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## Domestic Abuse during COVID-19: What about the boys?



In response to the thoroughly enjoyable read: ‘Danger in danger: interpersonal violence during COVID-19 quarantine’ (Mazza et al., 2020), we wish to further explore the statement that domestic abuse experienced by men is of ‘lower severity’. We ask: ‘Does the concept of abuse exist on a hierarchy; and it is a fair hypothesis that domestic abuse towards men is of lower severity?’.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the worldwide population in many different ways. Levels of anxiety have increased; with mounting fears regarding one's own potential death, the loss of a loved one, job insecurity, loss of contact with nature and financial stress being just a few ways in which mental health has been adversely impacted. The national United Kingdom (UK) lockdown which took effect on the 23rd of March 2020 (Johnson, 2020), effectively trapped male and female victims of domestic violence with their abusers. Home became not a place of refuge, but rather a place where victims were further isolated; and in addition to the fears identified above, these domestic abuse victims are experiencing additional anxiety in isolation.

Mazza and colleagues, supported by data from the Office of National Statistics, draw attention to the fact that of every three domestic abuse cases in the UK, two victims are female and one is male (Office for National Statistics, 2019). However, this figure may be a gross underestimation, as a considerably lower number of men (51%) confide in someone about their experience; this is in stark contrast to women (81%) (Office of National Statistics, 2018). The likelihood of more undocumented male victims is likely, as feelings of social prejudice, embarrassment and shame may lead to fewer men seeking help (Tsui et al., 2010).

Mazza et al. also allege that the domestic abuse of men is of ‘lower severity’. It is almost impossible to understand how the authors came to this conclusion. ‘Severity’ in a domestic abuse setting is entirely subjective, and assigning a hierarchy to the suffering involved creates ‘grey areas’, where victims may even ask themselves: ‘Is this actually that bad?’

Admittedly, if ‘severity’ is measured by the volume of domestic abuse victims, then the situation is more severe for women, as there is a prevalence of 28.4% in women compared with 13.6% in men (Office for National Statistics, 2019). However, to individual victims, abuse is abuse. Although the volume of female victims is higher, and there is an increased likelihood of women (52%) suffering from emotional and mental issues in comparison to men (41%), men are actually more likely to sustain physical injuries from their partner (Office of National Statistics, 2018). Strikingly, 4.3% of men compared with 0.4% of woman sustained internal injuries such as broken bones or teeth (Office of National Statistics, 2018). In addition, there are specific types of emotional abuse where men are more likely to be affected; these

include forms of abuse such as the monitoring of spending, food deprivation and hiding of personal property such as a phone or computer (Brooks, 2020). Men do suffer both emotional and physical domestic abuse, while simultaneously suffering from a lack of acknowledgement as to the serious nature and severity of the abuse.

The *Mankind Initiative*, a well-established charity in Britain offering support to male victims, recently reported a 35% increase in call volumes compared to the pre-lockdown period (Media and Policy Briefing, 2020). In addition, visitors to the *Mankind Initiative* website in the week of 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020 were three times higher than before the lockdown (Media and Policy Briefing, 2020). The most popular pages visited on the website related to signs of domestic abuse in men and statistics on male victims (Media and Policy Briefing, 2020). This is a potential indication of the strain that COVID-19 is placing on male victims of domestic violence.

We propose that domestic abuse towards men, although less frequent, is of equal severity to the domestic abuse suffered by women. Abuse is abuse. 16 men were killed between April 2018 and March 2019 at the hands of their partner or ex-partner whilst 80 women were killed during the same period (Office of National Statistics, 2020). We want to steer the domestic abuse conversation away from a gendered divide and open up the discussion to promote zero tolerance of domestic abuse towards both men and women.

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