

# **‘Living a life by permission’**

## **The experiences of male victims of domestic abuse during Covid-19**

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## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all of the men whose voices contributed to this piece of research. We hope that we have represented your experiences and that the report will be used to create change and to make it easier for other men to ask for help and to have that support available to them at the point they need it.

We are also grateful and in awe of the staff working on the Men's Advice Line. You have kept a lifeline going at a point of great personal stress in your own lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. We as researchers often felt emotionally exhausted analysing the calls and the e-mails. We did not even need to respond to them. You did both – you listened, you responded, and you accepted us as researchers into your world with kindness and dignity and respect. You are a great team – thank you for letting us be part of it for a while.

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction and research methods**

### **1.1 Research objectives**

Respect's helplines recently extended their opening hours, to meet the increased demand during the Covid-19 pandemic. This research is about Respect's Men's Advice Line – the helpline for male victims of domestic violence and abuse.

The research had three objectives -

1. To learn more about the key areas of service demand that are linked to the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. To widen and deepen our understanding of male victims and survivors of domestic abuse - by learning more about the experiences of a large number of men, in a more in-depth, less formulaic way than a survey or semi-structured interview can provide.
3. To provide recommendations for the development of interventions for male victim/survivors, based on their needs - as articulated through the calls/emails.

We used three research methods in this study –

1. analysis of quantitative data provided by the Men's Advice Line;
2. qualitative analysis of 344 phone calls and emails to the Men's Advice Line; and
3. semi-structured interviews with six staff working on the men's advice line.

### **1.2 Use of the Men's Advice Line**

The Men's Advice Line provided the researchers with details of the volume of telephone calls and emails to the helpline during the Covid-19 pandemic. We analyse this data in Chapter Two.

### **1.3 Analysis of calls and emails**

#### **1.3.1 The research sample**

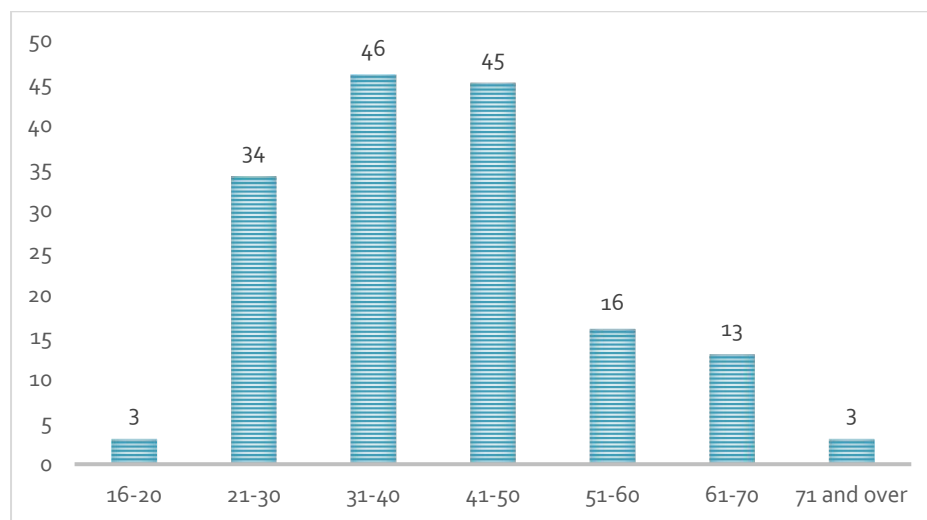
This research details the experiences of 344 male victims of domestic abuse. Of the 344 victims, 221 made contact by phone and 113 by email. The data collection took place Monday-Friday every week, between the start of June and the end of September 2020.

We excluded from this research requests for support from people other than male victims. The analysis of the experiences of 344 service users, therefore, does not include those who called on behalf of others, e.g. professionals or family members, those seeking advice

about relationships that were not abusive, and men who made contact because they were perpetrators of domestic abuse (and not also a victim).

Given the nature of the advice line being for male victims and the above exclusions, all of those in the research sample are male. The male victims were aged between 19 and 85 years old. Graph 1, below, shows the age breakdown. It shows that most of the victims making contact were aged between 31 and 50 years old (this age range accounted for 57% of all contacts).

**Graph 1. Age of male victims (n=160)**



Most of the victims were White British (58%). There was a higher than expected representation of men defining themselves as Asian or British Asian and African or British African than would be expected in the general population. This is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1. Ethnicity (n=151)*		
White British	87	58%
Asian/British Asian	27	18%
African/British African	18	12%
Mixed	11	8%
White other	8	5%

\*Where % exceeds 100 this is due to number rounding

Table 2, below, shows the gender of the perpetrator. This illustrates that the vast majority of the men were contacting the Men’s Advice Line about violence and abuse they were experiencing from women.

<b>Table 2. Gender of perpetrator (n=340)</b>		
Female	305	90%
Both female and male	17	5%
Male	16	5%
More than one female	2	1%

However, many gay, bisexual and queer men may choose to use LGBT-specific services instead. Table 3, below, shows the sexuality of the victim contacting the Men's Advice Line when known.

<b>Table 3. Sexuality of victim (n=137)</b>		
Heterosexual	127	93%
Gay	7	5%
Bi-sexual	2	1%
Pansexual	1	1%

In addition, it was not always their partners who were abusing them (although this was the case in the majority of calls and e-mails), sometimes they were calling about abuse from others such as parents, siblings, children or housemates.

Table 4. shows the relationship status of the victim. Nine out of ten victims were calling about the behaviour of a current or ex-spouse (usually wife) or partner.

<b>Table 4. Relationship of perpetrator to victim (n=340)</b>		
Spouse or partner	184	54%
Ex-spouse or ex-partner	122	36%
Partner or ex-partner and family member/s	14	4%
Parent/s	12	4%
Brother	3	1%
Other family member	3	1%
Sister	1	>1%
Son	1	>1%

Graph 2 shows where the victim was calling or e-mailing from. There was a predominance of contacts made from London and the South East. Of the 184 where the location was known, victims from London and the South East accounted for 81 of the contacts – almost half (44%). In contrast, Scotland and Wales accounted for only 6.5% and 4% respectively.

**Graph 2. Geographical location of victim (n=184)**

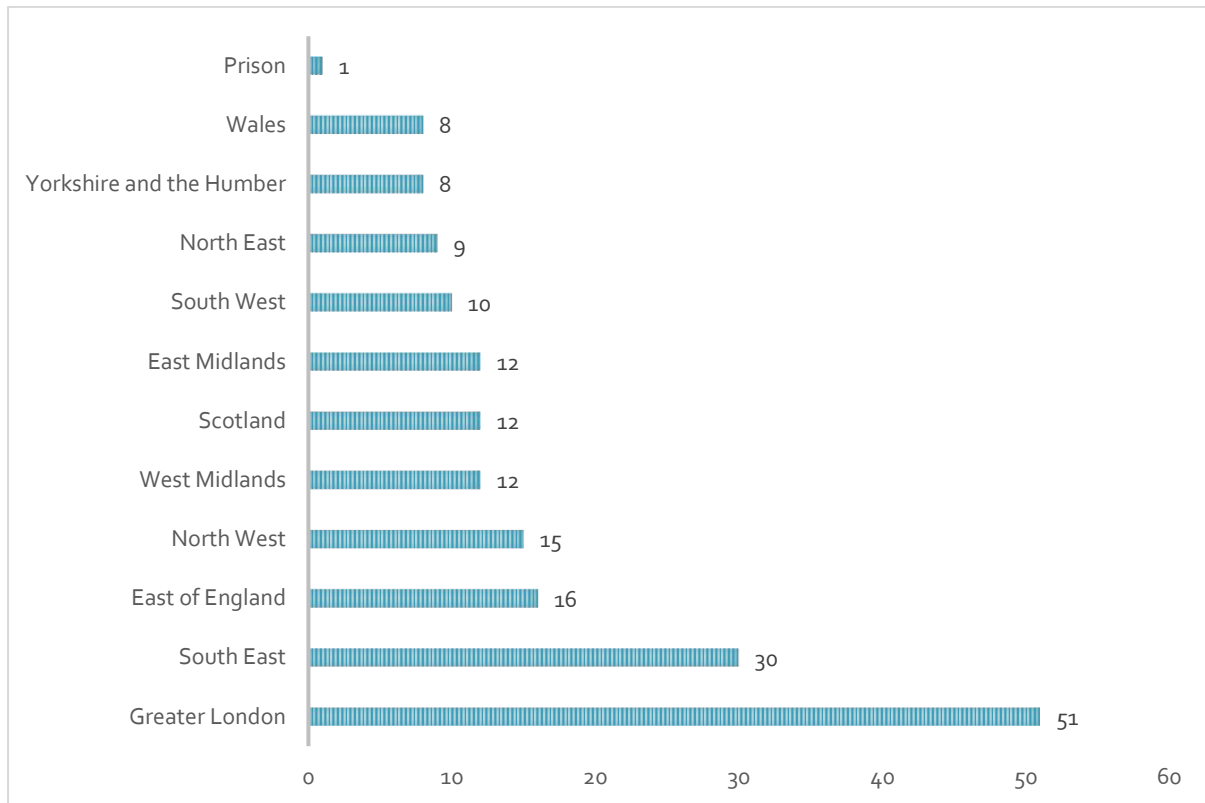
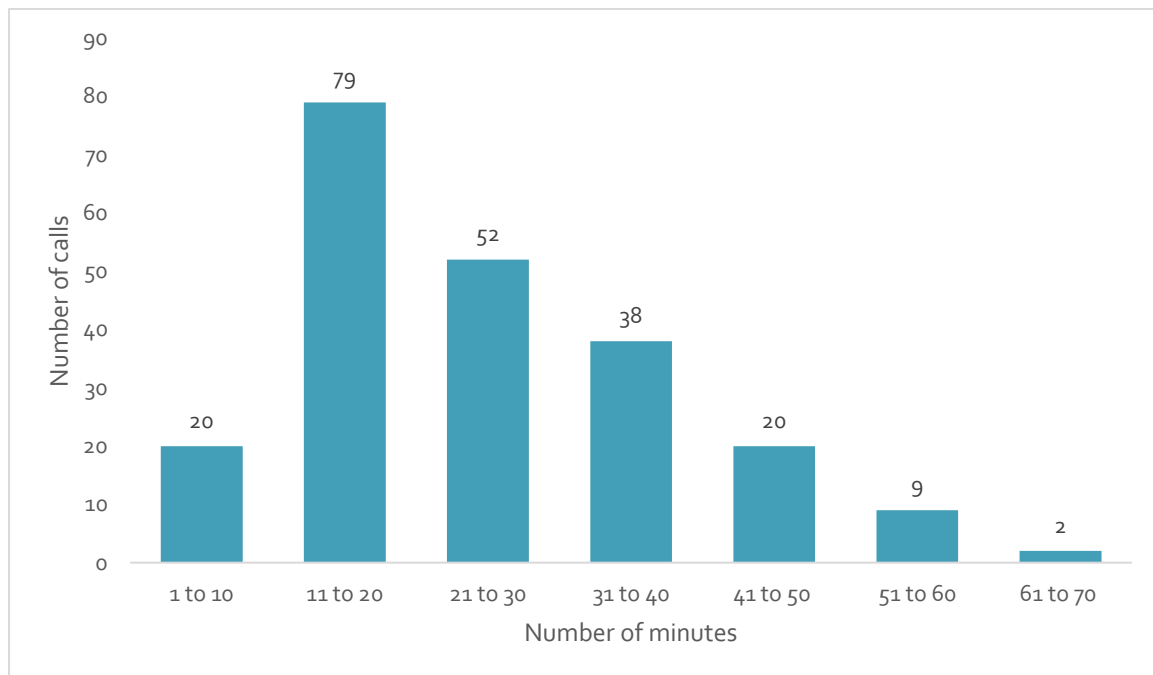


Table 5, below, shows from whom or where service users had found out about the Men’s Advice Line. Half of those making contact (50%) had found the information directly from the internet.

Source	Count	Percentage
Online	69	50%
Professional	38	27%
Family/friend	16	12%
Other	15	11%
Leaflet	1	1%

The length of the call was recorded in 220 of the 221 telephone calls. We did not record the number of emails in the email discussions as we did not always have access to the complete chain of emails. The shortest telephone call lasted 4 minutes and the longest lasted 70 minutes. The average (mean) length of a call was 25 minutes. Graph 3, below, shows that most calls lasted between 11-30 minutes (these two categories accounted for 59% of the calls).

**Graph 3. Length of telephone calls (n=220)**



### **1.3.2 Method for observing calls and emails**

Members of the research team were given access to the Men’s Advice Line system in order to virtually observe calls to the helpline by listening to them as they were made, and making notes on key points and quotes from the call using a data collection sheet. No identifiable information was recorded in these notes, apart from general demographic details to help understand the background of the sample, so the notes were anonymised from the outset. No real names were recorded, and no real names are used within this report. Researchers would listen to the whole call wherever possible – they would only listen to calls from the beginning (rather than picking up midway through). They would hang up on calls which were not relevant; i.e. if it was not a male victim calling to discuss their experiences (e.g. if it was a professional calling for advice, a friend or family member calling on behalf of someone else, or a man calling about something other than being a victim of abuse).

Throughout the duration of the research, a statement was added to the automated message heard by callers when contacting the helpline explaining that the research was being conducted and what it involved. In this message, callers were informed that they should tell the helpline advisor if they did not wish for their call to be observed by the researchers or included in the research, and a small minority of callers did take this option up. They were also encouraged to ask the helpline advisor if they had any questions about the research. Detailed information about the study was made publicly available on the Men’s Advice Line website, and callers were pointed to this if they wanted to find out more.

Researchers ensured that they only listened to calls from the beginning to ensure that they heard in case the caller had 'opted out' of the research, and helpline advisors also immediately gave this information to the research team to make sure that the call was not listened to if the caller expressed this preference. Only one or a maximum of two researchers were observing calls at any one time, and given the busyness of the Men's Advice Line, this meant that we only heard a minority of calls made to the helpline during the research period.

### **1.3.3 Method for observing e-mails**

As with the helpline calls, for the duration of the research a message was clearly placed at the top of the 'Contact us' page on the Men's Advice Line website where instructions are given about how to contact the e-mail service, explaining that the research was being conducted and what it involved, with a link to more detailed information. Again, people using the service were encouraged to mention in their e-mails if they did not want to take part in the research. A reminder of this was placed within the signature strip of every e-mail. Helpline staff then redacted e-mails from those men reporting experiences of abuse who did not 'opt out' of the research and shared these with the research team. Any potentially identifiable information (such as names, e-mail addresses and specific locations) were removed from the e-mails so these were anonymised before being shared with the researchers. Where possible, the whole chain of e-mails, including responses from helpline advisors, were shared for the researchers to be able to get as full a picture as possible of the man's contact with the helpline. All files from the project were stored on a secure Durham University cloud-based storage system.

### **1.3.4 Data analysis methodology**

The thematic analysis method was used to study the e-mails and notes from the calls and to draw patterns and connections between them. After initial themes were identified by the research team based on call observations and a preliminary analysis of e-mails and call notes, all e-mails and call notes were then coded in relation to these themes, with more themes generated where the initial themes were not deemed to sufficiently encapsulate all of the issues covered. The final themes which the research team eventually decided upon then provide the basis for Chapter Three.

## **1.4 Interviews with staff on the Men's Advice Line**

In September, we conducted six semi-structured interviews with Men's Advice Line Advisors who supported service users during the Covid-19 restrictions. Each Zoom interview lasted around 30 minutes and was fully transcribed.



The interview covered:

- the work of Advisors before Covid-19;
- how it changed in the initial lockdown period (in terms of the volume and nature of contacts, and the impact on their working hours and conditions); and
- how this changed (if at all) when restrictions started to be lifted in different parts of the UK.

We were particularly keen to interview advisors because we were aware that the data collection for this research started after the initial Covid-19 lockdown period. Hence, we hoped to fill in some of the gaps from these early weeks via these interviews.

#### **1.4.1 Demographic make-up of Men's Advice Line Advisors**

Six advisors were interviewed for the research:

- Gender: three male and three female.
- Age: between 27 and 53, with an average (mean) age of 41 years old.
- Ethnic background: two defined their ethnicity as Black, one Asian, one White European and two White British.
- Length of service on the Men's Advice Line: the shortest length of time an advisor had spent working in their role was eight months, and the longest was six years. The average (mean) was around three years and nine months.

#### **1.4.2 Data analysis**

We analysed data thematically, taking the questions within the interview schedule as the basis. We used a mixture of inductive and deductive coding. Due to the small number of interviews, one member of the research team carried out the analysis by hand.

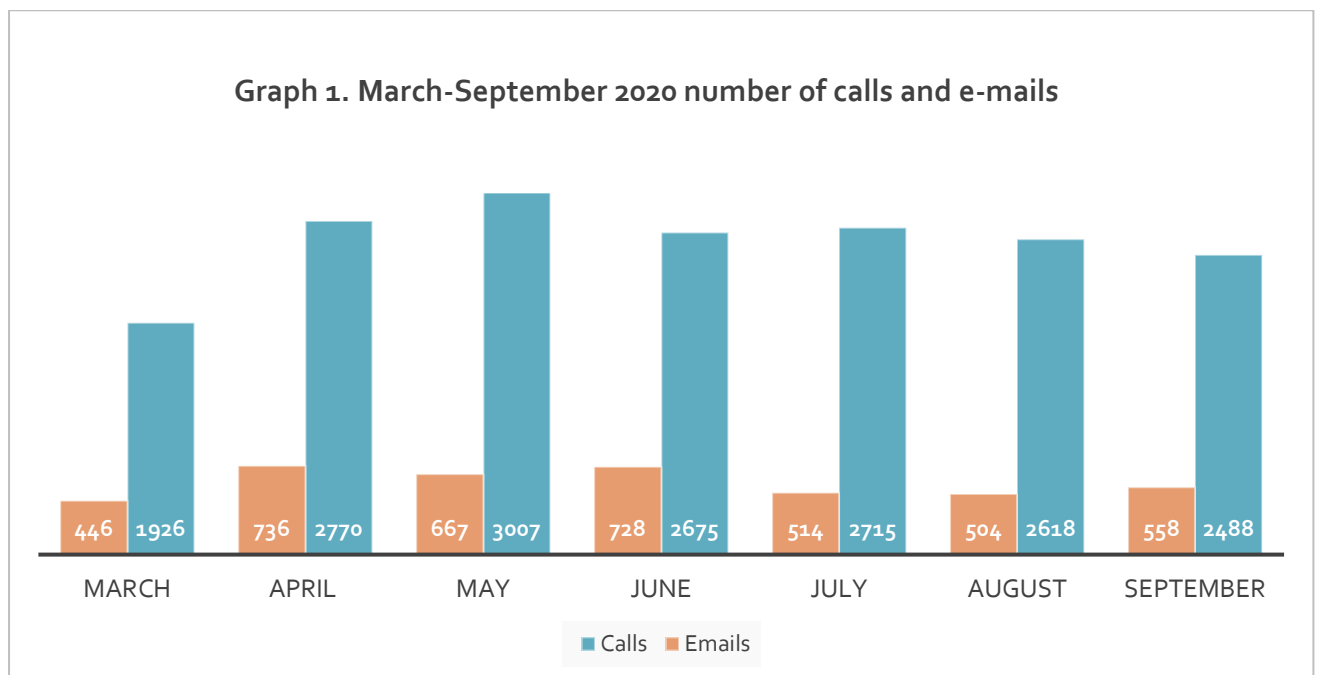
## Chapter 2. Requests for support from the Men’s Advice Line

The data on the volume of men contacting the Men’s Advice Line is consistent with descriptions of Advisors (see Chapter 4): that after an initial dip in demand when the lockdown was announced in March, the subsequent weeks and months saw a steep increase in demand.

In March 2020, the Men’s Advice Line received 1,926 telephone calls and 446 e-mails. In April, these figures were much higher: 2,770 telephone calls and 736 e-mails. Demand for the helpline in subsequent months remained high – both compared with the figures for March 2020, as well as with those for March 2019.

In fact, the demand for the Men’s Advice Line by phone and email in April 2020 (3,506 in total), May 2020 (3,674) and June 2020 (3,403) was the highest since the service began in 2007.

Graph 1 below shows the monthly rate for both the telephone calls and e-mails to the Men’s Advice Line.



## Chapter 3. Experiences of male victims seeking help

This section describes the male victims who called or emailed the Men's Advice Line between the beginning of June and the end of September 2020. The quantitative analysis describing the male victims overall was outlined in Chapter 1. Here, we provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of the types of violence and abuse they described. This is broken down into physical, sexual, financial, coercive control and emotional violence and abuse; plus other key themes including policing, housing, mental health, immigration and visa related issues, being a man experiencing domestic violence and abuse, child contact, co-accusations of violence and abuse, and Covid-19 specific issues not picked up elsewhere in the analysis.

### 3.1 Physical violence experienced by male victims

Of the 344 male victims who contacted the Men's Advice Line, many talked about experiencing at least one form of physical violence. The forms of physical violence that men described included being hit, scratched, slapped, bitten, punched in the face, grabbed, pushed and shoved, pushed down the stairs, kicked in the groin, hitting and biting children, being violent towards pets, having a mobile phone thrown, having a plate thrown, smashing a bottle over their head, smashing a bottle into their face, grabbed by the throat, being strangled, and being threatened with knives.

In one case there was an attempt to have the victim killed, and a small number of other men were threatened with being killed – with the main specific threat being that they would be stabbed.

Some of the men experienced this violence periodically for a long time. For example, Gary (not his real name)<sup>1</sup> described being physically attacked, alongside the emotional abuse he had experienced from his wife over a ten-year period. He had managed to leave the relationship at the point he called the Men's Advice Line. He recalled the times he had tried to manage the violence in the past, through being hyper alert and occasionally leaving the house when he felt a physical attack was likely:

'I used to sleep with one eye open...there were times that I knew something was going to happen and I would sleep in my car' (Gary)

In Gary's case, it was a phone call from a third party who had witnessed the violence against him that alerted the police.

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<sup>1</sup>All names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and safety of service users.

Some men described being laughed at by their partners for naming the physical violence as domestic abuse. Paul described his partner's response on telling her that he felt scared of her: 'She pissed herself laughing when I told her.' (Paul). The same was the case for Grant:

'She's done stuff with shoving and grabbing before. I've said look this is abuse and she's just laughed at me. She expects me to still sleep in the same bed as her'  
(Grant)

In some cases, particularly where the perpetrator was female, the difference in physical size and strength meant that the men did not feel physically at risk from the violence. Klay described that his partner has a disability so although he had been physically attacked by her, she was not capable of creating any 'damage'.

Similar circumstances are described below, where the physical violence was an important part or turning point in seeking help for the domestic violence, despite them not feeling they could be seriously physically harmed:

'On a couple occasions she's hit me, not in a way that would be hurtful - she hits herself, she kicks doors, once she's thrown things at me such as phones and on one occasion a laptop. I just think it's very unusual behaviour. When I tell certain guys, they brush it off in quite a sexist way and say: 'That's just women for you'. (Joel)

'She turned around and punched me in my chest. She's always been someone who gets quick angry quite quickly. She's not going to be able to do anything that would physically hurt me, but it was a shock to be struck on Saturday.' (Miles)

'Last night she punched me. It didn't really hurt me, it's just getting hard to cope with ... it's not fair on anybody, it's upsetting the whole house.' (Tobias)

Other men had injuries as a result of the violence, such as bruises, scratches, and bite marks. Zedan told the Men's Advice Line:

'There are marks on my body from the attacks on me'.

There were a number of cases where death threats were made or planned not only from the partner or ex-partner, but from their wider family as well. In most of these cases, there was some element of so called 'honour based' violence. This happened to some men who had felt forced into an arranged marriage that was starting to fail. Sometimes threats of violence or death were also made to the man's family overseas – the examples we heard were linked to countries in South Asia including India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

There was certainly an unequal power dynamic in play where men had entered the UK on a marriage visa, for example:

'I'm not from the country - I came here on a marriage visa. I've been suffering from my partner attacking me. Her family tried to kill me. I've had violence from the family and my wife as well. If you're not British they don't really give a shit about you.' (Hassan)

There were, however, examples of wider family involvement in cases not linked to 'honour' or immigration-related abuse. This was the case for Adie, who had just left a same-sex relationship and was receiving threats from his ex-partner's family:

'I was with my partner for 8 months. He became violent and threatened to stab me. I need to get out. I got brought down to my mum's house for safety, but I've had his family sending death threats to me. I need any support to move, I've got no money'. (Adie)

### **3.2 Financial abuse experienced by male victims**

For some men, the financial abuse was the primary form of domestic abuse that they contacted the helpline about. There were examples of contacts where the perpetrator had built up a significant amount of debt in the victim's name. Joseph talked about how he would have to pay for everything, resulting in a debt of £20,000. Ewan called about feeling manipulated and coerced into taking out a substantial loan for a number of items, including a very expensive handbag and an expensive pet; yet being refused £10 for a haircut.

There were many, many examples of how financial abuse was intertwined with coercive and controlling behaviours, the following being just a small selection for illustrative purposes:

'She was financially abusive - took credit cards out in my name and took the kids' pocket money off them. I paid off the debt.' (Anthony)

'She went through my amazon account and asked why I had bought things for my children and why I hadn't bought the same for her children. She checked my whole purchase history and asked me about all purchases in detail and questioned my reasons for buying.' (Bryn)

'She never worked when we were together. I am from the North East and she made me move to London. She used to give me £5 a day. I earned around a £2,600 monthly wage and she gave me £5 per day to live on. (Colin)

She used to take all of my money from the joint account so everything I earn goes in there and she takes it. Her wages don't go to the joint account – she keeps them to herself. She controls me about everything and says that I love my children too much. She keeps all my important documents such as immigration / birth certificate etc.' (Abhoy)

The financial abuse also had many overlaps with emotional abuse, with men being made to feel emasculated because of not being able to be the 'provider' for the family to the extent that their abusive partner felt was necessary. As described in the Covid-19 section of this report, one caller was told 'you are useless, you are worthless' (week 3, call 4) because his partner felt he was not earning as much money as others after a downturn in his job caused by Covid-19. Similarly, Mohammed was made to feel like he was a 'sack of rubbish' because of financial issues:

'I am from a poor family – she controlled money and I have become dispensable, I have no use now; I feel I am a sack of rubbish and not able to do anything and I am not eating. I am struggling with my life.' (Mohammed)

Financial concerns were often given as the reason why the victim felt they could not leave the relationship. Ryan described how he paid the rent and was worried about where he would live if he left and how he would afford to pay the rent for two households as his partner would not be able to afford to pay their rent.

Jasper told the helpline advisor:

'If we didn't share a child and a mortgage, we would have split a while ago.'

For several of the men, these financial worries had worsened as a result of the economic fallout of Covid-19, for example due to losing their jobs, being furloughed, or on reduced incomes. This meant that the pandemic had some victims more economically trapped than ever.

### **3.3 Sexual violence and abuse**

Sexual violence was reported less frequently than is often the case for female victim-survivors of domestic abuse. It is possible that some callers may have felt particularly embarrassed, ashamed or reluctant to discuss such experiences over the phone with a stranger, not least given that a man being subjected to sexual violence can be stereotypically perceived as highly emasculating. Other men may have been unaware that some of the sexual abuse they experienced could be classified as such or may not have been experiencing sexual violence or abuse.

However, some of the men contacting the Men's Advice Line did still discuss acts of sexual violence perpetrated by their partner or former partner, or by a family member for example, and the significant traumatic impact that this had had:

'She sexually assaulted me. On the day of the sexual assault I had seen my sister. I went to sleep on the floor as I was getting a migraine and had to be at work the next day and she came and assaulted me. [...] The case is going to court. I have been left with a sexual assault and can't deal with it. I can't trust anyone. I don't want to be here anymore – I feel like I am in the check-out lounge. I can't get over it.' (Anthony)

Others talked about how they had been pressured or coerced into taking part in sexual acts by their partner, even if they clearly didn't want to, and in some cases, this took place on a regular basis:

'Sometimes I can feel down and she wants sex and if she doesn't get it the words that come out of her mouth are just vile.' (Cameron)

'We went to my room and I put a barrier between me and her. She started trying to have sex with me and trying to kiss me and I said: 'Noooo! Stop!'. She started talking about we can get married tomorrow...'Blah blah blah, you my man' and I said 'Let me sleep please'. I fell sleep and I woke up was because she was in my pants putting my dick in her mouth... So I said stop stop and removed her.' (Dave)

### **3.4 Coercive and controlling behaviours**

Coercive control is a theory developed by Evan Stark in relation to the ways in which women are coerced and controlled by their male partners. Stark (2007) refers to it as 'the micro-regulation of women's lives' – with the sex of the victim and perpetrator and gendered norms about how women and men should act being of central importance. Coercive and controlling behaviour has since been introduced as a criminal offence in England and Wales (2015), in Scotland (2019) and is gender-neutral in its legal application. However, there exists a dearth of research on what coercive control looks like when it is perpetrated against men – in either heterosexual or gay relationships.

A very broad range of coercive and controlling behaviours were described by the men – with this theme generating by far the most data out of all of the themes. Some of the examples include the perpetrator:

- insisting on reading messages on his phone;
- holding items and pets 'ransom' when he tries to leave;

- threatening self-harm or suicide;
- repetitive phoning;
- accusing him of cheating in the relationship;
- blocking people from calling his phone;
- changing the passwords to online accounts;
- preventing him from having friends;
- blocking the number of family and friends on his phone;
- calling him names;
- belittling him;
- telling him what he can wear, how he should shave;
- telling him he's not manly enough;
- making allegations about him on social media;
- threatening to call the police and say that he attacked her;
- openly having affairs with other people;
- calling him 'a terrorist';
- dictating how they spend all of their time, without consulting with him.

One of the ways in which men were controlled was linked to religious and/or cultural expectations or norms. Colin, who was a Mormon and not allowed to drink alcohol said that his wife would give him alcohol and then bring members of the church home to see him drunk. Amir, who was a Muslim for whom suicide is not allowed, said that his partner would tell him to 'stop playing the victim' and shame him if he said he felt suicidal.

The impact of the coercive control included feeling what men described as 'walking on eggshells'. As Alex put it, 'It got to the point where I was scared to do anything.' Blake told the helpline advisor:

'I get called names, I get called pathetic, she's asked me if I'm scared of her before and I said yes; then she said that's pathetic.'

Brian described his wife as picking on him to the point where he's 'huddling up in the corner crying' – telling the advisor: 'I don't know how much longer I can take this situation – mentally.'

Harrison had developed a stammer due to the stress of the domestic abuse, which he said his partner in turn then mocked him for. Jasper said that his wife continuously makes him feel inadequate: 'She demands absolute authority'. He summed up the situation telling the advisor that the impact of this was: 'My confidence has never been lower. When I met her, it had never been higher.' Monty described feeling like a 'passenger' in his own life and that he was living a 'life by permission.'



### **3.4.1 Covid-19 specific forms of coercive control**

There were some cases where Covid-19 was used as specific weapon of abuse – as a tool of coercive control particularly. These included disputes about what was and was not allowed under the rules of lockdown. Some men said they were not allowed to leave the house at all. Others were made to shower immediately on entering the house. For men living with women who had OCD diagnoses, they found that the way they needed to act to keep the peace at home was increasingly rigid and controlled.

Sometimes the perpetrator was a key worker who took some of the work pressure, stress and anxieties out on the victim. There were a number of teachers and healthcare workers in particular that called the Men's Advice Line during the period we were doing the research. In these cases, the perpetrator used their role to say that the victim couldn't possibly understand the stress they were under. In one case, the perpetrator worked in the healthcare sector and threatened to 'bring the virus' home to infect him.

For many of the men contacting the advice line, Covid-19 and the lack of possible social contact even after lockdown restrictions started to ease seemed to have left them feeling more trapped than ever, playing into the perpetration of coercive control. Several callers discussed being even more isolated from support networks such as family and friends, or had difficulties accessing support services which might be able to offer them a way out from the abuse. In addition, a number of the men described the perpetrators as being more stressed or on edge during the pandemic, and their relationships being more tense, and reported that this in turn was exacerbating their abuse.

### **3.4.2 Immigration and visa issues as a form of coercive control**

For some men, threats around immigration and marriage visas were used as method to control them. Men residing in the UK on a spousal visa were often told that they were in the country only thanks to their partner. In many of these cases the abuse was not only coming from the female partner, but also her extended family, who were making threats to use violence towards the man himself, but also towards his family in the country of his origin. Many of the men talked about being forced into marriage and/or reluctantly agreeing to arranged marriages. Covid-19 had also made some victims in such circumstances more vulnerable, because it was not necessarily possible for them to return to their home countries due to travel restrictions, or their visa-status had become all the more important given the potentially greater need to engage with services during the pandemic.

## **3.5 Housing issues**

Concerns around housing were a major reason for calling the advice line, sometimes as one of a range of issues and sometimes as the primary reason for calling. These ranged from concerns about what would happen if their relationship ended to those who were actually homeless at the time of calling. Men talked about sleeping in cars, hotels, hostels, 'sofa surfing', at friend's houses and in a few cases on the street as a result of the domestic abuse they had experienced. There were some calls where a referral to a domestic abuse refuge was made by the Men's Advice Line advisor because of the housing situation and safety concerns.

Declan was homeless when he phoned the Men's Advice Line to talk about housing options, after moving out of the home he rented with his partner. Keith was in a similar situation, but also had custody of his son. He called about financial worries as well as housing concerns and he and his child were staying with his sister when he called. He felt he was trapped because the council said they were already 'housing' his son with the flat that his ex-partner was still living in.

Some men were temporarily living in hotels after being made homeless, but were clear that the situation could not last much longer because of financial concerns. Amari had a joint tenancy with his partner, but was living in a hotel at the time of calling – however, he could only afford two nights and then said he would be homeless.

This was also the case for Timothy who had been staying for nine nights at a hotel at the time of calling but told the advice line that his money was running out. Jonathan said he had been 'kicked out in the street' by his ex-partner and had been homeless for 5 or 6 months. At the time of calling he was suicidal and living in a hostel. For Steven, even a hotel was not an option as he was still paying the mortgage on the house that he had moved out of due to verbal and physical abuse. Steven was living in his car when he called. He told the advisor:

'The council won't help me and I want to know what I can do and where I can get help tonight. I don't know where to turn for help.' (Steven)

For Keiran, who was homeless along with his dog when he called, the fact that he was not named on the tenancy was part of the coercive and controlling behaviours that he was experiencing. He told the advisor:

'The housing situation was complex as he would never allow me to be added as a tenant. He then told me I had to leave. He would change his mind constantly about how / where we lived. Then he threw me out with my dog.' (Keiran)

Keiran felt anxious because he was worried about getting a tenancy on his own on account of his self-employed status:

'I don't know where I will live long term. I feel anxious about not being in control of where I live.'

Allen also felt that the housing situation was being used as part of the ongoing abuse. For the first three weeks he was living in his car because he was still named on the tenancy:

'I stormed out of an argument, and since then I have been homeless. She refused to sign the paperwork to release me from the tenancy, preventing me from getting any kind of housing myself.'

Others were staying in the relationship longer than they felt was safe because of Covid-19. Luke had been set to leave just as the lockdown started, but he had intended to stay with his Grandad which was no longer possible because of Covid-19. He told the advisor:

'I've gone from having somewhere to go to having nowhere to go. I'm trying my hardest to find somewhere so I'm not homeless.'

For many of the callers then, the perception that they would not easily be able to move somewhere else, or could not afford to do so, provided a major barrier to them leaving their abuser. This often appeared to be exacerbated by the pandemic, with the possibilities for finding accommodation and moving house made much more complicated, not least due to many victims' incomes being reduced or more insecure.

### **3.6 Mental health impacts of domestic abuse**

There were a range of negative impacts on the mental health of men who contacted the Men's Advice Line. They talked about depression, anxiety, panic attacks and suicidal feelings as a result of the abuse they had experienced. Some had tried to act on their suicidal feelings.

Leigh talked about self-harming and spending four hours one day going into different shops to find a syringe so he could put an air bubble into his veins. Joel told the helpline advisor that he thought it would be better if he was dead. Jonathan had stood on a bridge and considered ending his life. Matthew had taken an overdose. Caleb told the advisor he could not see any other way out: 'I don't want to die, but I don't want to live.' Ben said: 'If I do not get help it will push me over the edge.' Iman had tried to kill himself 'hundreds of times', telling the advisor: 'In the next few days maybe I kill myself ... I want to find a very quick solution'.

Some of the men had accessed mental health services. Gary had been to his GP who had prescribed him anti-depressants, but he had not told his GP the reason for the depression. For many, the negative impacts were cumulative. Seth told the advisor 'I've been bottling it up for so long. When you least expect it, it all comes crumbling' and Terence said: 'I thought I was pretty resilient, but I have taken a massive hit.' Rab was coming out of a long marriage where he felt 'the only way out was death'. He talked to his GP who prescribed anti-depressants which he felt were helping to some extent:

'The GP put me on SSRIs in January. I don't feel happy, but I think I'm less anxious about walking on eggshells because I don't get the same fight or flight responses – heart pounding, shortness of breath, feeling out of control.'

The Covid-19 pandemic and the experience of lockdown and coronavirus prevention measures appeared to have contributed to worsening these mental health problems in some cases, leaving several of the men more stressed and anxious, and more isolated and alone. It also made it harder for some of the men to access support services which could help them with mental health-related issues.

### **3.7 Views and experiences of police responses**

There was a lot of reluctance to 'bother' the police where the abuse was anything other than physical. The advisors often had to reassure callers that they could report verbal or emotional abuse and/or coercive control to the police on the non-emergency 111 number.

George phoned the Men's Advice Line because he didn't know how he could prove controlling behaviour if he called the police. He was also worried that the police would make a referral to Social Services if he called them, and that this would have implications for his children.

Other men also talked about being worried that they would not be able to see their children as often if they contacted the police about the abuse they were experiencing.

Zedan, for example, told the advisor:

'I don't know what to do. I want to log it, but I worry about going to the police. She will take the kids if I report it to the police – I just can't lose my kids. I really want to call the police, but I worry about the consequences. It is very difficult, and I need guidance.' (Zedan)

Some callers were concerned that the situation would be made worse in terms of the abuse they were experiencing if they contacted the police. Harrison for example had considered reporting it but ultimately been worried about the potential impact of doing this:

'I just feel that getting the police involved would make things worse. I didn't think about reporting it to my doctor, but the last instance was over a year ago. I did tell my mum at the time.'

There were a few cases where the caller said they didn't want to contact the police because their partner was in a job where she may lose their job if she had a criminal conviction for domestic violence. In one case the caller didn't want to contact the police because they had had a negative experience of reporting historical abuse he had experienced as a child.

In some cases where non-physical violence and abuse had taken place, positive police responses were reported. Xander called the Men's Advice Line when his ex-partner and her family used a fake social media account to stalk him. The first time he reported this to the police he described the response as being 'really great about it' and they went and talked to her about it. When it continued, Xander reported it again and felt 'the police have taken this genuinely very seriously.'

In a small number of cases, it was someone else who had phoned the police on behalf of the caller. Iain was experiencing coercive and controlling behaviour from his wife. His neighbours phoned the police when they became aware that he had been locked inside his house by his wife. While Iain was pursuing legal advice and support, he told the police that he would not support a prosecution against her.

'The police arrested her, I stayed with the children until she got back. They [the police] asked me if I wanted to press charges and I said no.' (Iain)

In Gary's case, he suspects it was a taxi driver who had phoned the police on his behalf after he was attacked in the car. In this case the perpetrator ended up being taken into custody also, but when the case reached court, Gary stated that he was not in support of the prosecution because her behaviour had been out of character. However, this was not the case, and Gary acknowledged that this 'was a lie' and the behaviour was very much in character.

Marc had worked for the police himself, but was wary of reporting his ex-wife for her use of emotional and physical abuse, saying 'I really feel she needs medical support not prosecution.'

Ivan also felt that the police response was not useful. The police attended his house after his wife hit him over the head and knocked him unconscious. He felt that rather than prosecution, she required support for her mental health problems, writing:

'They incarcerated my wife and charged her, when she should have been sent for in-patient mental health treatment.'

Aarondeep felt that the police were dismissive of him as he had previously been logged as the perpetrator of domestic abuse in an incident involving his wife. However, he acknowledged that the police did say that she could be charged, but he felt this was not the best way forward because 'It's not a nice position for a lady to be in.'

Like Aarondeep, Hassan was also in the country on a spousal visa, but had concerns about her being arrested for the violence and abuse he was experiencing from her and her family. He told the advisor:

'When the police come, I don't want her to be arrested – she's still the mother of my kids. I have enough evidence to put her in jail.' (Hassan)

In other cases, the police and/or the Crown Prosecution Service did not progress with the case in the way the caller had hoped. Leigh told the advisor he had

'claw marks and blood dripping from my cheek' and although the police took photos of his injuries, the 'CPS did nothing.' (Leigh).

There were a number of cases where the caller himself had been arrested or asked to leave the house temporarily when the police attended. Nicholas ended the call when the advisor suggested he seek police intervention as he had had negative experiences with them on previous occasions. He told the advisor:

'I'm scared to phone the police [...] They see a woman in distress and they make their mind up.'

He said he had previously spent 37 hours in a cell after calling the police on a previous occasion.

Although it is difficult to be certain, given the form of data we have collected, it appeared that in some cases the police response was led by stereotypes around gender and domestic abuse, while in other cases the police response was led by co-accusations of violence and abuse where they may or may not have arrested the correct person. One example of this latter example is Ian, who said that he had been punched in the head and badly injured so

he drove off with her in the car, he stopped the car suddenly to avoid hitting another car and his partner got concussion as she had not yet put her seat belt on.

There were other examples of serious injuries caused to the alleged perpetrators of abuse and also cases where the callers had convictions for violence and abuse against the person they were alleging was the perpetrator. Further investigation using a more appropriate research method is needed in order to fully understand police and other practitioners' responses – including staff working on the Men's Advice Line – to co-accusations of violence and abuse.

### 3.8 Being a man

During many of the calls and e-mails to the advice line, callers mentioned how difficult they found it to be a man talking about domestic abuse. Research shows that influential ideas about masculinity in society, such as the pressure to be invulnerable, stoical, unemotional, and to never show weakness, can place a substantial barrier on coming forward for male victims (Eckstein, 2010; Huntley et al., 2019), and in the words of the caller Farhan, attaches a 'stigma' to their experiences. This was highlighted by many of the men in this study.

'I feel like I'm a man...I feel like I shouldn't be in this position.' (Benjamin)

'I am not a man, I am a mouse trapped by a cat.' (Niall)

'Yesterday I was in pieces. I'm a strapping man - no one gives me any trouble.' (Ellis)

'I am scared of her and I don't care if this makes me less of a man. I have decided to speak up as I am now worried about my daughter and need help.' (Zack)

'This is extremely embarrassing for me. I'm a healthy, successful man in my mid forties. I shouldn't be emailing you. But my wife's behaviour is upsetting me and worrying me ...' (Josiah)

Some of the callers described how they themselves had certain ideas about what it meant to be a man, which meant that they found it hard to understand or believe that they were a victim of abuse, or found this to be something highly embarrassing, shameful or humiliating. This demonstrates one way in which experiencing abuse can be highly difficult for some men, because it challenges their own sense of masculine identity.

'You don't feel like you're a man because of it.' (Luke)

'The things she has said about me not being a real man are true - as I have lost my hair and have put on weight for which I have apologised for. I am no longer attractive.' (Alexander)

Others described how, as a result of expectations about masculinity, they found it difficult to talk about their experiences with other people or express how they felt about what had happened, which could ultimately hamper their recovery from abuse. Some of the callers talked about how even if they did open up to someone in their lives about it, they did not necessarily feel believed, because they were a man.

In some cases, callers expressed a perception that men are treated differently by criminal justice agencies, the legal system, and other services in relation to domestic abuse, because of gender stereotypes which mean they are not assumed to be victims. Indeed, sometimes the callers themselves said they held this view about domestic abuse. For instance, Kizer said that 'Normally it is supposed to be the other way around'. This perception had also put some men off from contacting services in the first place.

Some of the callers also described the confusion they felt if they were physically bigger or stronger than their partners, and yet were being controlled by them. In some cases, they said they weren't sure how to respond to the abuse, because they were capable of defending themselves, but did not want to do so, and on the one hand were socialised as a man to be prepared to use violence, but on the other not to behave violently towards a woman.

'I am six foot three, and it's hard to realise that abuse is occurring, because of the knowledge that physically I am 'safe'.' (Monty)

'Men always get taught that if you're getting abused by a woman just hit them back...I could never do that...you never lay a hand on a woman. It wouldn't matter if I was in a male relationship or female, it's not right.' (Seth)

'In all honesty I'm not scared of no man, but I can't defend myself against a woman and she knows that so is using it to manipulate when she hits me or turns up kicking off.' (Jenson)

Meanwhile, several callers described receiving gendered forms of verbal and emotional abuse, which denigrated them in relation to gender stereotypes, and suggested that they were failing to live up societal expectations about masculinity. This included being described as not being a 'real man', as being 'too emotional' or 'like a woman', that they should 'man up', or that they were 'gay'.



Sometimes, this gendered verbal abuse was expressed specifically in relation to sex, if the caller was not willing to go along with what his partner was suggesting:

'She did come back but told me I needed to be more attentive and give her more attention. She also mentioned our sex life and that I was not manly enough for her.' (Eddie)

'She says things like 'You're not a man, grow a pair, you can't get it up.' (Trevor)

Comparisons with other men were also sometimes made, seemingly to try and illustrate that the victim was inadequately matching up to standards of masculinity.

Similar issues arose for some men in gay or bisexual relationships too. For example, some callers talked about how they were threatened with being 'outed' as being gay by perpetrators, if their families or social groups didn't know about their sexuality. One caller described his fears about this because, due to his sexuality, in the eyes of his family 'I'm a shame for them' (Iman).

As mentioned in the 'Financial abuse' section, sometimes men were specifically belittled because they were not seen to be fulfilling a masculine 'breadwinner' role, perhaps because they had lost their job or were on a reduced income – in several cases as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Again, this suggests that the men were sometimes receiving abuse because they were not seen as living up to patriarchal standards of masculinity and being the 'head of the household'. In several cases, for example, the caller was the main source of income in the relationship or family, but their partners were still exerting control over their finances.

### **3.9 Lockdown as a time to reflect**

So far in this report there have been a range of impacts of Covid-19 on men's experiences of domestic abuse highlighted – including additional financial issues, more acute housing problems, and the problems with being 'locked down' with someone who was causing them harm. However, there were also a number of calls made to the advice line that were not about the experiences of abuse during Covid-19 – rather, that they had more time to reflect because of the lockdown and in some cases due to the extended period of time that they spent alone. This led them to reflect on current previous relationships with partners and also experiences of abuse in other times of their life – predominantly in childhood.

William talked about the impact of the abuse he experienced during childhood on his relationships in adulthood. It wasn't until being alone for so long during lockdown that he had really been able to reflect on this and process these events in a deeper way.

In another example, Philip called the helpline after lockdown gave him time to reflect on his past two relationships, wanting to explore whether he had been subject to domestic abuse.

Similarly, Gary decided to contact the helpline even though over a year had passed since the relationship ended; because the period of lockdown had led to the memories 'festering'.

Robert reported something similar – that he felt he was 'increasingly fixating' on his past marriage since lockdown, as he had had more time on his own to reflect. In some circumstances, counselling and related support that men had been receiving for abuse had stopped because of Covid-19 restrictions and they were calling the Men's Advice Line in their place. It is worth noting that the advice line was ideally placed to provide this support during Covid-19 because of its web-based system, ability for home working, and staff management and support system.

### **3.10 Co-accusations and child contact**

There were also two overlapping themes for one group of men contacting the helpline which were around co-accusations and child contact. We started coding these two themes separately but found that in nearly all cases the two themes overlapped. These were calls and e-mails where men were concerned around contact with their children being used as a form of abuse, where they were describing violence and abuse that they had experienced, but also where they themselves either told the advisor about their use of violence and abuse or told the advisor they had a conviction for a domestic abuse related offence or that their ex-partner had a court order limiting contact. Often social services and/or the police were already involved in these cases. Sometimes the men said they were the subject of false allegations made against them in terms of their use of violence and abuse. We do not explore these categories further here as the method used (phone and email observations) was not a good method for investigating the issue of co-accusations. However, we introduce it briefly for transparency of coding themes.

## Chapter 4. Interviews with advisors

As described earlier, we interviewed six advisors working on the Men's Advice Line answering calls and/or e-mails. In these interviews, the advisors talked about the nature and extent of the issues that the callers presented with during the Covid-19 restrictions.

The advisors described the volume of calls increasing significantly in terms of both number and length – the latter which they linked to the complexity of the calls and the level of distress presented. This was not the case at the start of the lockdown period, though. One of the advisors explained that the first two weeks of the lockdown restrictions were quieter than usual. However, this quietness did not last long:

'Then it was like a tsunami. There was a massive wave. A small reduction and then a huge increase. It was very stressful and overwhelming. Normally we have a gap between calls, but then it was non-stop all day, every day.' (Advisor 2)

'The number of calls themselves, the sheer volume of them completely shot up; it was all hands on deck. To be honest, we didn't have all the people needed to respond to the demand so I think there were some calls missed, and there were some very long waits, like 45 minutes, so it felt very busy and stretched. Before the lockdown I was used to finishing a call and having a five, ten-minute break before calls, and you had to go straight in, you didn't really feel you could take a rest although we were encouraged to do so. But you didn't want to take too much time away as you were putting more on your colleagues as well.' (Advisor 3)

'The calls that were coming through were really complex, with different layers. Trying to navigate that within a standard 30-minute period was almost impossible, as a result the calls were going over the length because of all the issues and needs. There was a lot more emotional support that was needed too, time needed to come out of a distressed state before we could come to the issues that was happening.' (Advisor 6)

Following this 'tsunami', additional advisors were recruited and trained, and the workload became more manageable again. The Men's Advice Line remained busier than usual and had also extended its hours into the evening but 'there was more people to share the load' (Advisor 2). However, there was still a view that the call volume and the length and complexity of calls felt higher than it was pre-Covid-19:

'It's still high and we don't really sense a decrease, as we are still constantly busy.' (Advisor 3)

The advisors had different views on to what extent the nature of the calls had changed. On the one hand, one advisor felt that the calls were covering similar topics as they had pre-Covid-19 – with a predominance of calls being about children and/or child contact. Other advisors felt that there had been a shift in the nature of the calls – with callers being more anxious because of Covid-19 and/or because Covid-19 was weaponised as a form of abuse:

'I noticed there was a lot of anxiety, the virus, the lockdown was mentioned in every call, people feeling unable to leave, or feeling more pressure, or having to work from home. The virus was always mentioned.' (Advisor 2)

'They were saying how their partners were using Covid as a tactic and a way of using more control manipulation. So, it meant they weren't allowed to see their children at all any more if they had broken up from their abusive partner, or if they were still in the house there was no way they could leave.' (Advisor 4)

'I did see a lot of disagreements about the rules and about how to follow them coming up [...] I just remember speaking to someone who was a carer for his partner and she was really controlling and she told him he couldn't even physically leave the house and go outside and I spoke to a few people that had just not gone outside – like, how poor their mental health must have been.' (Advisor 5)

'It certainly came up in conversations during that time, men were talking about, particularly immigration control, Covid now being used as a weapon, their partner saying to them 'I can throw you out' and services are overwhelmed so no-one will be able to look at your case and you will become street homeless' and that created a lot of fear for those men. And men who weren't subject to immigration but whose tenancies were in their partner's name, had that used as a weapon.' (Advisor 6)

'I had several calls where abusive partners were saying I'm going to bring the virus home and infect you, or I'm going to bring the virus back from a care home so you die, so there were cases where the perpetrator was threatening to use Covid as a weapon against the victim who had health issues.' (Advisor 4)

Advisors described overall seeing both an increase in 'extreme' calls on the one hand (for example where callers were homeless) and on the other hand also an increase in cases where callers who were living with relationship problems but not necessarily domestic abuse. Looking first at the examples of callers with relationship problems, the following quote sums this up well:

'I noticed there were more calls from people who weren't necessarily in a situation of domestic violence. I felt there were more calls from people who were

just struggling with their relationship, they were seriously struggling, not so much about safety or people being harmed physically or emotionally, just people freaking out, not knowing how to manage their own anger, not nasty or threatening, just struggling with the situation, with the stress, the claustrophobia of being with someone for weeks and not knowing when it would end. It was about helping the person to take a bit of perspective too.’ (Advisor 2)

Those that the advisors described as particularly extreme tended to be men with housing and/or mental health as their primary concerns.

‘And then there were others which were very extreme. People where they were homeless and the services were collapsing around them. People who needed to think about space for themselves and the other person, and communication. And the problems that we had before, violence in the street or not being able to leave, because of the lockdown. It was really a struggle to see how many people were struggling, and mental health services not being as available as they were before.’ (Advisor 2)

‘There is no doubt a massive impact from Covid. I’m confident that desperation is huge. Mental health is deteriorating, stress is high and abuse is high. It’s really sad.’ (Advisor 3)

Housing was identified as a particular issue. The phrase that callers were ‘feeling trapped’ was described in different ways by most of the advisors interviewed. Advisors also described how many of the options that were available in pre-Covid-19 times just weren’t available at during the initial lockdown period.

‘I feel the general misery of the population in the calls we are taking. There’s an awful lot of sadness, there’s an added layer of misery and desperation that you feel in your body, that you absorb. People have lost their jobs, they can’t leave, you can’t even go to housing at the council.’ (Advisor 3)

‘We used to talk about people moving out to live with family and friends but now people are having to stay where they are now, and even hotels and guesthouses, there is literally no escape.’ (Advisor 3)

‘There were a lot who did try to leave but who were facing homelessness because of it. They were really stretched they couldn’t stay with family and friends and the refuges and hostels were full. A lot were saying they were sleeping in cars; I had a lot people calling from a car. A lot of people feeling completely stuck, people in

abusive households feeling stuck and powerless as they had nowhere to go.’  
(Advisor 4)

The advisors also talked about the challenges of ensuring that the callers were in a place they could not be overheard during the initial lockdown period. They explained that usually they preferred the caller not to be in the same house as the person causing them harm when they made the call. In some cases this was possible and the caller was able to access the advice line when on a daily walk. In other cases, they had to ease this requirement and take calls whilst the caller was in the garden or in a room in the same house, but where they were confident they wouldn’t be overheard.

‘Some people could only call the Men’s Advice Line if they were allowed to go out for a walk. But you can’t talk to them for an hour, because they had to have time to make the call and compose their emotions and go back in and be normal again.’  
(Advisor 3)

As time went on and many areas of the UK moved into lesser restrictions outside of the initial lockdown period, the advisors described how it became easier for men to contact them.

‘When the lockdown ended, more people were freer to call, they could go out, they were able to look for somewhere to live, so the quality of call improved, people could be more proactive, they weren’t so helpless. At the start people were basically in jail. People were stuck and anxiety was all around.’ (Advisor 3)

They also explained that Covid-19 stopped being specifically mentioned as often but that it was still there implicitly as a reason for the call. The impact of unemployment or furlough came through as a particular problem both in terms of the financial aspect but also in terms of people being at home together for longer periods even post-lockdown:

‘Yesterday I had four calls where it was financial because of the lockdown - that was the main issue. They had been furloughed, or waiting for a grant, and I remember thinking it’s such a problem financially, regardless of health and the health system, it’s now about people having fights and being stressed because they don’t have money or they are stressed about what they are going to have if they leave.’ (Advisor 2)

‘Sometimes it’s that they are unemployed because of Covid and that can lead to issues and tension within the family. They are around each other more as they’re not going to work but not as much, maybe also it’s sort of changed, like the nature

of it has shifted more to being out of work because of it, or people whose relationships have been damaged from the lockdown.' (Advisor 4)

'I think there is still an undercurrent, I think people are concerned about money and the future and things being up in the air for a lot of people and I think we'll get more of that now [...] I think lots of people are just sort of coping with things and I think the effects will last a long time.' (Advisor 6)

A theme that also came through strongly in the qualitative analysis of the calls was that of immigration and visa related abuse, and this was also highlighted as an issue by two of the advisors which they'd particularly seen an increase in:

'I've also noticed an increase in calls with interpreters. We are talking, for example, with a lot of Asian communities that we use interpreters for. Usually they can work in restaurants and things [if they don't have the formal right to work] but because there is no work for the no recourse [to public funds] caller they are at home and being more abused.' (Advisor 3)

## Chapter 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 5.1 Summary of key findings

The research found that the **key areas of service demand** linked to the Covid-19 crisis for male victim-survivors calling the helpline were based around: experiencing coercive control and financial abuse; physical violence; financial abuse; sexual violence; immigration and visa issues; housing problems; harmful mental health impacts; contact with the police; norms and expectations about what it means to be a man; difficulties in child contact; and dealing with co-accusations of abuse.

The research shed much light on the experiences of male victim-survivors during the pandemic. For many of the men contacting the Men's Advice Line, **Covid-19 appeared to be compounding or exacerbating their experiences of domestic abuse**. This, combined with the myriad ways in which coronavirus has impacted different aspects of our lives, meant that many of the calls and e-mails which we observed were **highly complex in nature, and that the helpline was often extremely busy**. We were therefore only able to observe a minority of calls to the helpline during the period of the research, however we have still been able to hear about the in-depth experiences of a large amount of male victims of domestic abuse; which we believe to be one of if not the largest such sample to date.

In some cases, perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse were adapting to the pandemic and using it as an opportunity to exert greater control and surveillance over their partners or family members. This included **developing new tools and tactics to facilitate their abuse**, such as using lockdown restrictions to keep victims trapped at home, or deliberately breaking the rules to put the health of their partners and/or children at risk.

For many of the helpline callers, coronavirus prevention measures meant that they were **more isolated than ever**, and this was playing into coercive control. In other cases, being stuck at home all the time with their partners and family increased tensions, stress and anxiety, and this was leading to more violent and abusive behaviours.

Meanwhile, for some callers, **lockdown had provided a time to pause and reflect**, either on current or previous relationships and experiences which may have been abusive, and this had prompted them to finally take the step to contact the helpline.

The **economic impact of the pandemic also had significant implications**. Several callers had lost their jobs, or were furloughed, or were on reduced incomes, which in some cases meant it was even harder for them to leave the relationship due to reduced economic independence.



**Housing was a key issue for many callers**, in that they felt they were unable to afford to move into a new property away from their abusers for example, or were reluctant to ask their partners to leave because they would be unable to afford to find a new place to live (especially given the implications for childcare). In some cases, this meant that **victims had been made homeless** as a result of the abuse which made them feel too unsafe to stay at home, and several callers described having to sleep in their car or stay with friends. These issues were exacerbated by the abuser exerting control over the victim's finances: financial and economic abuse was reported in many cases.

**Masculine norms and expectations played a central part in the abuse.** For example, some victims described being mocked and bullied in very gendered ways, such as being called 'gay' or not a 'real man', especially if they were perceived to not live up to patriarchal family dynamics. For instance, some victims reported that they were expected to provide the income for the whole household, and would receive abuse if they were seen as doing this inadequately. Many callers also described the difficulties they had in sharing their experiences, because being of a victim of abuse, and asking for help, were not seen as 'manly' things to do.

The callers described domestic abuse as having a wide range of impacts on their lives. This included **significant mental health impacts**, such as trauma, depression and anxiety, and economic consequences, such as not being able to go to work or undertake their studies – issues which were again likely to be compounded by the pandemic. Feeling suicidal and not being able to see any other way out was sadly a feature of some of the calls. **Many of the callers were subject to physical violence and violent threats** from their partners or family members, and in some cases described experiencing extreme acts of violence. Again, sometimes this physical violence appeared to have gotten worse during the pandemic, and given that a large number of the reported perpetrators were women, bursts the gendered myth that women can't be physically violent. Although men were not always physically injured as a result of the physical violence, it still played an important role in the overall pattern of domestic abuse.

## **5.2 Recommendations for developing work with male victim-survivors during and beyond Covid-19**

### **Maintaining the extended opening hours of the helpline**

During the pandemic, the Men's Advice Line has been given funding to extend its opening hours due to the increase in demand connected to Covid-19. The continued busyness of the helpline and complexity of calls, and the ongoing nature of the pandemic, demonstrate that it is vital that more funding is provided to ensure that the helpline can continue to operate with extended hours and with sufficient staffing, so that male victims of domestic

abuse are able to access the service when they need it and are not left waiting for their call to be picked up for lengthy periods.

### **Ensuring support services remain available**

The research demonstrated the importance of services on the ground being available to men who are victims of violence and abuse; there is only so much the helpline can do if there are not local services which can be accessed to provide more in-depth support. It is therefore vital that emergency funding is provided for domestic and sexual violence services during the pandemic at a time when many are in a highly insecure position, and that this is made available on a more long term basis too so that services are able to operate on a sustainable footing. In addition, it is crucial that frontline services such as refuges and mental health support remain accessible for victim-survivors as and when coronavirus prevention measures such as lockdowns are imposed.

### **Increasing awareness of the Men's Advice Line outside of London and the South East**

The research suggested that most men contacting the Men's Advice Line are calling from London and the South East of England. Whilst these are the most populous areas of the UK, this still indicates that there is not enough knowledge of the helpline in others areas of the UK, perhaps especially in the devolved nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This demonstrates the importance of raising awareness of the service across the UK, for example among frontline workers, who will then be able to inform men about the helpline.

### **Raising awareness about coercive control and financial abuse experienced by men**

Whilst awareness is growing about male victim-survivors of domestic abuse, there remains a need to build more understanding about the nature of their experiences. In particular, the research highlighted that many of the callers experienced coercive control and financial abuse, about which there is relatively little understanding in relation to male victims. Furthermore, this was often enacted in a gendered way, with men often receiving verbal abuse along the lines that they were not seen as a 'real man' or a successful masculine breadwinner for example. This suggests the need for an awareness-raising prevention campaign about how coercive control and financial abuse can impact on men, which particularly addresses how these tie in with gender norms and stereotypes, such as expectations about what it means to be a man today. Such a campaign would be particularly valuable during the pandemic given that many men's experiences of domestic abuse worsened during this time.

### **Further development of the e-mail service**

Some men clearly preferred to contact the helpline via the e-mail service, perhaps because of the increased anonymity this gave them, the ability to contact the helpline at a time that suited them, and to express themselves at their own pace. Helpline advisors provided

thoughtful and supportive responses to these e-mails. However, the research suggested that further training could be provided to ensure consistency in responses matching the service delivered over the phone, as well as ensuring that helpline advisors have sufficient time to respond to e-mails properly, as this can be very time-consuming, with some involving a lengthy chain of communication.

#### **Further research on aspects of male victim-survivors' experiences**

There remains a need for much more research into the experiences of male victim-survivors of domestic abuse. There were specific issues raised which are still little understood and which this research was not able to investigate sufficiently given the method used. For instance, several callers were facing immigration and visa-related problems as a result of their abuse, demonstrating that the 'hostile environment' can be used as a tool to facilitate the control of male victims. A number of men also appeared to be experiencing forms of 'honour based' violence, and whilst knowledge in this area is growing (Idriss, 2019), it remains a subject about which future research is needed.

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