

Hell Is Other People: Pandemic Lifestyles and Domestic Violence

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Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

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In No Exit, the translated title of Jean-Paul Sartre's play, Huis Clos, three deceased characters find themselves in a room, ostensibly in Hell, in what transpires as a permanent wait. Locked after being ushered in by a valet, with quite literally no means of escape, they are confronted with each other's moods, lies and eventual confessions. Sadism, cowardice and mendacity figure. The torment each character subjects the other to leads to that famous observation: L'enfer, c'est les autres (Hell is other people.) Humans are inventive, and tiringly so, in ensuring that torture or physical requirement need not be necessary in inflicting enduring misery.

The global lockdowns and forced hibernations should not just be seen as measures of imposed isolation. The Pandemic State has done much to kill off that delicate creature of solitude, the routine of tranquil space essential to life. Privacy does not merely die before the wizardry of heat sensors, drones and state surveillance; it also vanishes in spaces crowded and crammed, even with your intimates.

In the context of health and a raging pandemic, paranoia can also be a continuous companion. Does a cough in bed or a rising fever entail a risk to the entire family? The unfortunate sufferer, whatever the actual illness, risks accusation and banishment. The converse is also true: using a disease to affect vulnerability, thereby keeping a tormented partner or relation in that space. The range of human manipulations in that regard are legend and endless.

As Crystal Justice, chief marketing and development officer at the US National Domestic Violence Hotline [puts it](#),

"We are hearing from survivors how COVID-19 is already being used by their abusive partners to further control and abuse, how COVID-19 is already impacting their ability to access support and services like accessing shelter, counselling, different things that they would typically lean on in their communities."

The British medical journal *The Lancet*, in a [survey on the literature](#) on forced isolation, had few surprises. "Most reviewed studies reported negative psychological effects including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion and anger." Problems arise from the duration of quarantine, leading the authors to warn that such periods should be "for no longer than required". Clear rationales for such quarantine, accompanied by "information about protocols" with sufficient provisions, should follow. Such technical formulations, fine as they are to script, do little to alleviate the social and physical constrictions that place people in Sartre's room of hell.

If hell is other people, some versions are more hellish than others. China, the first country to impose lockdown measures in response to COVID-19, saw the immediate social effects: neglect, domestic violence, enervating anxiety. Retired police officer turned activist Wan Fei claimed that [domestic violence reports](#) had doubled since China's cities had gone into lockdown. The police station in Jingzhou's Jianli County had received over triple the number of reports from February 2019 - 162 in total. "According to our statistics, 90% of the causes of violence are related to the COVID-19 epidemic."

This has also been accompanied by a certain apathy in some responses from the police authorities, if the [observations](#) of Feng Yuang, director of Weiping, a Beijing-based women's rights non-profit, are anything to go by. "The police can detain people for insulting (leading respiratory disease expert) Zhong Nanshan online and arrest someone for not wearing a mask on the street. If they use the epidemic as an excuse not to deal with domestic violence cases, that's not acceptable."

Consulting the statistics on domestic violence is always a dispiriting exercise. They have become even more telling of late. The United Nations calls it the "[shadow pandemic](#)". Following the March 17 lockdown in France, a 30% increase in domestic violence reports has been registered. Helplines in Cyprus and Singapore have registered an increase in calls - 30% and 33% respectively. A Women's Safety New South Wales (Australia) [survey found](#) that frontline workers had registered a 40% increase in calls for assistance from survivors, with 70% reporting an increase in the level of complexity in cases during the coronavirus outbreak. (Rates of domestic violence in Australia - [with one in four women](#) experiencing some physical form of it since 15, was already horrendous.)

The impediments for sufferers to access services has also seen social workers and activists turn to more virtual and online methods of communication, a point that can only ever be half-satisfying at best. Calls to Italian helplines may have dropped (it tends to be difficult to make calls in near presence of an abuser), but the use of emails and text messages has increased. Lella Palladino of the activist group EVA Cooperativa [told the Guardian](#) about the desperation arising from those in confined spaces. "For sure there is an overwhelming emergency right now. There is more desperation as women can't go out."

The Pandemic State is insular and closed. Technology has given an illusion of proximity to ameliorate this condition, at least to some degree. It is being praised for connecting people during periods of pandemic isolation. But you still have to be able to use it. Unfortunately for those unblest in their fraught human relations, living in less than commodious accommodation, there may simply be No Exit.

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