Special issue on the COVID-19 pandemic and gender-based violence

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In this Special Issue we publish a series of articles from different disciplines and countries looking at impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on victims and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), on perpetrator behaviours, on services and institutional responses, as well as wider concerns.

The COVID-19 pandemic which began in late 2019 is still with us, we continue to see new waves emerging in different countries, and the future trajectory of the pandemic is still uncertain. Since early 2020 governments in many countries adopted ‘stay at home’ or lockdown measures to stem the pandemic, which were eased and reimposed as the pandemic continued. As this Editorial is being written most countries have loosened the COVID-19 restrictions. Even so the COVID-19 pandemic and associated measures have profoundly changed the way we work and live and many of these changes may continue to be apparent in the longer term. We also know that the pandemic has created unique contexts and opportunities for abusers. The World Health Organisation has talked about there being a ‘dual pandemic’ of COVID-19 and GBV. As this issue of JGBV attests, academics and practitioners are increasingly documenting and providing insight to the many and varied effects that the pandemic context has provided especially with regard to violence against women and children.

Some prominent patterns in GBV have thus emerged across countries since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, with large increases in reporting of domestic abuse and sexual assault to helplines and support services and increases in domestic femicides. While COVID-19 does not cause domestic abuse or rape and sexual assault, decisions to control the epidemic via ‘lockdown’ and ‘social distancing’ have provided contexts for perpetrators to intensify existing abusive behaviours against women and children in particular, to control, degrade, threaten or otherwise use violent and abusive behaviours against them. As Emma Williamson and colleagues have argued in a previous issue of JGBV:

It is critical to contextualise this: more men are not starting to be abusive or violent; rather, the patterns of abuse are becoming more frequent. … it is imperative that we continue to see the dynamics of domestic violence and abuse as both a pattern of abusive behaviours and a product of gendered
social and cultural norms, rather than a reaction to a specific factor or event, such as COVID-19. (Williamson et al, 2020: 289)

As the articles in this issue show, these effects have been replicated across numerous countries.

Specialist services for GBV survivors and perpetrators in numerous countries have responded rapidly to the context of COVID-19, changing their delivery modes and dealing with higher volumes, and articles in this issue document the creative ways in which practitioners have adapted their work as well as the impacts on the staff themselves. Moreover, both COVID-19 and certain forms of GBV such as domestic abuse have particular and detrimental consequences for communities subject to particular structural inequalities, discrimination and resource allocation, such as Black and racialised minorities or those with disabilities. For instance, Black and minoritised communities in the UK have experienced both a greater number of deaths from the virus and higher levels of GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Thiara et al, 2022, this issue of JGBV). At the same time, differences have emerged across countries that also shed a light on different approaches, understandings and positioning of women as victims across country contexts. For instance, in this issue of JGBV, Spence and colleagues show that, reflecting the increased severity in domestic violence, there has also been a general increase in reporting of domestic violence to the police in the UK during the pandemic and even larger increases during lockdown. In contrast, as the article in this issue by Cremers and colleagues indicates, in countries such as Argentina reporting of domestic violence to the police actually decreased during lockdown.

Clare Gunby and her colleagues in a previous issue of JGBV (Gunby et al, 2020) observed that sexual violence was often left out of the initial media and policy discussions regarding the pandemic, while domestic violence and abuse were more readily discussed. We therefore begin this issue of JGBV with the article by Ruth Spence, Charlotte Dalton, Kari Davies and Miranda Horvath (2022), who take a detailed look at reports to the police of both domestic violence and rape and sexual assault. By comparing population level data and police data from one UK police force the authors are able to show that general levels of domestic violence and abuse remained the same before and during the pandemic but reports to the police increased significantly especially during lockdowns and included a greater proportion of older victims. In contrast, reporting of rape and sexual assaults decreased significantly during lockdown but increased as lockdowns eased, with changes apparent especially for younger victims-survivors. They suggest that these findings are in line with Routine Activity Theory in the sense that the pandemic provided suitable contexts and targets for men to abuse their female partners at home, but with fewer opportunities for men to rape and sexually assault young women as night time economy venues were closed. Also, the gender-based nature of the abuses remained constant, with the proportion of women experiencing domestic abuse or rape and sexual assault remaining the same.

While domestic violence and abuse increased in intensity during lockdown where partners were living together, what about abuse where the partners had separated? Kathryn Royal (2022) looks at the phenomenon of economic abuse and implications of the COVID-19 restrictions, focusing specifically on the child maintenance payments men were supposed to be paying to their female ex-partners. Before the COVID-19 pandemic women were already finding it difficult to obtain the maintenance payments they were due and needed to cover costs related to the children. The
pandemic provided a context for abusive fathers to further reduce their payments and to use child maintenance to harass and put pressure on the women. In a survey of victims-survivors, one fifth reported that their abusive ex-partner had stopped paying since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, and some had increased demands regarding seeing children if they were to pay. Due to the pandemic, it was also more difficult to get the authorities to enforce the outstanding payments. We thus see how the pandemic provided opportunities for renewed economic abuse.

Another consideration is where intimate partners may or may not be living together. If lockdown increases opportunities for domestic violence and abuse, then what about non-cohabiting partners? Patricia Romito, Martina Pellegrini and Marie-Josèphe Saurel-Cubizolles (2022) consider this question in their article about partner abuse in Italy. While intimate partner violence generally increased for women cohabiting with their perpetrators and decreased for non-cohabiting women, Romito and colleagues also ask about help-seeking and whether this is affected by fear of violence from the perpetrator. As may be expected, where the violence and abuse had increased in frequency and severity the women were more likely to report feelings of fear, and the women living with their abuser therefore reported most fear. However, it was the effect of the various forms of abuse and control exerted by the perpetrator that appeared to have a greater impact on the women’s help-seeking than fear as such.

As governments placed restrictions on people meeting face-to-face or in groups as a means to control the spread of COVID-19, there has also been a need for organisations tackling GBV to develop new approaches and new treatment modalities to intervene directly with survivors and perhaps perpetrators. Where possible, services have developed online delivery and in other ways shifted their work with survivors and perpetrators to ensure ongoing safety and support. At the same time, in some countries, services were quickly undermined and reduced due to economic and wider impacts of the pandemic. The different ways of working, often from home alongside other household activities, placed especial pressures on professionals in GBV and related services who were also likely to be women, and additional pressures for services for Black and minoritised victims-survivors. The following set of articles look at the issues regarding GBV and related services, in Australia, the UK and Canada. Naomi Pfitzner, Kate Fitz-Gibbon and Jacqui True (2022), in their article based on survey data, show how Australian professionals across a range of GBV and children's services reported pressures and impacts on their wellbeing as a result of the changes in the location and patterns of their work resulting from the pandemic, and especially the stress of working online at home. They were rapidly having to respond to tactics by perpetrators who were using COVID-19 as a pretext for abuse, including greater cyber monitoring by perpetrators which made it difficult for victims to seek help but also for the professionals to actively intervene or provide support. The authors urge that both the new expertise and the wellbeing of those working with victims-survivors of GBV be taken into account in future shaping and development of services.

The article by Ravi Thiara, Sumanta Roy and Baljit Banga (2022) provides important and detailed insights to the particular challenges that Black and minoritised GBV organisations in the UK encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, against a backdrop where Black and South Asian communities were experiencing high levels of COVID-19 and related deaths, while also at times being blamed for the pandemic. Already at the beginning of the pandemic these organisations were underfunded compared to other organisations not supporting Black and minoritised
victims-survivors to the same extent. This lack of resources and racial discrimination more generally compounded the problems faced by both staff and the women they were trying to support, with greater difficulties in providing online approaches, and women needing more time from the organisations as other services were not available or created barriers to access, or longer stay in refuge accommodation. The staff had to spend more time with each survivor to provide the ‘intersectional advocacy’ needed to access and navigate other services reluctant to provide support.

Simon Lapierre, Mélanie Brunet, Alexandra Vincent and Michèlè Frenette (2022) highlight the significant challenges faced by domestic violence shelters in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they quickly and creatively adapted practice in order to facilitate women’s and children’s access to services, ensure their safety and respond to their multiple needs, while at the same time limiting the spread of the virus. Groupwork sessions, advocacy work and prevention work in schools and communities, with children’s services and outreach, became more limited as face-to-face work became difficult. They found that while the shelter accommodation services were well-established, and well-funded, other services which did not benefit from the same recognition and funding were however in danger of disappearing when domestic violence shelters were placed under pressure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that services aimed at changing the behaviour of perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse have also had to reflect on and change their work to ensure the safety of victim-survivors and their children.

The article by Jane Healy, Jade Levell and Terri Cole (2022) considers how services for male perpetrator across the UK, Cyprus, Greece, Italy and Romania have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic using online approaches. There were perhaps surprisingly many similarities across countries. The move to online work with the male perpetrators was in many ways positive, as the men welcomed one-to-one intervention where they might only have been offered group work previously, and there was flexibility in the timing of sessions allowing the men to work more easily or from remoter locations. The more negative aspects related to more marginalised men, in particular those who did not have, or were unable to access or use the requisite technology. Moreover, it was especially difficult to work in a multi-agency and coordinated manner, which is important in work with perpetrators.

The article by Anouck Joëlle Cremers and Mary Hadley (2022) continue the ‘comparative’ theme, focusing in particular on re-orientation of GBV policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Argentina and Spain. Using the ‘Bacchi approach’ they look at how GBV is framed in the COVID-19 GBV policy documents in the two countries. While both countries have detailed legislation against GBV, they also have a ‘maschismo’ model of masculinity that tends to normalise violence against women. Worryingly, the COVID-19 GBV policy documents focused on victims with only limited reference to the definition of GBV and lack of attention to the (male) perpetrators. This results in a de-gendering and invisibility of perpetrators and suggestion that GBV results from ‘confinement measures’ rather than the perpetrators.

The issue finishes with two Policy and Practice articles. Katie Smith and Sarah Davidge (2022) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown up a need for robust data collection by GBV services and looks at the use of NGO administrative data in this regard. Ben Donagh, Caroline Bradbury-Jones and Julie Taylor (2022) consider the use of technology to support children and young people experiencing domestic abuse, and look at how to make the technology safe.
Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


