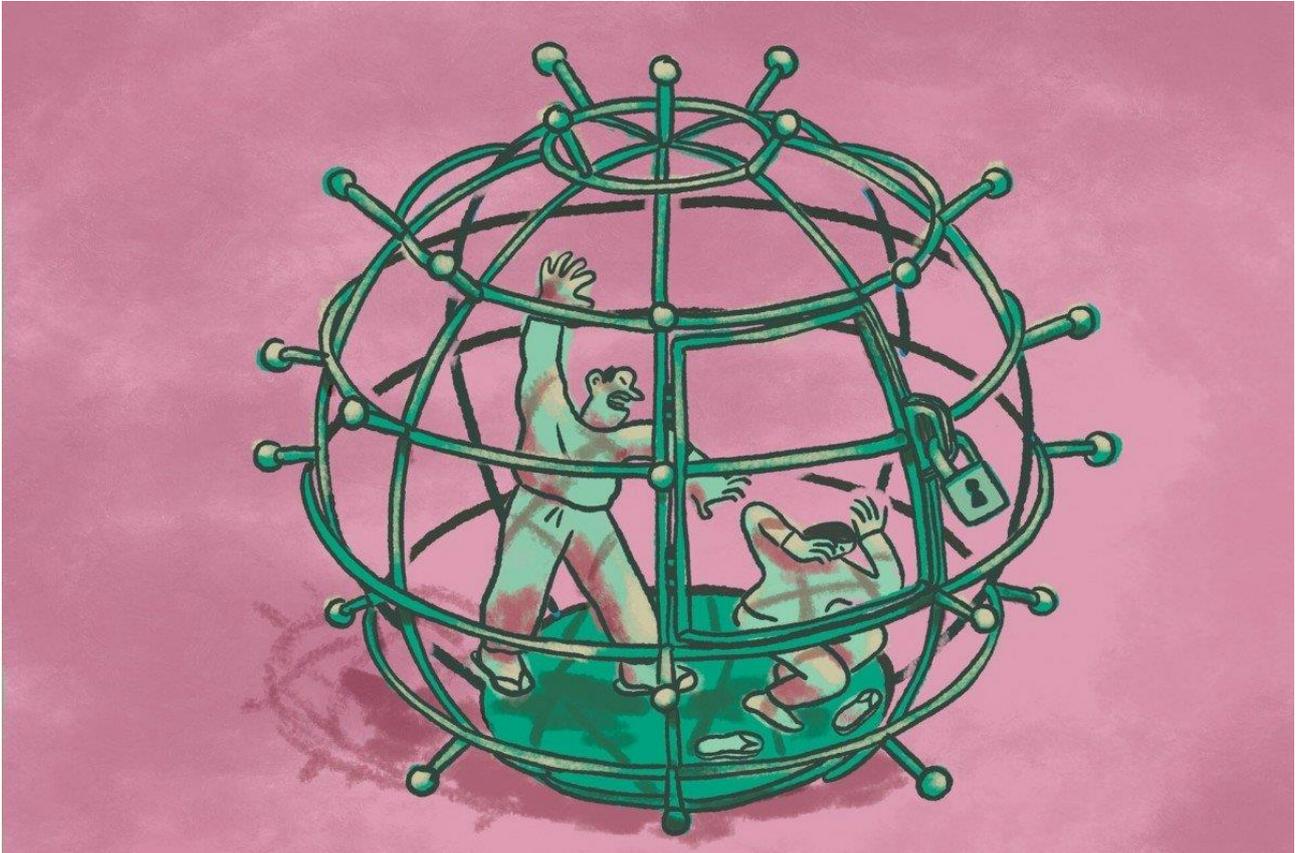


2020.04.11 SCMP Stuck at home with a monster: more reports of violence against women, children in Hong Kong since start of pandemic

- Higher chances of conflict, violence when abusers spend more time at home
- Children at risk of neglect, abuse as stressed parents work from home, help agencies say



The coronavirus has seen a rise in cases of domestic violence in Hong Kong. Illustration: Kaliz Lee  
Staying at home may help to keep the coronavirus causing Covid-19 at bay, but the pandemic is taking its toll on victims of domestic violence in Hong Kong.

After more than 30 years of marriage, Cheng had kept her secret to herself. She was too ashamed to tell anyone that her husband abused her sexually, and that being alone at home with him was hell.

The pandemic made it worse when her husband, in his 60s, had his working hours slashed. He was home more, spent his time drinking, lost his temper easily, and forced himself on her.

Cheng, in her 50s, became terrified each time he started drinking. Reluctant to go to their three children, who live on their own, she fled to a friend's place and spent two nights there.

She was in tears when she called the hotline of the non-profit organisation Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres (HKFWC) for help last month.



Mandy Wong, education officer and counsellor at Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres, helps victims of domestic violence. Photo: Dickson Lee

"She did not speak for long before breaking down," says Mandy Wong Nga-sze, education officer and counsellor at the federation.

Cheng was placed in a shelter, and is receiving help and advice on getting a divorce. She still gets upset when discussing the past.

The HKFWC and other help centres have reported a sharp rise in domestic violence cases since the start of the pandemic, with women and children making up most of the victims.

Globally the coronavirus has killed more than 100,000 people and infected over 1.6 million. In Hong Kong, there have been almost 1,000 confirmed cases, with four deaths.

To slow the spread of the virus, people have been advised to stay at home, and employers have asked staff to work from home too.

**The pandemic has worsened the situation as they and their abusers are forced to spend more time together** - Mandy Wong, Hong Kong Federation of Women's Centres

For abusers and their victims, these changes can leave them like "trapped beasts fighting in a cage", Wong says.

"In many cases, it is not the first time that victims have suffered domestic violence," she says. "But the pandemic has worsened the situation as they and their abusers are forced to spend more time together, and that can result in more conflicts and violent behaviour."

Experts warn that for victims of domestic violence, having to spend more time at home with their abusers adds to the stress from fear of infection, the virus-related social isolation, as well as issues of unemployment, financial difficulty and having to care for their children.

### **‘Surge in numbers is alarming’**

Social Welfare Department statistics show there were 2,920 reports of domestic abuse cases in 2019, slightly lower than the 2,937 reported cases in 2018.

There were 2,313 cases of physical abuse in 2019 – almost 80 per cent of the total – followed by 311 cases of psychological abuse and 20 cases of sexual abuse, while 276 cases involved multiple types of abuse. Women accounted for 84.2 per cent of the victims.

Lam, in her 40s, fled home with her older daughter last month, after her husband hit her repeatedly.

Her husband, in his 50s, lost his job furnishing homes after the pandemic arrived. Lam used to stay at home to care for their two daughters, but she started doing part-time work to make ends meet.

However, her husband then began accusing her of having an affair. He picked quarrels with her frequently, and also hit, shoved and choked her. He even harassed her at her workplace, going to her office and creating a scene.



Doris Chong, a service supervisor at the Hong Kong Federation of Women’s Centres, conducts a counselling session through drawing to help a victim of domestic violence. Photo: Handout

She called the police twice, but the officers who came to their home left without taking any action after her husband told them it was just a domestic matter.

Police classify domestic conflict reports into three categories – domestic violence filed under crime or miscellaneous and domestic incidents – based on their severity.

According to police, when a domestic conflict report comes in, an officer assigned to oversee the case will go to the scene to assess possible action such as detaining the offender and providing support to victims and their family members in collaboration with government agencies.

Lam decided to leave, taking only her 10-year-old daughter with her, as her husband refused to part with their four-year-old.

Now living in a subdivided flat, Lam is worried about the younger girl, whom she visits fortnightly, accompanied by a social worker. She is seeking a divorce, and hopes to have custody of both her daughters.

The Harmony House, established in 1985 as the city's first shelter for abused women and their children, received more than 900 hotline calls in March alone, and the number of domestic violence victims admitted into its shelter rose from 10 in January to 17 in February, and 18 in March.

Shelter supervisor Mandy Chan Man-yi says very few victims used to turn up in February because of the Lunar New Year holiday, with 10 cases in February last year. This year's surge in numbers is alarming, she says.

Many of those seeking refuge had experienced conflicts over living together, cleaning and disinfecting the home, unemployment, home quarantine, and whether to go out or wear masks. "The pandemic has caused many domestic issues to surface, and some escalate into violence," Chan says.

Doris Chong Tsz-wai, service supervisor of the HKFWC, says the pandemic has made it harder for victims to escape violence.

"Victims need time and a place to go to in order to escape from home," she says. "They used to be able to go out and talk to others, and attend social activities, but now they are deprived of opportunities to do these things and vent their negative emotions."



Chong advises victims to move away when conflicts arise and the situation is in danger of escalating into violence. They could go to the bathroom, for example.

Those who have suffered violence repeatedly ought to keep their important personal belongings at hand for a quick getaway if they have to leave home and seek help, she says.

### **Help is available**

Social workers and NGOs are also concerned about a rise in child abuse cases during the pandemic. These include physical, sexual and psychological abuse as well as neglect.

Donna Wong Chui-ling, director of Against Child Abuse, a charitable organisation formed in 1979, says it has been receiving more phone calls from people saying their neighbours were abusing their children physically and verbally at home.

With schools closed and employees working from home, Wong says, parents and children have been spending more time together indoors. The pressure of parenting can take a toll, leading to conflicts between parents and children, and culminating in violence.

# Confirmed Covid-19 cases

Total

**2,331,629**

cases

**155,689**

deaths

**599,863**

recovered

	Cases	Deaths
United States**	734,552	33,903
Spain	194,416	20,639
Italy	175,925	23,227
France	152,978	19,323
Germany	143,724	4,538
United Kingdom	115,314	15,464
Mainland China	83,730	4,632
Turkey	82,329	1,890
Iran	80,868	5,031
Belgium	37,183	5,453

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*\*based on the WHO's Covid-19 situation reports \*\*includes presumptive cases*

Sources: JHU, WHO and health authorities

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She is particularly concerned about children being neglected during the outbreak, with some being left alone at home.

NGOs and social workers are urging victims of domestic violence and parents finding it hard to cope during the pandemic to seek help.

Because of the pandemic, the Social Welfare Department and NGOs have adjusted the way they serve the public, relying more on hotlines, phone calls and social media, and suspending non-essential face-to-face services.

The department's 24-hour hotline (2343 2255) is unaffected, and shelters for victims of domestic violence remain open.

參考資料 Reference: <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3079338/stuck-home-monster-more-reports-violence-against>