

“I risked our lives to flee”



For victims of domestic violence, lockdown is a pressure cooker. How and when can they escape? Sharon Hendry reports. Photographs by Laura Pannack



It's close to midday and a young mother is freewheeling a bicycle down a slope on the communal lawn of a women's refuge with a carefree expression on her face. Nearby her three-year-old stands barefoot in the warm June sunshine, looking somewhat bemused at his mum's new-found playfulness. He begs for a ride and a smile spreads across his face.

For years Gemma, 23, and her son were subjected to horrific abuse and control at the hands of her husband. Only now can she savour the simple pleasure of playing with her child without fear. They are among a small number of women and children who have found sanctuary at this refuge for victims of domestic abuse in the north of England. Nestled on a leafy suburban street, the detached property with a spacious garden looks like all the adjacent comfortable family homes. Only the secure intercom system and barbed wire betray its difference.

"We have only been here for three weeks," she tells me, "but already our lives are transformed and it feels like we are just learning to live. I fled a forced marriage. My husband was abusive and very controlling. He gave me no money and I wasn't ever allowed to leave the house without his

The journey to freedom is treacherous for victims of abuse and leaving can be lethal



PLACE OF GREATER SAFETY A family room at a refuge for victims of domestic violence

permission, or have any friends. I wanted a better life for me and my son, but that meant I had to risk our lives to flee."

With a growing number of people — the vast majority of them women — contacting domestic abuse hotlines during the coronavirus pandemic, fears are mounting that Britain's refuges will not cope with the demand once lockdown eases, and lives will be lost as a result. At least 19 women were killed in suspected domestic violence attacks in the UK during the first six weeks of lockdown (March 23-May 3) — an eight-year high, according to data gathered by Counting Dead Women, a project that records the killing of women by men.

Campaigners, support groups, refuges, police and government-appointed commissioners are calling on the government for a co-ordinated response.

Since the start of the pandemic, Refuge, the country's largest provider of specialist domestic abuse services and sole provider of the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, has reported a 66% increase in calls and a huge 950% rise in visits to its website, where women can request a safe time to be contacted.

So far police say they have recorded only a small rise in domestic abuse-related crimes during lockdown — up 4% during the four weeks ending May 10 on the same period last year. But many experts — police included — fear that there is likely to be a "surge" as lockdown loosens.

"One of the things that worries me is that reporting is suppressed, and higher-risk situations are more likely to happen when a victim is trying to leave a relationship," says Deputy Chief Constable Louisa Rolfe

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of West Midlands police, who serves as the lead for domestic abuse on the National Police Chiefs' Council. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, Rolfe has been holding twice-weekly meetings with police forces, government agencies and domestic violence charities.

"Worryingly, it might be that the threat has been there but people haven't had the opportunity to call us if they are in incredibly controlling relationships."

The journey to freedom is treacherous for victims of domestic violence and leaving can be lethal. It is the moment when a perpetrator loses all control and it can trigger feelings of murderous rage.

Once inside the safety of a refuge such as this one, women and children are given small but homely rooms and allocated their own cupboards in a communal kitchen. After the initial trauma of their escape is stabilised, a team of dedicated support staff and therapists work together to help rebuild their lives and apply for new accommodation after a six-month stay.

One new resident, Maria, a teacher, enters the communal kitchen after an arduous trip to the local Tesco with her six-month-old twins in a large pram and her six-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son. She has just broken free from a potentially lethal abusive marriage after being confined with her husband during lockdown. Assisted by an alert health visitor and two compassionate police officers, she fled her Midlands home with her four children in mid-May, clutching only a handful of documents. Maria is in no doubt that she and her children could have died in the pressure cooker of the pandemic.

"My husband has been abusive throughout our 12-year marriage, but his behaviour got much worse in the lockdown," she says. "I remember hearing the prime minister announcing it and felt relieved that other people would be kept safe, but terrified for me and my kids."

Stuck at home with her abuser, the mental torture was constant. "Every moment of the day he was looming over me, criticising me and trying to trigger a fight. For example, if I was changing a nappy he would say, 'You are not wiping the baby correctly.' If I went to the kitchen and started preparing food, he would say, 'You don't know how to chop.' When I presented the food, he would say, 'You don't know how to cook.' I had to try to keep him happy in case his temper flared in front of the children. There was no let-up, not a moment to take a breath. Every night I prayed we would make it through another day. I had to keep the children very quiet.

If they cried he would start shouting, saying it was affecting the business meetings he was dialling into from home. If I asked him to move to another room, he would yell at us until the children were trembling."

She says she had been enduring horrific abuse — much of which she is not yet able to talk about — for more than a decade. "Eventually I cracked in the lockdown. I met a health visitor and confided in her that the situation was escalating, and thankfully things got going. She put me in touch with an independent domestic abuse adviser, who I called during the short daily walk my husband allowed me."

A rare refuge space was found for them and a day was set for them to leave. "It was so hard. My husband physically attacked me and I had to call the police for an escort. My husband screamed, 'She can't take the kids — I pay for them!' The police officer said, 'So what if you pay for them? She's coming with us.' I will never forget that moment of solidarity."

That sense of solidarity continues in the refuge. Women and children wander freely in and out of one another's rooms, sharing food, babysitting and offering shoulders to cry on. I find Hannah, a 25-year-old mother who suffered three years of emotional and physical abuse, gazing out of her bedroom window with her two-year-old daughter hitched securely on her hip.

"Looking out onto this garden makes me feel happy every single day. It's the simple things that I appreciate most," she says. "When I first came to the refuge I was so frightened. As I wasn't from this country, I thought I would face racism and nobody would help me. That's what my abuser told me. This is why it took me such a long time to leave. I thought I wouldn't get help or support, but I feel so welcomed. I was provided with everything I needed for my child, because I left home with nothing."

Softly she describes some of the abuse she suffered. "When I was pregnant with our child he head-butted me. After our child was born he showed no interest in her at all, but when I was planning to leave he must have suspected something because he started taking her out. Then he bought us a ticket to go back to our home country and threatened to hurt me if I refused. I was worried he was going to kidnap our child. Now I feel happy and safe. I'm going to college in September and I can continue with my life without fear of judgment or criticism. The staff and residents here feel like one big family."

Another resident, Judith, who fled an abusive marriage along with her 14-year-old son, is heavily pregnant. She stands in the shade of a tree in the refuge garden, gently stroking her swollen belly. Judith lost a previous baby during pregnancy after her abuser pushed her, she says. "I left because I feared for me and my baby's life. I had to make a decision so I could see my children



COMFORT ZONE Maria, a teacher, escaped an abusive husband with her four children in May

grow. When I was with him I could not see a future. I suffered verbal, physical and sexual abuse for five years. I wasn't allowed an opinion and I had no right to refuse him anything."

She has asked her refuge support worker to be by her side during labour. "Here I am safe and I can now be a mother to my children. There is life after abuse. As much as there is isolation from the outside world at the moment, I do not feel worried about having my baby here at all. My children's safety is the most important thing to me. We've been given the chance of a new life. I feel protected and at peace. I have hope."

Long before the coronavirus struck, demand for domestic violence support services was soaring. Across England and Wales two women every week are killed by a current or former partner. In the year to March 2019, an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16-74 experienced domestic abuse (1.6 million women and 786,000 men), according to the Office for National Statistics. Police recorded 746,219 domestic abuse-related crimes in that year — an increase of 24% on the previous year.

Demand for refuge space was also far outstripping supply: 64% of refuge referrals were declined in 2018-19, and the number of refuge bed spaces in England was 30% below the number recommended by the human rights organisation the Council of Europe.

The home secretary, Priti Patel, declared solidarity with victims of domestic abuse on April 11 and encouraged the public to share a "symbol of hope" — a handprint embossed with a heart — on social

media and in windows, but has come under fire for a slow and piecemeal response. What's the point of handprints, critics ask, without a clear strategy? She pledged £2m to boost helplines, but the money did not materialise for a month. In the meantime the author JK Rowling stepped in with a £500,000 cheque to support Refuge.

During an Easter weekend briefing Patel said she was "looking at alternative accommodation" for victims who needed to escape, but at the time of going to press none had been approved.

The victims' commissioner, Dame Vera Baird, who refers to domestic abuse as the "epidemic within the pandemic", is urging action. "The University of Swansea rang the local police crime commissioner and offered empty student accommodation some weeks ago," she says. "A hotel chain has offered accommodation, but you need the government to be involved. There has to be insurance, health-and-safety work and input from services as well as just rooms. This is way beyond what anyone but government can do, since it has to be available nationwide. We need the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [MHCLG] urgently to co-ordinate a response."

Refuge managers and domestic violence support workers, who complain of years of underfunding, were invited to enter a bidding process for a share of a £10m pot — part of a £76m support package for the most vulnerable in society launched by MHCLG on May 7. Successful bids for the first £8.1m were announced on June 5, with the money to be shared between 100 →

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women are killed every week by a current or former partner in England and Wales (ONS)

charities. Ministers said the funding would provide “1,500 additional beds”, but service providers question this.

Nicki Norman, acting co-chief executive of Women’s Aid, says: “Many of these 1,500 will be existing spaces, with funding provided to ensure refuges can continue operating during the pandemic. The government’s emergency funding for domestic abuse services is very welcome and we are pleased to see it finally reaching the front line. But the process has been slow, messy and bureaucratic.”

She adds: “This is not a long-term solution — funding will end in October, but services anticipate that the numbers of women and children needing support will increase as lockdown lifts. We urgently need government commitment to a secure funding future.”

Refuge received £900,000 on June 5, but says: “Our funding is to keep the existing refuges we have running. Never in this country have there been enough refuge spaces for the huge numbers of women and children who experience domestic abuse — and tragically during the last

“People think you can just take your kids and leave. You can’t. It is a living hell”

10 years of austerity the already under-resourced refuge sector has lost yet more bed spaces.”

Since 2010 one in six refuges has closed and many remaining refuges and outreach services have been forced to strip back. The annual Women’s Aid audit calculated that the sector was operating at a shortfall of £393m a year.

Charlotte Kneer, 49, a domestic abuse survivor who has managed Reigate and Banstead Women’s Aid refuge for nine years, is relieved that new funds are imminent, but says, “£10m is a joke for what is coming our way”. “It’s all well and good throwing pots of money at refuges now, but if these services are on their knees

already they will have to use the funding to prop themselves up rather than create extra spaces. It’s simple. We needed a plan from the outset of this pandemic to provide additional capacity in relation to Covid-19, but that plan never existed. I’ve literally had nightmares wondering what is going to happen to women and children. Yes, the police will help them — but then what? Take them where exactly?”

“Imagine what it is like for those six out of 10 women who cannot get a refuge space. We have women coming to us who have been sleeping rough, sleeping in their cars with children or sent to unsafe hostels and B&B accommodation, where they are vulnerable to repeated victimisation.”

Kneer lived for nine years with her abuser, during which time she was struck on the head with a lamp and threatened with a knife. Her now ex-husband spent four years in jail for actual bodily harm and threats to kill. “People think you can just take your kids and leave. You can’t. It is a living hell.” If she had tried to leave, “he could have killed me”, she says. “He could have killed our kids. We already know similar incidents have happened during the Covid crisis.”

Kneer took the fate of survivors into her own hands and entered a partnership with the domestic abuse charity Your Sanctuary and Surrey county council, which gifted her an additional building with capacity for up

to 18 families. She says the new government funding will help with setup and support costs for four months.

There have been other delays, which campaigners say could cost lives. DCC Rolfe of West Midlands police backed plans for a government-led “code word” alert system for victims, but at the time of going to press that had yet to materialise. “In Spain they used the code word ‘Mask 19’ in pharmacies, which enabled staff to immediately identify a customer trying to flee an abusive relationship and offer support,” Rolfe says. “We are now looking at what we can do in the UK. I support this, but it needs to be fail-safe and co-ordinated. The most dangerous time for victims is when they try to leave.”

In the meantime Boots launched a scheme of its own with the charity Hestia, offering the use of its consultation rooms.

Rolfe says that, early in the crisis, officials were privy to documents that showed the dangers ahead. “A report released by the Department for International Development on the impact of Covid-19 on violence against women and girls in China and Italy identified pressure on refuge services and the importance of ensuring emergency accommodation both for victims and perpetrators, if you need to remove them from the home.”

Nicole Jacobs, the UK’s first domestic



FRONT LINE Charlotte Kneer, manager of Reigate and Banstead Women’s Aid refuge

abuse commissioner, says a post-lockdown “surge” in women seeking help is inevitable. “We know that people will be at home quietly looking at web pages today, thinking about what they need to do next, so there will be a surge. Those people will be seeking help as soon as they possibly can. Some things are just 100% obvious.”

Dame Vera Baird agrees. “It was absolutely predictable there would be an upturn and it should have been taken into account from day one. The government has come to it late. And even now there is no guiding hand, no overall strategic direction nor leadership in

tackling this issue. That’s very frustrating.”

Nicki Norman of Women’s Aid feels her early warnings fell on deaf ears. She welcomes the return of a delayed Domestic Abuse Bill to parliament, which aims to create a statutory definition of the crime, crucially not just as physical violence but also emotional, coercive or controlling and economic abuse. It would also include placing a duty on local authorities in England to provide refuge support. But the bill will not be able to provide a lifeline for those who seek to make a bid for freedom during lockdown.

After her first night at the refuge, Maria says she woke up feeling startled but safe. “Hopefully there aren’t too many people who will ever know what it feels like to make a life-or-death decision to leave behind their home and everything they’ve ever known. But for those women and children who will need to follow me, I pray to God they will make it to safety. Surely the most vulnerable among us deserve that?” ■

Names of the victims have been changed. The National Domestic Abuse Helpline run by Refuge offers free confidential support 24 hours a day to victims and those concerned about loved ones; telephone and Typetalk: 0808 2000 247. Women’s Aid offers confidential advice via LiveChat, email and on its forum; visit womensaid.org.uk

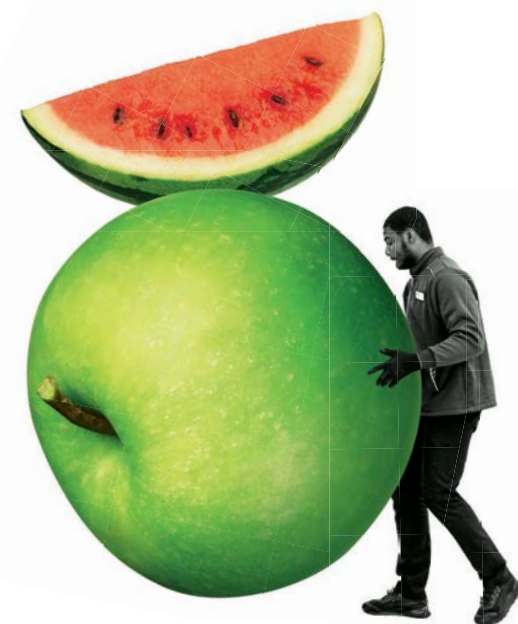
92%

of defendants in domestic abuse-related prosecutions in 2017-18 were male (ONS)

Laura Pannack for The Sunday Times Magazine

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