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Sexual violence and COVID-19: all silent on the home front

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Abstract:

In this article, we reflect on the framing of violence against women in mainstream media in the UK, and some policy documents and guidance, in the first four weeks of the COVID-19 induced lockdown. In so doing, we consider the implications associated with the frequent failure to acknowledge sexual violence as a unique, and discrete, element of violence against women. Amidst a context of overshadowing and absence, we also raise for debate (and recognition) the likely challenges associated with moving voluntary sector sexual violence organisations into workers' homes, to enable service provision to continue. In developing our arguments we draw on conversations with voluntary sector sexual violence practitioners in England and existing literature that highlights the importance of the boundary between home and the job, when working with the 'taint' of sexual offences. Such a boundary rapidly recedes when sexual violence services, and their functions, are moved into workers' living spaces. We set out some of the likely impacts of this changed work context and argue that projections for the resource required to manage COVID-19 in the longer-term, must not forget about the needs of frontline voluntary sector workers.

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In this open space article, we think about how the risk of violence against women was framed by mainstream media in the UK, and some policy documents, in the first four weeks of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We consider the frequent failure to acknowledge sexual violence as a discrete form of gendered victimisation, often independent from domestic abuse. We draw attention to how, 'behind the scenes', specialist voluntary sector sexual violence services were innovating, bottom-up, to respond to need. However, a particularly notable silence has been around the possible challenges aligned with moving support services into workers' homes. Such challenges seem inevitable when evidence indicates that those who work with the 'taint' of sex crimes need - and attempt to actively demarcate - boundaries between work and home. We argue that the blurring of this boundary and the possible impacts associated with it, should not be ignored, but factored into projections for the resource required to respond to the pandemic. Here, we draw on existing literature and our conversations with voluntary sector sexual violence practitioners in England as part of a National Institute for Health Research funded study (see Author's own, 2019)[i]. The authors also work in a range of voluntary and trustee roles that support survivors of gendered violence and we use the insights gleaned from being party to the process of moving services into workers' homes, to frame our arguments.

The absence of sexual violence in public discourses on violence against women

In the first weeks of 'lockdown'[ii], the state sanctioned requirement to stay at home (and save lives), mainstream media and policy conversations in the UK were quick to acknowledge that COVID-19 would perpetuate violence against women (BBC, 2020; End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW), 2020a; Fielding, 2020). The evidence indicated that such violence increases during every public health emergency, with data from China showing that police reports of domestic abuse had tripled (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020). By early April, UK domestic violence charities and some police intelligence implicated similar trends (EVAW, 2020a; Refuge, 2020). As those working in the field well know, and some of us have argued (Author's own, 2020; Author's own, 2020), 'home' – that loaded and romanticised term – is one of the most violent places women and children can find themselves, with forced coexistence exacerbating risk. Pared-back provision within the health, criminal justice and voluntary sectors means that while demand for support intensifies - demand which has always been difficult to meet (Coy et al, 2009; Women's Resource Centre, 2008) - availability is restricted, further enhancing vulnerability. Thus, encouragingly, it was conceded early on that gender-sensitive responses that map the unique impacts of COVID-19 on men and women were necessary (Wenham et al, 2020). Moving forward, planning and resource allocation efforts

must prioritise people's intersecting identities, where distinct power relations are experienced in tandem (Crenshaw, 1991), posing additional barriers to protection and justice.

However, during those first four weeks of lockdown, much was missing from the public conversation. Mainstream media coverage of risk replicated the subsuming and overshadowing of various forms of gendered violence that can be seen in policy and funding arrangements more broadly. Indeed, in those early weeks, media focus in the UK - sometimes echoed in policy and state guidance - hinged almost exclusively on the enhanced risk of domestic violence. That is, the particular form of physical, coercive and controlling abuse that occurs, most often, between intimate partners. While, as outlined, these risks were real and we do not argue otherwise, coverage of them needed to occur in parallel with consideration of other forms of violence against women. For example, sexual violence, forced prostitution and 'honour' based offences[iii]. Otherwise, we make them invisible at a time when they are likely proliferating, blur the boundaries between unique forms of gendered victimisation and fail to speak directly to those survivors who need to see their experience represented. We also miss opportunities to direct individuals into appropriate forms of support. Axiomatic of this point, by the end of the fourth week of lockdown, a Google search on 'sexual violence', 'COVID-19' and 'Home Office' revealed the top 'hit' to be *Coronavirus (COVID-19): support for victims of domestic abuse* (Government, 2020). While the webpage signposted to a plethora of organisations and provision, as well as to statutory Sexual Assault Referral Centres, no information was provided about the three UK umbrella voluntary sector sexual violence organisations (or their member services); Rape Crisis England and Wales, the Survivors' Trust and the Male Survivors' Partnership. All of which, would be more suitably positioned to offer support if the sexual violence experienced was not related to the domestic context.

As the example above exemplifies, discussions of sexual violence outside of the domestic relationship; the alternate forms this may take; how risks could be managed, and the services best placed to provide support, were largely absent in mainstream media reports. They were also sometimes sidelined in policy projections considering the impacts of COVID-19 on gendered victimisation more broadly (Fraser, 2020; WHO, 2020). Despite being in the midst of an Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse - various hearings of which were suspended due to COVID-19 - it was only at the beginning of the fourth week of lockdown that children's increased vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation, both on and offline, gained real media traction. While resources supporting young people to stay safe continued to proliferate thereafter, consideration of adult women's enhanced vulnerability to online harassment, coercion and image-based abuse remained all but invisible (see EVAW, 2020a for an exception). Similarly, we know that non-intimate partners will

have continued to meet during lockdown and that rape and sexual assault was happening, the likelihood of reporting abuse diminished even further. For all the camaraderie seen in those early weeks, shaming and shame - that embodied affect so intertwined with survivors' experiences of rape - were pronounced towards those perceived to have flouted the expectation to 'stay at home' and 'save lives'. Sexual violence thrives in a context of impunity so we should not be surprised if the numbers impacted here are vast. Moving forward, specialist support services will need to be resourced to execute strategies that can draw these groups of survivors into support.

Moving sexual violence work into workers' homes

It will not be until after the event (and by the time of publication), that we may start to understand the nature of sexual violence during lockdown and the weeks of social distancing that preceded and followed it. The commitments made by Government to financially support domestic and sexual violence services to meet increased need, are therefore necessary and welcome. While we agree with the core principles set down by EVAW (2020b) in the allocation of this funding, we argue that the resource required to support voluntary sector workers to manage the impacts of their changed work climate may have been missed from financial projections. Indeed, despite the media silence, voluntary sector sexual violence services were well aware that victimisation, in its multiple guises, would continue, that breaks in support would be detrimental to clients and that social distancing measures would have unique wellbeing implications for survivors. Looking at the websites of the three umbrella sexual violence organisations and many of their partner services - to which the Government did not signpost - it was clear that within those first four weeks (in many instances well before) new forms of text, telephone, email support and a range of online resources became available and operational. Perhaps reflecting the comparative advantage the voluntary sector has, due to its social mission, closeness to communities, flatter hierarchies and scepticism of state agencies providing timely resolutions (see Billis and Glennerster, 1998), in a matter of days (and late nights) sexual violence organisations were moved online and into workers' living spaces. In so doing, resource became available to support self-care and wellbeing during lockdown, to help survivors stay safe, stay connected, stay active and to manage negative news and social media consumption. Links to virtual zoos, museums, the opera, to recipes, free Spotify playlists, to audio books and much more, all appeared, all verbalising loudly that these are agencies with a holistic appreciation of the people they support and what they require. Suddenly then, groups of predominantly women workers, often not paid or underpaid, found themselves delivering online counselling, support provision and maintaining the functions of an organisation while often balancing home schooling and care work, all remotely, with agility and all within one physical space.

While voluntary sector sexual violence services demonstrated their capacity for responsiveness, perhaps unsurprisingly, little has been said about how this rapid transition of service provision into workers' homes may have implications that require resource to manage. Indeed, research pays testament to the difficulties, and sometimes inability, to seamlessly transition one's work life into the home setting, with this being particularly pronounced in occupations that are 'tainted'. The concept of 'taint' has been applied to jobs and work tasks that society considers unpleasant, repellent, emotionally stigmatising or morally questionable (see Hughes, 1958; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). While such work is necessary for society to function, and often considered honourable, due to its unpleasant associations, proximity to it acts to stigmatise or 'taint' the worker. As one of us has argued, sexual offences elicit unique forms of discomfort, due to the burdensome feelings of shame, anger, guilt and self-blame that surround them (Author's own, 2019). To be clear, we do not suggest that frontline voluntary sector sexual violence workers (or survivors) are themselves unpleasant or distasteful, but that they carry the stigma, or 'a mark', as a consequence of their closeness to forms of violence that invade, degrade, pollute and often leave the survivor feeling 'dirty' (see Caputi, 2003). As a voluntary sector sexual violence practitioner in our NIHR study told us:

> They're [friends, family and acquaintances] still uncomfortable. Even people that I know personally that have known me for years, if I've not seen them for a while they'll say 'what are you doing now?' and I tell them and they go 'urgh'.

When working with other agencies and commissioners around sexual violence, a lack of recognition of the expertise, contribution and professionalism that existed within the voluntary sector remained. Thus, in many respects, voluntary sector sexual violence practitioner found themselves 'doubly' stigmatised:

> We still have to go to meetings where people go 'but you're all volunteers aren't you, what do you mean you get paid?'. You know, so we're still at that level and I think there needs to be a shift, a cultural shift around recognising us as providers.

In light of those lacking 'insider knowledge' finding tainted work unpleasant and/or worrisome, as well as not understanding its detail, tight-knit work cultures develop. These cultures enable co-workers to informally air job stresses with those who 'get' the particularities of what cannot be shared with others, including family members (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Research with prison officers, for example, highlights an active refusal to talk about work at home, a decision aimed at shielding family from grizzly details and to protect the home sphere from prison life (Colette, 2017). Thus, it is easy to surmise that difficulties will arise when working remotely, with less access to

colleagues, opportunities to seek assurance and iron out apprehensions, combined with family - now workers most immediate form of support - offering no appropriate substitute. It is questionable whether conversations held through various forms of technology will offer comparable opportunities for release and restoration.

Thus, for 'tainted workers', research underscores the importance of maintaining a boundary - both emotional and physical - between work and home, something that rapidly recedes when work activities are moved into the home space. Sexual violence practitioners in our study reiterated the significance of this divide: "I do have a chunter occasionally at home [about work]! But, yeah, predominantly when I leave here, I leave here… So yeah, it's about protecting you". Workers used language that placed parameters around the realms of work and home, with the former constructed as stressful, intense and chaotic while "home life is calm". As other research testifies to, home is often a space that provides distance, the opportunity to 'switch-off' and recharge from the work: all necessary features of enabling the job to be done. Practitioners who work with sex offenders, for example, use showering, the changing of clothes and removal of uniform to help maintain the divide between home and work and to ready themselves for re-entry into their house (Crawley, 2004; Petrillo, 2007; Mawby and Worrall, 2013; Author's own, 2019). In certain instances, the physical journey between work and home can serve as a form of 'therapy', where landmarks are used as sites for the shedding of work anxieties (Colette, 2017). By comparison, switching-off has been found to be more difficult for probation officers who work in the community and lack the physical boundary between work and home (Westaby et al, 2016). Here, meeting clients in the street caused high levels of anxiety and stress, reinforcing the argument that delineated boundaries between work and home play an important role in regulating mood, behaviour and the process of feeling 'more normal'.

Of course, the boundary between home and work is malleable, with the emotions, perceptions and behaviours of each seeping into the other in bidirectional ways. In short, work cannot be left, entirely, at work, regardless of how well that line is managed (Staines, 1980). Sexual violence practitioners in our study indicated that world views acquired on the job slipped into non-work contexts: "I sit on a train and I think… I wonder how many perpetrators are on this". Such findings resonate with literature examining the experiences of those employed by rape crisis centres. Here, employees reported an enhanced awareness of their own vulnerability to sexual violence, feeling less safe, more cautious, sceptical and protective of their children as a consequence of the work (Clemans, 2004). Similar anxieties are shared by other practitioners who work with sexual offences, perpetrators and survivors (see Petrillo, 2007; Mawby and Worrall, 2013; Author's own, 2019). Although less well researched, it is important to acknowledge the range of self-affirming emotions

and behaviours that also develop from the job. In our study, practitioners spoke about specialist sexual violence services' strong sense of collective and political identity, which can influence workers' (and survivors') personal lives accordingly (Vera-Gray, 2020). Other research points to work with trauma victims having the ability to generate a renewed fulfilment, perspective on life and living, changed self-perceptions and philosophy. Sometimes badged under the label of 'vicarious resilience', where a therapist's personal growth occurs through exposure to their client's hardiness (Pack, 2014; Edelkott et al, 2016), emphasising the potential for transformations that 'are positive, even if not pain free' (Hernandez-Wolf et al, 2015: 166).

The point that we are making is that the boundary between home and work is important for specialist voluntary sector sexual violence workers, as it has been found to be for other practitioners who work with the stigma of sex crimes. In a job that demands the handling of burdensome and difficult feelings and a simultaneous requirement to manage the taint associated with other peoples' preconceptions of the work, opportunities to distance, switch-off and relax are important. Indeed, such processes likely enable workers to do their role and not become overwhelmed by it. Home, we argue, typically provides the context that affords these opportunities. While total separation between home and the job is not possible, there is value in having a space that is disassociated and distinct from, albeit imperfectly, one's place of work. The 'calm' of home has clearly been undermined by the need to move sexual violence organisations and their functions into workers' living spaces. This, in turn, complicates and compromises the boundary which previously offered some degree of distance. We have started to think about the areas of workers' lives that this blurring may undermine, or, the things that it may be more difficult to do as a consequence. While our focus has been on sexual violence workers based within the English context, the implications are likely to span well beyond this geographical application. Research, moving forward, should consider the detail of these impacts, both in the immediate and longer-term. In decisions around the allocation of funding to respond to COVID-19, we must not forget about the needs of frontline voluntary sector workers. While they have executed something quite remarkable in their re-envisaging of service delivery, we should not assume that it will leave no mark.

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[i] Footnote currently removed for the purpose of anonymisation.
[ii] Which came into place in the UK on 24ᵗʰ March 2020.
[iii] This list is not exhaustive.