

# Covid

Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline

## **Service Review 2020/21**

**This time last year  
this country went into  
lockdown. In the 12 months  
since, more and more  
women have reached out  
for support from Refuge's  
24-hour National Domestic  
Abuse Helpline and its  
supporting services.**

**In England and Wales, 1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse during their lifetime and two women a week are killed by a current or former partner.**

**For women and girls experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of violence, home has never been a safe place.**

**In lockdown, as they were forced into close confinement with their abusers, women's isolation was compounded and their exposure to violence increased.**





## Increase in activity



### **A review of the service during COVID**

Activity on the Helpline shot up over the first national lockdown – between April and June of 2020, whilst women were asked to stay at home, the average number calls and contacts logged<sup>2</sup> on our database<sup>3</sup> every month was up 65% compared to the previous three months.

Over the summer restrictions eased, but the pressure on our service remained high. Today, we have a ‘new normal’ – the pandemic, and the welcome increase in awareness around domestic abuse, has had a lasting impact on our Helpline. Looking across the last ten months (April 2020 – Feb 2021), average calls and contacts logged on our database per month is 61% above the January - March 2020 baseline<sup>4</sup>.

*<sup>2</sup> Calls and contacts logged does not equal demand. One woman may access our services multiple times. We log all interactions logged on phone and allied Helpline services*

*<sup>3</sup> This includes all incoming and outgoing contacts, to and from survivors, professionals and third parties*

*<sup>4</sup> January-March 2020 baseline 8,176 average calls and contacts logged per month. April 2020-February 2021 13,162 average calls and contacts logged per month*

## Who did we support?

72% of those our Helpline team supported were women experiencing violence and abuse, seeking information on their rights and options and support to plan their next steps, as well as much-needed emotional support and validation. Women of all ages called us, but the most common age-bracket was aged 30-39.

Our Helpline Advisers can also support women in any language, 24-hours a day, through interpreters.

Our team spoke to professionals, such as police, social workers and healthcare staff (11% of those we supported) and members of the public who were concerned that a friend, family member, or neighbour was experiencing domestic abuse (10% of those we supported).

**Women of all ages called us, but the most common age-bracket was aged 30-39**



**Supporting women in any language, 24-hours a day**

**24%**

were being stalked  
or harassed

**40%**

were subjected to  
economic abuse by  
their perpetrator

**58%**

had been subjected to  
physical abuse

**81%**

described being  
controlled by their  
partner

## What had women experienced?

The Helpline team received many calls from women who were being terrorised in their own homes, women who were afraid to seek treatment for their injuries in case they overburden hospital staff, women whose court cases had been delayed, women making plans to flee the home, and women with no home to go to. Women contacted us having been subjected to horrific abuse.

Covid-19 did not impact the types of abuse disclosed to us; the ways in which men abuse women remain stubbornly constant.

Abuse is multi-layered, with most women describing more than one type.

*In January - December where abuse type was recorded:*

## Domestic abuse is a life or death issue

Every day, our Helpline Advisers talk to women at serious risk of homicide from their abusive male partners, and the data bears this out.

Where abuse type was recorded, nearly one in five (19%) of the women we spoke to had experienced threats to kill from their abusers. Ten per cent had had weapons used against them. Sixteen per cent had been strangled. Research shows that domestic homicide of women is seven times more likely if the same partner has previously attempted strangulation<sup>2</sup>.

Around 20% of callers who requested support around safety planning were seeking advice specifically on keeping safe having left an abuser.



**Leaving an abuser can be an extremely dangerous time for a woman; in the recent Femicide Census, of the 888 women killed by partners or former partners over the last 10 years at least 378 (43%) were known to have separated, or taken steps to separate, from the perpetrator<sup>3</sup>.**

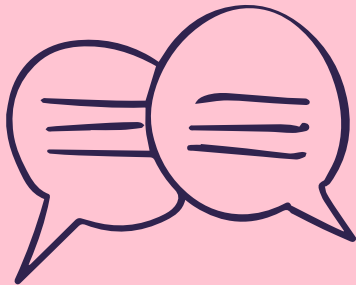
**This is why services like the Helpline – and the specialist domestic abuse services we can refer women to – are so critical.**

<sup>2</sup> (Glass et al., 2008) (PDF) *Non-fatal Strangulation is an Important Risk Factor for Homicide of Women* (researchgate.net)

<sup>3</sup> *Femicide-Census-10-year-report.pdf* (p.30)

## How do we support women?

The Helpline lets women know they are not alone, whatever their abuser tells them – we listen, believe, validate, and support them to plan the next best steps for them.



**During the same period (January – December 2020), our expert Helpline team:**

- **Referred women to secure refuges across the country 4,481 times, enabling them to flee abusive partners.**
- **Signposted survivors to other specialist domestic abuse services in their communities 32,811 times.**
- **Supported women to create safety plans 11,616 times.**
- **Empowered women with information about their rights and options (for example, around child contact, civil orders, reporting to the police, making an emergency homelessness application) 56,596 times.**

## Adapting our services to meet need

During the pandemic, the typical windows of time spent outside the home that have often provided women with much-needed relief - going to work, dropping the kids off at school, coffee with a friend - all but disappeared. Many women had limited recourse to their support network, and their opportunities to access specialist services were curtailed. We knew snatched moments on the Helpline might make all the difference, so we mobilised to meet need.

That's why – as well as increasing the number of shift hours on the Helpline, so more women received a response in the moment they needed it – Refuge worked quickly to launch a new live chat function on the Helpline website. This option allows women to communicate with Helpline advisors online, Monday to

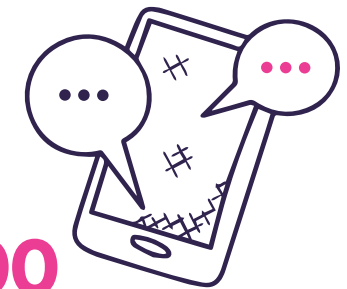
Friday, from 3pm to 10pm – digitally and, most importantly, in silence. This greatly increased their opportunities to find a safe way to reach out, even if only for a few minutes behind a closed door. Since launching the service, over 5,200 live chats have taken place.

We have seen particular uptake of the live chat service from young women; between May – December 2020, 37.6% of the survivors we spoke to on live chat were aged 16-25, compared to 15.2% of women we spoke to on the phone in the same period.

Live Chat also proved a valuable resource for concerned third parties – during the first lockdown (from May, when the service launched, to the end of June 2020), 18% of live chatters were friends, neighbours or family members worried about somebody experiencing domestic abuse, compared to 12% of those we spoke with on the phone.

When we asked users for feedback on the live chat service, 75% said it was the first time they had accessed Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline, showing how vital this alternative route to support is.

**All of the users we surveyed said they would recommend the service to a friend or loved one who needed it, and 92% said they got most or all of what they needed from their interaction.**



**5,200**  
live chats since launch





[www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk)

**10,500**

average visits per month  
Jan/Feb/Mar 2020

**73,595**

average visits per month  
April 2020 to February 2021

**700%**

increase in average  
visits per month

Digital support has been crucial in reaching as many women as possible during the pandemic; as well as Live Chat, Refuge has seen visits to its Helpline web platform, [www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk) increase hugely.

We went from around 10,500 visits per month in the first three months of 2020, to an average of 73,595 per month between April 2020 – February 2021 – a seven-fold increase.

Refuge launched a web form service in December 2019, which enables women to send the team a secure message, letting them know a safe way and time for us to contact them back; this proved invaluable over lockdown. The number submitted between April – June 2020 was more than four times that submitted in the previous three months.



## The future

As Government measures to suppress Covid-19 continue, thousands of women and children up and down the country are facing continued isolation with their abusers, at risk of violence in their own home.

As lockdown lifts in the weeks to come, women will have more opportunity to reach out and access support from us than they have this last long year period – and we need to be there for them.

Refuge is also continuing its work to ensure as many women as possible can reach us, including those who may have faced barriers to accessing our support in the past.

Already, we can speak to women in any language on the Helpline via interpreters, but we are beginning a programme of web content translation later this month.

We are also focusing on making the service as accessible as possible for women with additional needs.

Ongoing we will continue to listen to the needs and experiences of survivors and adapt our Helpline service to ensure we reach and support as many women as we can.

Every woman has the right to live free from safety and fear and Refuge will continue its work to achieve this mission.

**If you, or someone you know needs support,  
contact Refuge's 24 hour National Domestic  
Abuse Helpline**

**0808 2000 247**

**or visit [www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk) and  
access live chat support (Monday-Friday 3-10pm)**

**Refuge**



For women and children.  
Against domestic violence.

**[www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)**

**Refuge**

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