Intimate partner violence, stalking and the pandemic

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DOI:
10.1111/jan.14820

Intimate Partner Violence, Stalking and the Pandemic: Yet more paradoxes?

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a form of violence and abuse that occurs between current or ex-partners/spouses. It is the most type of abuse that falls within a broader category of domestic violence. It occurs in all relationship configurations, but it's most prevalent form is by male perpetrators, directed at their female partners. An estimated one in three (35%) women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual IPV (or non-partner sexual violence) in their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2017). The reasons for IPV are complex and multi-faceted and there is no simple, causal relationship. An explanation held by many, is that IPV is underpinned by coercion and control, providing a fundamental means of one person being able to exercise dominance over another. This manifests as a number of abusive behaviours (that frequently co-exist), such as emotional, physical, sexual and financial abuse and stalking.

When the world went into lockdown in early 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pervasive message from governments and authorities was to stay safe at home. The problem is however, that home for many people is far from a safe haven (Bradbury-Jones and Isham 2020). While it may well have provided a protective factor against the virus, home was a dangerous place for many (especially women). Being shut-off from family, friends, social circles and work colleagues played directly into the hands of perpetrators. Lockdown created a fertile ground for breeding coercion, control and isolation tactics. Calls to domestic abuse helplines rose exponentially at that time and there has been a plethora of literature and research reports that have captured the impacts on intimate partner violence as a result of restrictive, COVID-related measures. We know then, that the pandemic and different phases of lockdown have had a direct, negative impact on IPV because of victims being literally trapped with their perpetrator, with limited avenues for accessing help and support. Early in the pandemic when the risks associated with lockdown on IPV were beginning to be reported, Bradbury-Jones and Isham (2020) referred to the 'protection paradox', whereby measures to control the virus had the unintended consequence of increasing the control of many perpetrators. Since then, we have come to understand far more about the problem and yet more paradoxes have unfolded. We take the case of stalking and explore technology abuse, paper abuse and the 'old normal'.

The definitions of stalking vary across literature and legislative contexts. Typically, stalking is understood as an intense and pursuit-oriented behaviour that is a pattern of repeated, intrusive actions – such as following, harassing, and threatening – that cause fear and distress in victims (Logan & Walker 2017). Stalking can include acts which, taken individually, do not constitute illegal behaviour, such as sending flowers, which may be regarded as 'normal' breakup pursuit. Thus, it is not the behaviours themselves that are violent, but the context in which they are used. It is the un-wantedness of the behaviours, the intent behind them, and their duration that make them illegal (Logan & Walker 2017). If the perpetrator and victim have children, they can be perpetrator's means to get in contact with the ex-partner, but children can also be direct targets of violent acts and even threats of death (Nikupeteri & Laitinen 2015). Stalking can take place within a current relationship, but it is important to recognise that a great deal of stalking occurs post-separation. The pervasive nature of stalking as a form of IPV creates a continual risk to many women, even though they may have managed to leave their abusive partner and have physical distance from them. Paradoxically, they remain unsafe, well beyond the act of leaving.

The early evidence on COVID-19 lockdown and stalking victims suggests that even though lockdown might appear to be a time when victims are less accessible to their stalkers (because they are 'safe' within their homes), the victim's vulnerability has increased

(Bracewell et al. 2020). Perpetrators still have a wide arsenal to use that enables them to continue stalking and perpetrating IPV against their ex-partners. When physical stalking and IPV tactics are not possible, perpetrators can continue stalking behaviour enacted through technology. They utilise technological devices, such as mobile phones, social media or spyware and tracking programs to monitor victim's activities and whereabouts (Woodlock 2017). In many respects, technology has been a double-edged sword for IPV victims. On one hand, technology has provided a crucial means of accessing remote support for IPV victims. Yet conversely, technology becomes a perpetrator's weapon. Victims of stalking describe a continual fear, and the use of technology may intensify this, by making the stalker 'omnipresent' (Nikupeteri 2017; Woodlock 2017).

Next to technology-facilitated stalking the perpetrators can continue their coercive behaviour without being face-to-face contact by taking legal actions, such as filing frivolous lawsuits or making false reports of child abuse. Miller and Smolter (2011) has termed this procedural stalking as 'paper abuse' where the behaviours occur under the guise of legal proceedings. Legal proceedings are lengthy processes and it is painful for victims to be legally required to be in contact with the perpetrator. Additionally, due to the pandemic, trials are often postponed which prolongs even further a victim's anxiety. Moreover, if there is court ordered child contact arrangements, closures of child contact centres and virus-related issues, such as perpetrators withhold using safety items (e.g. protective mask and hand sanitizers) when meeting the child, may enable the perpetrator to use new ways of coercive and controlling behaviours against the ex-partner and children (see Bracewell et al. 2020; Peterman, et al. 2020).

The 'new normal' during the pandemic is not actually 'new' for many victims of stalking. The governments' exhortations of avoiding public places and big group events are part of many stalking victims' daily lives. Stalking victims are accustomed to thinking carefully about the safety of public places and where to go. Social distance is a routine for many stalked women in order to avoid meeting the perpetrator in a chance encounter (Nikupeteri 2017). What is specific to stalking as a form of violence is that it transcends the victim's private and public domains. Closures of public premises, such as libraries and churches, as governments' safety measure and recommendations to spend more time at home, create a significant safety issue for many women. Even though for stalking victims public premises may not be a safer place than home, they may still provide some sense of safety, reprieve and a possibility to get help from other people (Campbell 2020). When victims remain in the physically static space of home, stalkers are provided with increased opportunities for surveillance. Moreover, because stalkers are not typically law-abiding citizens, it is unlikely that they adhere to authorities' safety recommendations to stay at home and avoid social interaction (Bracewell et al. 2020; Nikupeteri 2017): they may still continue stalking behaviour in person.

We have reflected on some interesting (and concerning) paradoxes associated with the pandemic and stalking. There may be more that arise. For example, emerging findings from a recently completed study with women who had exited an abusive relationship, indicate that for a minority, the pandemic provided some form of protective mechanism. They reported that they were locked down away from their perpetrator and importantly, the perpetrator was also locked down – elsewhere. This gave the women a rare sense of freedom and safety. Paradoxically it seems, while lockdown has been a threat to the safety of many women in relation to IPV, for some, it has provided an unexpected respite and layer of security. Overall though, this is likely to be an anomaly in the many twists and turns of the pandemic in which

IPV victims are at significant risk. It is essential that health and social care practitioners stay attuned to the complexity of the lives of those who experience IPV and the adaptive, abusive behaviours of stalkers. Cognisance is required of the triple and perhaps multiple, paradoxes that exist when dealing with global problems as tenacious and slippery as the COVD-19 pandemic and IPV.

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