COVID-19: HARMS OF PUBLIC HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

Lockdowns don’t kill women, abusive men do

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Bavli and colleagues report that public health interventions against covid-19 are associated with increased rates of domestic violence. To tackle issues around the murder of women at the hands of men we need a wider change of narrative across society and the media.

We need to change how women are portrayed when they are murdered by men. Headlines must stop trying to provide context (“he murdered her after she . . .”). This apportions blame to the victim, though the responsibility for her murder obviously lies squarely with the man.

After the death of serial killer Peter Sutcliffe, news reports described, inaccurately, how he “murdered prostitutes.” This dehumanises his victims and perpetuates the stigma faced by sex workers—a stigma that delays the responses when these women are subject to violent crimes.

A similar problem occurs when men murder women in so called honour killings—a term carrying implicit justification that the women were “fair game” because they deviated from some cultural norm. Language matters. Terms like “honour” paint the perpetrator as a hero, emboldening others to commit such crimes.

We must not make the same mistakes when discussing public health measures to tackle covid-19. Lockdown does not make men kill women. Rather, the most vulnerable people in society, including those who have experienced domestic abuse, were not provided adequate protective resources even before covid-19. A crisis would always render them at risk of increasingly dangerous, potentially fatal, situations.

Throughout 2020, the covid-19 pandemic has exposed cracks in our societies and brought to light the very problem with inequality: vulnerable people lose out most. We have lost sight of the very women and children who need to be on someone’s radar. The excellent work of health, social, and third sector services that strive to protect women is under threat. We need systemic and societal changes in how we perceive women and protect abuse victims, not just discussions around the validity or otherwise of lockdowns.

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Full response at: https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4074/rr-2

1 Bavli I, Sutton B, Galea S. Harms of public health interventions against covid-19 must not be ignored. BMJ 2020;371:m4074. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m4074 pmid: 33139247

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