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Domestic abuse and coronavirus

Anarchist Communist Group

2nd April 2020

The first coronavirus murder has been reported in the UK. A 67-year old woman was murdered by her husband when they were both in self-isolation.

This illustrates the great dangers that women face as a result of lockdown, not just here but over the world. Domestic abuse cases soared in France, with at least two murders of women. Women's organisations there are warning of worsening situations as regards domestic abuse. Globally, one in three women face physical and sexual violence, in many cases from someone in their family. In China, local police stations reported a threefold increase in domestic violence cases in February, compared to the same time last year. In the USA, calls to some domestic abuse helplines doubled.

Self-isolation won't solve the unequal distribution of domestic tasks and childcare, and women who are now having to telework will still face the stress of double workloads.

Single parent families are the first to be marked by poverty with many in substandard housing.

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Women are facing pressure from their ex-partners to keep them under their control with the desperate situations created by the lockdowns.

Here in Britain, a figure of 1.6 million women in England and Wales was given for cases of domestic abuse for the last year. So self-isolation for many women will not mean catching up with your reading or viewing box sets but a place of menace and confinement, walled up with their abusers. Women's organisations here are also monitoring an increase in enquiries about abuse and local police forces are reporting an increase in domestic abuse cases.

In times not troubled by pandemics, women could have taken refuge with friends or family. This is not now possible. Home Secretary Priti Patel has said that women can leave the home they share with an abuser to seek shelter in a women's refuge, but one in six of these have closed since 2010 because of austerity measures.

This highlights the whole nature of a patriarchal system that has been incorporated into capitalism, and raises questions about the essential nature of families as they exist at present. Domestic violence is an instrument for keeping women in line, of maintaining patriarchal power relations.

The home can be a terrible place for children as well, and the lockdowns will aggravate the situation. Children can temporarily escape from violence at home by attendance at school. The closure of schools means that thousands of children are confined with their abuser. In some homes, even the provision of meals is not guaranteed, something that school meals provided, but which have been temporarily taken away.

The same goes for many LGBTQ+ young people, not just here but around the world. They may be trapped in a home where their family does not accept their sexual orientation, and suffer a high risk of violence. In Uganda, police have used social distancing laws to arrest 20 people, 14 gay men, two bisexual men and four transgender women.

As a result of all of these ongoing problems aggravated by the coronavirus, suicides may spiral as people cannot cope with worsening situations.

In the West, including in the UK and the USA, a majority of mothers hold down jobs, and will face pressure to give up their paid work. Many women in a two-earner heterosexual household are paid less than their partner. There will be greater pressure for women rather than men to devote themselves to full-time childcare. All the unpaid caring work, looking after self-isolating elderly, children home from school, relatives ill with COVID-19, will fall more heavily on women, because of the present status quo.

Last year, hundreds of thousands of women went out on strike on March 9th against domestic violence in Mexico, where it is a particularly acute problem. Later in November there were demonstrations all over the world against domestic violence. In India, following the rape and murder of a woman, there were widespread protests.

The coronavirus crisis has temporarily shut down these protests, but what must be emphasised, is the continuing problem of violence against women, as well as children and LGBTQ+ people, which is now being highlighted by the developing situation. When this is over, we cannot continue to accept the way things are.

No going back!