19 as a tool for coercion and manipulation, often using Covid-19 as a tool to induce fear.

Prior to lockdown, fleeing abuse was already a challenging and tumultuous time for many survivors and the lockdown measures have made leaving an abusive situation harder than ever. Survivors face substantial challenges accessing specialist domestic abuse services, mental health support and maintaining informal contact with friends and family.

The impact is not limited to survivors. Many children are in lockdown in homes where they are more exposed to abuse and child contact arrangements are being used to further abuse and are placing children at risk of further harm.

Survivors want to see Women's Aid and the government work towards strengthened availability of services, improved awareness and more accessible, online support options.

Appendix 1: Respondents' demographics

Table 4: Age

| Age | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|--------------|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| 21-25 | 16 | 6.5% | 2 | 4.3% | 18 | 6.1% |
| 25-30 | 30 | 12.1% | 5 | 10.9% | 35 | 11.9% |
| 31-40 | 78 | 31.6% | 15 | 32.6% | 93 | 31.7% |
| 41-50 | 87 | 35.2% | 15 | 32.6% | 102 | 34.8% |
| 51-60 | 31 | 12.6% | 7 | 15.2% | 38 | 13.0% |
| 61-70 | 4 | 1.6% | 2 | 4.3% | 6 | 2.0% |
| Missing data | 1 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |

Table 5: Disability

| | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|---|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Disability and long term health condition | 9 | 3.6% | 2 | 4.3% | 11 | 3.8% |
| Disability | 14 | 5.7% | 2 | 4.3% | 16 | 5.5% |
| long term health condition | 59 | 23.9% | 16 | 34.8% | 75 | 25.6% |
| Neither | 157 | 63.6% | 24 | 52.2% | 181 | 61.8% |
| Prefer not to say | 6 | 2.4% | 2 | 4.3% | 8 | 2.7% |
| Missing data | 2 | 0.8% | | 0.0% | 2 | 0.7% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |

Table 6: Ethnicity

| | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|---|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Asian/ Asian British Bangladeshi | 1 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Asian/ Asian British Chinese | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Asian/ Asian British Indian | 3 | 1.2% | 1 | 2.2% | 4 | 1.4% |
| Asian/ Asian British Pakistani | 2 | 0.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 0.7% |
| Any other Asian/Asian British background | 1 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British African | 1 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British Caribbean | 2 | 0.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 0.7% |
| Any other Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British background | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups White and Asian | 2 | 0.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 0.7% |
| Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups White and Black Caribbean | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Any other Mixed/ Multiple ethnic background | 2 | 0.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 0.7% |
| Other ethnic group- Arab | 1 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| White English/ Welsh/ Scottish/ Northern Irish/ British | 214 | 86.6% | 41 | 89.1% | 255 | 87.0% |
| White Gypsy or Irish Traveller | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |
| White Irish | 8 | 3.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 8 | 2.7% |
| Any other White background | 9 | 3.6% | 4 | 8.7% | 13 | 4.4% |
| Prefer not to say | 1 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |

Table 7: Sexual orientation

| | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|-------------------|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Asexual | 5 | 2.0% | 2 | 4.3% | 7 | 2.4% |
| Bisexual | 11 | 4.5% | 3 | 6.5% | 14 | 4.8% |
| Gay woman/lesbian | 1 | 0.4% | | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Heterosexual | 216 | 87.4% | 37 | 80.4% | 253 | 86.3% |
| pansexual | 4 | 1.6% | | 0.0% | 4 | 1.4% |
| Prefer not to say | 9 | 3.6% | 4 | 8.7% | 13 | 4.4% |
| Missing data | 1 | 0.4% | | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |

Table 8: Transgender

| | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|--------------------|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| No | 246 | 99.6% | 43 | 93.5% | 289 | 98.6% |
| Do not wish to say | 1 | 0.4% | 2 | 4.3% | 3 | 1.0% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |

Table 9: Religion

| | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|--------------------|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Buddhist | 4 | 1.6% | 0 | 0.0% | 4 | 1.4% |
| Christian | 107 | 43.3% | 17 | 37.0% | 124 | 42.3% |
| Hindu | 2 | 0.8% | 1 | 2.2% | 3 | 1.0% |
| Muslim | 3 | 1.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 3 | 1.0% |
| Sikh | 2 | 0.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 0.7% |
| Any other religion | 12 | 4.9% | 0 | 0.0% | 12 | 4.1% |
| I'd rather not say | 7 | 2.8% | 2 | 4.3% | 9 | 3.1% |
| No religion | 109 | 44.1% | 26 | 56.5% | 135 | 46.1% |
| Missing data | 1 | 0.4% | | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |

Table 10: Pregnant

| | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|--------------------|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Pregnant | 7 | 2.8% | 0 | 0.0% | 7 | 2.4% |
| Not pregnant | 240 | 97.2% | 45 | 97.8% | 285 | 97.3% |
| Do not wish to say | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 2.2% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |

Table 11: Insecure immigration status

| | Survivors who had experienced abuse in the past | | Survivors who are currently experiencing abuse | | Number of all survivors | |
|-----------------------------|---|-------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | # | % | # | % | # | % |
| Insecure immigration status | 9 | 3.6% | 4 | 8.7% | 13 | 4.4% |
| Secure immigration status | 234 | 94.7% | 42 | 91.3% | 276 | 94.2% |
| Do not wish to say | 1 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.3% |
| Total | 247 | | 46 | | 293 | |