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Domestic violence in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Lockdown and social distancing restrictions have impacted women's experiences of domestic violence, and complicated their access to frontline support services. The entry examines this phenomenon in the context of Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Themes

Mobility Events

Keywords

Domestic violence, women, gender, pandemic, Australia, New Zealand

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Globally, COVID-19 lockdowns have produced a marked rise in domestic violence.² Whether the same can be said for Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand – where provisional statistics on rates of violence during the pandemic have proven inconclusive – is uncertain. Still, observations by frontline workers suggest the lockdown has significantly affected the provision of assistance and protection to survivors of abuse, rates of violence have likely spiked, and forms of violence experienced by women are rapidly changing, including increasing rates of online, technology-facilitated abuse. This rise in violence is attributed mostly to increased collective confinement in domestic space, and to the pandemic's varied social and economic consequences, many of which are known to contribute to the incidence of abuse, including social isolation, financial and professional pressure, and an increase in alcohol usage.³ Lockdown measures have also adversely affected the availability and impact of vital frontline services – many of which rely on face-to-face contact – impinging survivors' ability to seek assistance in times of crisis.



Campaign against domestic violence, 2020, photo by the author.

² Human Rights Watch. 2020. *Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences regarding COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women*. 3 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/03/submission-un-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-its-causes-and-consequences>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

³ See Boxall, Hayley, Anthony Morgan and Rick Brown. 2020. *The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Statistical Bulletin no. 28. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology: 1-2.

Statistics on abuse during the pandemic

Contrary to international trends, statistics in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand do not convincingly reflect any marked increase in domestic abuse during the pandemic. During the first weekend of lockdown in late March, New Zealand police reported a spike in reports of domestic violence.⁴ Still, other than that first weekend, police reports do not illustrate any substantial increase in the number of reports of domestic violence while the country was subject to Levels 3 and 4 lockdowns⁵. In Australia, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (NSWBCSR) similarly found that neither reports to the police, nor reported breaches of Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders (ADVOs),⁶ increased over the country's first months of lockdown in March and April.⁷

Nonetheless, these statistics should be approached with caution. New Zealand's Human Rights Commission (NZHRC) warns that the number of police reports does not necessarily reflect the amount of violence occurring, and highlights that even under ordinary circumstances, violence against women in Aotearoa-New Zealand is significantly under-reported.⁸ Aotearoa-New Zealand "has one of the highest rates of sexual and domestic violence in the developed world".⁹ In a country of 4.9 million, half a million women are thought to be survivors of domestic violence.¹⁰ Rates of gender-based violence are also considerably higher amongst Maori women, who are more than twice as likely to have experienced intimate violence by a partner.¹¹ Meanwhile, in an online survey of 15,000 women, the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) finds that most respondents who had experienced violence during the pandemic had not notified the police.¹² Helen Campbell, the Chief Executive Officer of Women's Legal Service NSW, concurs that "reporting isn't an accurate measure of what's going on," as several women are trapped with their abusers and have no means of contacting anyone outside the home.¹³ Karen Bentley, the Chief Executive Office of WESNET, Australia's national Women's Services Network, further reiterates that "a lot of women don't go to the police," even during ordinary circumstances.¹⁴ Police statistics are therefore unlikely to accurately reflect the incidence of domestic violence in either country.

The experiences of frontline services

Meanwhile, the AIC finds that many of their respondents who experienced violence during the pandemic did not contact the police, but did contact others – including government organisations and

⁴ Sumeo, Karanina and Laurie McGregor. 2020. Submission of the New Zealand Human Rights Commission for the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences: The Impact of COVID-19 and the increase of violence against women. Auckland: New Zealand Human Rights Commission: 6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Akin to a restraining order.

⁷ Freeman, Karen. 2020. Monitoring changes in domestic violence in the wake of COVID-19 social isolation measures'. Bureau Brief No. 145. Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research; Freeman, Karen. 2020a. Has domestic violence increased in the wake of COVID-19 social distancing and isolation? Update to April 2020. Bureau Brief No. 146. Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics: 3-4.

⁸ Sumeo et al. 2020: 4.

⁹ Roy, Eleanor A. 2020. New Zealand domestic violence services to get \$200m as lockdown takes its toll. *The Guardian*. May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/11/new-zealand-domestic-violence->. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹⁰ NZ Ministry of Justice in Sumeo et al. 2020: 4.

¹¹ Ministry of Maori Development in Sumeo et al. 2020: 4.

¹² Boxall et al. 2020: 13.

¹³ Author's interview notes, 9 September 2020.

¹⁴ Author's interview notes, 28 October 2020.

NGOs – for support.¹⁵ Still, domestic violence support organisations in both Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand have reported varied experiences of engagement with survivors during the pandemic. Some services have experienced increased demand, while others experienced less, or the same amount.¹⁶ While there is no evidence of increased calls to the NSW Domestic Violence Line since March,¹⁷ Australia’s national sexual assault, domestic and family violence service, 1800 RESPECT saw a 38% increase in use of its online chat tool between March and April.¹⁸ 1800 RESPECT’s national hotline also saw a spike in phone calls after midnight, while abusive partners were asleep.¹⁹ In Aotearoa-New Zealand, services’ experiences are similarly mixed: some have reported significant increases in reports of family and sexual violence, while others have reported a decline in demand.²⁰

Still, engagement – or a lack thereof – with frontline services does not necessarily reflect the actual incidence of violence against women.²¹ The AIC survey recognises that social distancing measures have impacted many women’s ability to seek help from frontline services.²² Campbell’s observation that women cannot seek assistance while confined to the house with their abusers also runs true for their engagement with frontline services, many of which, under ordinary circumstances, rely heavily on face-to-face contact with survivors, and are unable to run effective services while limited in their mobility under lockdown.

Following from this, the pandemic has also necessitated changes to frontline services’ provision models. Bentley reports that in the first week of lockdown, WESNET conducted a survey with 320 specialist women organisations in Australia, half of which had reported either closing, or conducting services remotely, and half of which stayed open, conducting their regular services. Campbell’s organisation, WLSNSW, suspended the majority of its services during lockdown, and conducted some remote services, where possible. Due to widespread restrictions on everyday movement, the organisation could not provide any direct services, including outreach visits to health centres and prisons, attending court, or visiting remote Aboriginal communities. The bulk of WLSNSW’s work at this time therefore centred on providing online advice to other community workers who needed assistance with their clients’ complex needs. Campbell expresses concern over the quality of services available to survivors over the initial months of the pandemic: she tells me that while clients could continue to remotely apply for protection orders in NSW courts, they were only provided “standard form” orders, with no modifications based on their individual needs. While under ordinary circumstances, applicants for protection orders attend court, where they have the option of receiving free legal advice from a duty solicitor who might assist them with requesting certain conditions tailored to their personal circumstances, this was no longer possible when court services were

¹⁵ Boxall et al. 2020: 13.

¹⁶ See Ibid: 2.

¹⁷ Freeman 2020a: 1.

¹⁸ Doran, Matthew. 2020. Domestic violence services prepare for demand as coronavirus restrictions begin to ease. *ABC News*. 1 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-01/domestic-violence-brace-for-demand-coronavirus-restrictions/12203178>. Last accessed 22 December 2020; Zwartz, Henry. 2020. Amid coronavirus lockdowns, use of online domestic violence reporting tool spikes. *ABC News*. 23 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-23/coronavirus-lockdown-domestic-violence-spikes-in-australia/12238962>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹⁹ Zwartz 2020.

²⁰ Sumeo et al. 2020: 7.

²¹ Slakoff, Danielle C, Wendy Aujla and Eva Penzey Moog. 2020. The Role of Service Providers, Technology, and Mass Media When Home Isn’t Safe for Intimate Partner Violence Victims: Best Practices and Recommendations in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 49: 2780.

²² Boxall et al. 2020: 16.

conducted remotely. She therefore expects that many of these orders were not adequately protective.²³

Types of violence commonly experienced during the pandemic

COVID-19 lockdowns have had further impacts on the nature of domestic violence committed and experienced. Campbell reports that her service has witnessed a rise in the number of women experiencing control by their partners, and an increase in online, technology-facilitated stalking and abuse. Meanwhile, Bentley reports that calls to WESNET's helpline for frontline workers – which provides casework assistance for individuals addressing complex, technology facilitated abuse among their clients – tripled after March. WESNET's member organisations also reported that their clients were experiencing higher rates of pornography-related abuse, and monitoring and surveillance inside their homes. Similarly, the AIC observes that emotionally abusive, harassing and controlling behaviours are the most frequently reported forms of abuse among their respondents.²⁴ In their second report of the year, WESNET attributes this increase in technology-facilitated abuse to increasing reliance on technologies in everyday life.²⁵ Meanwhile, lockdowns have provided perpetrators of abuse with more avenues for such abuse, such as using children's schooling apps to track their whereabouts, or tracking women's use of technology to contact their families or friends.

Lockdowns have also exacerbated some of the consequences of domestic abuse. Social workers from one region of Aotearoa-New Zealand report that women survivors are experiencing significant increases in mental health challenges, depression, distress and isolation.²⁶ The reasons for these increases are likely connected to women's limited mobility outside the home. Campbell draws attention to the spatial dimensions of her organisation's service provision model: under normal circumstances, WLSNSW provides confidential, private and safe spaces for women. This was no longer feasible under lockdown, when women were likely to be ensnared in harmful spaces with their abusers with little reprieve. The New Zealand Human Rights Commission further finds that women survivors have reported "having to de-escalate situations", and support abusive partners in lieu of support by service providers, which has further impacted their mental health.²⁷ This reorganisation of social space during lockdown – which is specifically designed to limit human mobility, and interactions – has therefore exacerbated women survivors' vulnerability to mental health challenges.

The experiences of migrant women survivors

In both countries – mirroring trends in several other contexts²⁸ – concerns have been raised regarding the welfare of migrant women survivors of violence with temporary or insecure immigration status.

²³ Author's interview notes, 9 September 2020.

²⁴ Boxall et al. 2020: 6

²⁵ WESNET. 2020. *Second National Survey on Technology Abuse and Domestic Violence in Australia*. Canberra. Available online at: <https://wesnet.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/11/Wesnet-2020-2nd-National-Survey-Report-72pp-A4-FINAL.pdf>.

17. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²⁶ Sumeo et al. 2020: 6.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch. 2020. *Submission to the UN special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences regarding COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women*. 3 July 2020. Available online at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/03/submission-un-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-its-causes-and-consequences#_ftn51. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

In multiple contexts, non-citizen women experience heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence. An immigration status that is dependent on another's, or that is otherwise insecure, may be used by abusers to make threats of deportation, and perpetrate abuse with impunity. Women's 'deportability'²⁹, or fear of being removed, may also impede their willingness to seek assistance. As previously highlighted, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the conditions that breed vulnerability to domestic abuse. Migrant women, however, may face additional structural challenges, which, together with the lockdowns' restrictions on mobility, have both increased their vulnerability to violence, and restricted their access to vital support.³⁰

Migrant women – particularly those who are recently arrived – often have smaller, or non-existent, support networks.³¹ Lockdown and social distancing restrictions therefore have additional impacts for these women, who may not have anyone to contact for assistance, even remotely, while confined to the home.³² Meanwhile, even under ordinary circumstances, migrant women often face additional challenges with leaving an abusive home: in both Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, temporary migrants are generally not entitled to welfare support or other forms of public assistance, complicating their ability to procure vital assistance after leaving an abusive relationship, such as a space in a women's shelter, or financial support.³³

The immobilities produced by lockdown and social distancing measures have further complicated migrant women's access to safe accommodation, e.g. restricting access to inspections of privately rented properties, and negatively impacting income streams.³⁴ While it may take years for researchers and practitioners to understand the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation in these countries, it's no doubt that the traumatic impact on women of all backgrounds — and the work to reverse those trends — will be long-lasting.

²⁹ De Genova, Nicholas. 2002. Migrant "illegality" and deportability in everyday life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 419-447.

³⁰ Imkaan. 2020. The Impact of the Dual Pandemic's: Violence Against Women & Girls and COVID-19 on Black and Minoritised Women & Girls. *Position Paper Series, VAWG and COVID-19*. May 2020. Available online at: https://829ef90d-0745-49b2-b404-cbea85f15fda.filesusr.com/ugd/2f475d_6d6dea40b8bd42c8a917ba58ceec5793.pdf. Last accessed 23 December 2020.

³¹ Blakkarly, Jarni. 2020. The coronavirus lockdown has Australia's domestic violence shelters fearing for migrant women. *SBS News*. 2 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-coronavirus-lockdown-has-australia-s-domestic-violence-shelters-fearing-for-migrant-women>. Last accessed 23 December 2020.

³² Ibid.

³³ This is also true in other comparable contexts, including the United Kingdom, United States and Canada.

³⁴ InTouch. 2020. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inTouch clients. *Issues Paper*. April 2020. Available online at: https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/inTouch_COVID19IssuesPaper_April2020_website.pdf. Last accessed 22 December 2020.