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Inside New York's domestic violence 'shadow pandemic'

This is the third of a five-part series about the impact the Covid-19 crisis has had on women

By Helen Nianias

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Equality Check

Shining a light on the lockdown gender gap

When countries around the world went into lockdown at the start of the Covid-19 crisis, a shadow pandemic of domestic violence began playing out behind closed doors as women found themselves trapped indoors with abusive partners.

Hotlines around the world have reported rising numbers of calls from women who found themselves victims in the very places they were being told to stay for their safety.

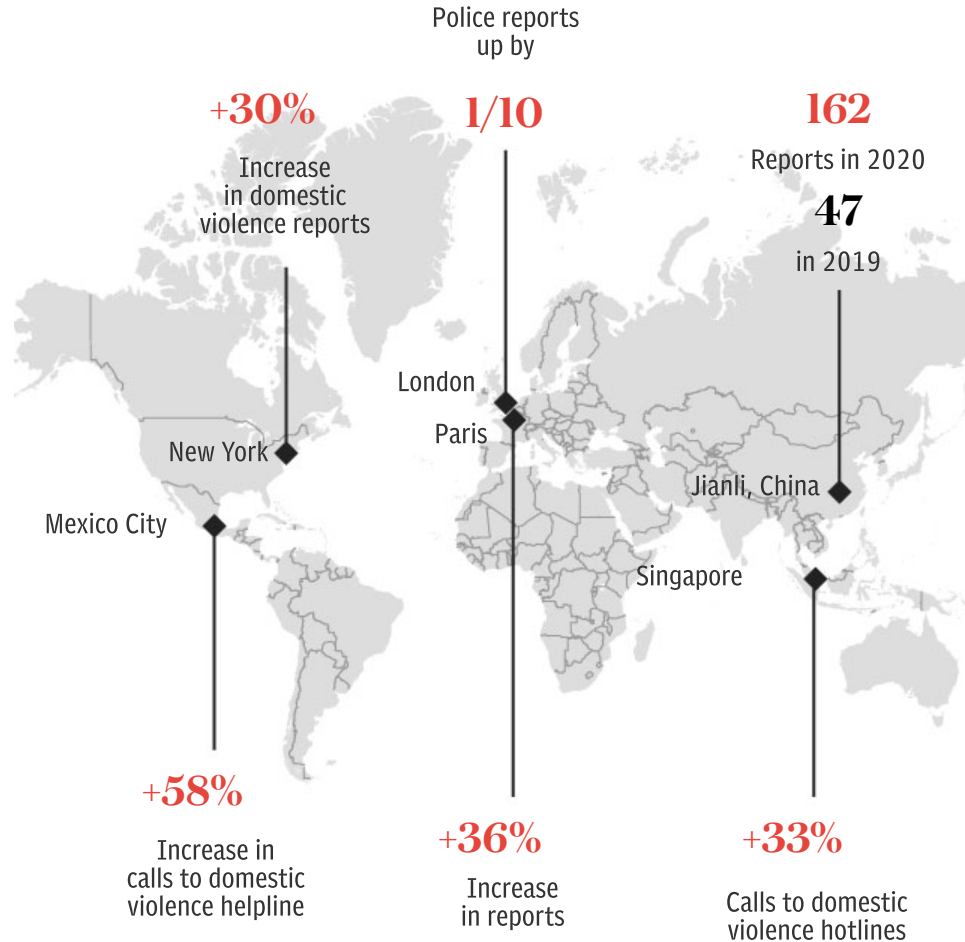
Reports rose by one tenth in London, calls to a domestic violence hotline in Mexico City rose by nearly 60 per cent, and New York saw a 30 per cent surge in reports of domestic violence in May.

By June, New York state had launched a special Covid task force to support victims and survivors to address the alarming spike in cases.

Smaller living spaces and the intensity of the outbreak have created a high-pressure situation in cities such as New York.

“In New York City the apartments are small, you don't have a lot of space between you and your abuser, and tensions are high,” says Dr Carla Smith, deputy chief executive officer at the Urban Resource Institute (URI), a group that supports domestic violence survivors.

Increases in global domestic violence



“Also, people are afraid to go outside. Where do you go to maintain safety from violence and the pandemic?”

Support workers across the city have been forced to innovate by making emergency housing Covid-secure, moving group sessions to WhatsApp and creating chat boxes on their websites that are undetectable to abusers checking search histories.

Meanwhile, abusive partners have threatened to infect their wives and girlfriends with Covid, and withheld vital health information to keep them under their control.

When Holly, not her real name, first met her boyfriend in November 2019 at a friend’s birthday party in New York, he seemed charming and kind, but looking back she says warning signs were there.

“Everything started to click after Valentine’s Day. He approached me because I did not dedicate a post to him on social media.

“He was extremely angry. Two weeks later, he showed me 28 screenshots he took of celebrities on Instagram which had been marked up with circles where I liked or commented on them. He was very jealous and possessive,” she says.

Despite his increasingly unreasonable, erratic behaviour, she moved in with him in May to save money after losing her job because of the pandemic. In their apartment, he would obsessively check her phone and social media accounts, and video call her if he thought she spent too long out grocery shopping.

“Covid made everything worse,” she says. “We spent more time together and we were behind closed doors 24 hours a day. We were always in each other’s space.”

He turned physically violent in May, grabbing and shaking her. “By June 1st, he threatened my life,” Holly says. “He said, ‘I will burn down the apartment with you in it.’”

She called the police and got an order of protection, but she fears he's still watching her.

“My mother's house is the only place I can go, and he is probably monitoring the neighborhood,” she says.

Even for those who have escaped their abuser, the risk of bumping into them still lingers.

Although Rosa, an undocumented migrant who only speaks Spanish, managed to escape her abusive boyfriend last year and has a restraining order against him, she fears seeing him at the foodbanks she relies on to feed her three children during Covid.

“At the beginning of Covid I bumped into him at a couple of community places. It was scary because I didn't know what was going through his mind,” she says.

Rosa, whose name has been changed, isn't entitled to government assistance and has lost most of her work as a housekeeper, while dealing with the trauma left by the horrifically violent relationship. “It has been extremely difficult. On top of dealing with the pandemic I've been dealing with a situation that stole my soul.”

Undocumented migrants such as Rosa have been badly affected, says Maria Lizardo, executive director, of NMIC, a community outreach organisation serving Manhattan and the Bronx.

“It's hardest for undocumented women. They get no cash assistance, and they can't apply for unemployment benefit. It's going to be the hardest for them to get back on their feet.”

When lockdown was first imposed in March, many domestic violence support lines in New York saw a drop in calls because women weren't able to do anything without their partner hearing, but the numbers quickly grew as restrictions relaxed.

In June, NMIC saw the number of new clients more than double compared to the same time in 2019.

“We are seeing an increase in the number of folks seeking assistance, but we know there are many more out there,” says Ms Lizardo.

“We usually get referrals because other survivors will bring people to us but in the era of Covid all those social connections have been cut off.”

She warns that a call for help doesn't mean the worst is over. "We all know that women are at the highest risk of being murdered when they decide to leave their batterer," she says.

Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York City, has warned a second strict lockdown similar to that imposed in spring could be brought in if case numbers continue to rise, raising fears for some women.

"If anything else comes my way, I will conquer it. But it does frighten me," says Holly.

This is a problem that has affected women worldwide, Hetti Barkworth-Nanton, the chair of domestic violence charity Refuge, says.

"Their ability to leave home to escape the abuse, even for just a few hours, by attending counselling sessions, medical appointments, or simply meeting a friend, has also been drastically curtailed," she says.

Holly is still unemployed but is now taking a computer course with URI to help bolster her chances of getting a job.

Despite her ordeal, she doesn't blame the pandemic for her boyfriend's violence. "Ultimately, I think Covid proved who he was. That monster was already in him, Covid just accelerated it."

The Telegraph is supporting Refuge as part of our Christmas Charity Appeal. To donate, please visit telegraph.ctdonate.org

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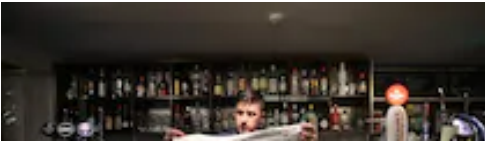
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