

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA: A SHADOW PANDEMIC

by

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ABSTRACT

Many countries engulfed in the lockdown due to covid-19, almost five billion sheltering at home from the epidemic; though it as a protective measure it has invited another dramatic turn in terms of growing domestic violence against women in India. In the run-up to the announcement of the nationwide lockdown on March 24th, 2020, the government was unable to craft strategies to address possible fallout in several areas. One such area that went unaddressed was domestic violence. As more states report rise in infections and strict measures called during lockdown, more domestic violence helplines rung to its peak alarming help to reach the women under distress ambit domestic violence. Certain studies, over the years, have shown a direct link between times of crisis like these and interpersonal violence. Pandemics provide for an enabling environment of fear and uncertainty that may exacerbate diverse forms of violence against women. Moreover, Mandatory stay-at-home rules, economic insecurity, financial instability, and isolation are also some of the factors that contribute to making domestic violence even more prevalent. Unfortunately, domestic violence cases are underreported across the world, especially in times of global emergencies like COVID-19.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Pandemic, uncertainty, lockdown, protective measure etc.

I. Introduction:

The pandemic COVID-19 is considered in the present times as the most prominent threat to the people across the globe. The consequences of this pandemic are not only circumscribed to the loss of life but also have caused a severe socio-economic-psychological imbalances. As of 10 January, 2022; 5.492 million deaths are reported (covid19.who.int) due to the pandemic¹. The lockdowns and the consequential social imbalances have resulted into extreme crisis to everyone and has caused loneliness, fear, anxiety, sadness etc among many. Suicidal tendencies, psychiatric disturbance found a welcome resort amongst the heavily affected populace including healthcare professionals. However, the impact of this pandemic on women has been worse; coupled with the pandemic impact and worsened domestic issues. The lockdowns and other social isolation measures implemented by all affected countries have forced women to be confined to their homes despite the fact that they are subjected to family violence, with limited or no social support options available. As a consequence, the steady rise in domestic violence during the coronavirus pandemic has resulted and posed an additional and equally potent challenge at the global level. An increase in domestic violence is equivalently observed in India also.

Domestic violence is one of the most pernicious gendered ailments of human society. Several studies have confirmed the inevitable consequences of domestic violence (physical, sexual, and emotional) in increased vulnerability to psychopathologies in addition to physical morbidity. Domestic violence cases are vast in India, and the numbers are further aggravated at an alarming rate during the COVID-19 pandemic².

The intimate partner violence, aggressive behaviour within the household involving the abuse of a partner or spouse is termed as domestic violence. It may also include abuse by any member of a family on a woman. The domestic violence or aggressive behaviour on the woman in many a case is from her own partner. The World Health Organisation puts across that one in every three women experience Physical or/ and Sexual abuse globally and nearly thirty percent (30%)

¹ <https://covid19.who.int/> dated 10 Jan 2022

² Das, M. , Das, A. , & Mandal, A. (2020). Examining the impact of lockdown (due to COVID-19) on domestic violence (DV): An evidences from India. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54, 102335.

of women having relationship have experienced physical or/ and sexual abuse from their partners³.

II. Domestic Violence in India:

Crime in India Report 2018, reflected that at every 1.7 minutes crime is recorded against women in India and at every 4.4 minutes a woman is subjected to domestic violence⁴. Domestic violence is highest among the violence reported on the women according to the Crime in India Report⁵. The data reflects that almost 90,000 cases of crimes on women were reported across India in 2018, relatively higher than the preceding years. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) highlighted in its report that thirty percent (30%) of women between fifteen to forty-nine (15-49) age group have experienced physical violence. According to the report eighty three percent (83 %) of the married women have experienced physical and sexual abuse and also emotional torture. The report says amongst the alleged people committing violence against women specifically on the offence of domestic violence is their husband as the main perpetrator and others being the husbands' mother reportedly fifty six percent (56%), the husband's father reportedly thirty three percent (33%) and the husband's siblings making twenty seven percent (27%).

The research finding observes that the primary reasons for violence against women is prevalent due to the orthodox social norms widely practiced amongst the families in India. It is also observed that not all the violence against the women is reported, but only if the circumstances go beyond the tolerance level of the women subjected to violence. Also, the stigmatisation that is imposed on the women survivors of physical or sexual or domestic violence is a major reason at which the incidents of domestic violence is grossly underreported⁶. It is also observed that women feel unsafe reporting the incidents of domestic violence to the police. It is worrying to such women that if their partner is arrested, they may face a worse abuse in the hands of in-laws, siblings of her husband, relatives and others. It is threatening to such women that once

³ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/question-and-answers-hub/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-violence-against-women>

⁴ National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Crime in India-2018. Retrieved from <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/crime-india-2018>

⁵ <https://idronline.org/the-link-between-lockdown-covid-19-and-domestic-violence> dated 17 Apr 2020

⁶ Bhanot, D. , Singh, T. , Verma, S. K. , & Sharad, S. (2020). Stigma and discrimination during COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Public Health*, Section Public Health Education and Promotion. 10.3389/fpubh.2020.577018

after their partner is released, there is a least possibility of a peaceful marital life with such partners⁷.

Domestic violence amidst pandemic: The command of the government directing the authorities for mandatory lockdown, compulsorily stay at home rule, shut down of the economic activity, social distancing, financial uncertainties, no relief from the financial burdens, anxieties caused etcetera have fuelled for the increase in domestic violence globally. The pandemic days have eclipsed even the most developed states like France, Australia, United Kingdom, United States of America and others under the rising domestic violence and intimate partner violence on women⁸. India being the most sensitive country on gender-based violence has also shown similar development with respect to domestic and intimate partner violence during the pandemic.

III. Widespread poverty and unemployment:

The covid-19 lockdown has an economic impact on the poor and middle-class population much as against the upper class. It is projected to push poverty to levels more than that has ever seen at least thirty (30) years ago and will cause a high unemployment in about one billion people world-wide⁹. The developing countries like India is on high risk due to its heavy population dependency. Further, women will be affected more during these crises since unemployment make women become more financially dependent on their partners. In addition to this the male unemployment will lead to increased intimate partner violence, especially physical abuse due to financial and psychological stresses¹⁰. In patriarchal societies where the male is expected to be the provider of the household, financial and psychological stressors are thought to increase intimate Partner Violence by threatening the male's authority at home making him more aggressive in an attempt to regain his authority¹¹. The economic burden would leave the female dependent on the male partner making it harder to leave a violent relationship¹².

⁷ Bhattacharya, R. (2004). *Behind closed doors: Domestic violence in India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications India.

⁸ Mohan, M. (2020, March). Coronavirus: I'm in lockdown with my abuser. BBC News . Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52063755>

⁹ Understanding Domestic Violence During a Pandemic, Jinan Usta, Hana Murr, and Rana El-Jarrah Published Online:25 Aug 2021<https://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2020.0069>

¹⁰ Jha, S. K. (2020, May). Women become victims of domestic violence due to the fear of employment and stress during lockdown. Dainik Jagran . Retrieved from <https://www.jagran.com/haryana/panchkula-women-become-victims-of-domestic-violence-due-to-fear-of-employment-and-stress-in-lockdown-20279892.html>

¹¹ Sharma, M. , & Sharma, V. (2020). COVID-19 and Economic Shocks: An Analysis in Indian Context.

¹² Jacob, Suraj, and Sreeparna Chattopadhyay, Speaking of Abuse The Pyramid of Reporting DV in India, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY 53–62, 54 (2019)

IV. The changed approach on reporting the violence during Covid-19:

The women abused during these days are kept away due to lockdown from the regular support system that would have been available in times of need to a woman especially during violent abuses on her. The helpline bells have rung proportionately less during this time is something a shock that one can learn. After 24 March 2020, when a nation-wide lockdown was announced by the government of India in order to contain the corona virus, within weeks the National Commission for Women (NCW) highlighted 100% rise in domestic violence complaints nation-wide¹³. In order to meet such rise in numbers of violence on an emergent note the NCW launched a nationwide WHATSAPP number to provide an alternate solution and to make available help quick and remotely. There was an abrupt increase of domestic violence during the initial weeks of lockdown in India, it is strange enough that the monthly data of NCW revealed the different story. It showed an overall decrease in complaints compared to even the initial months of the year 2020. (Complaints received: January: 538, February: 523, March: 501, April: 377). However, the gradual relaxation of the lockdown saw a subsequent surge in the complaints. While 552 complaints were recorded in the month of May, June saw over 730 complaints. This data shows that while the concern of a rapid increase in the domestic violence cases during the lockdown was valid, the instances were not actively reported¹⁴.

V. Obstacle that hindered reporting amidst pandemic:

The continuous lockdown and other socio-economic difficulties have cut the path of reporting agencies to the women who have faced the domestic violence during pandemic, as a fact worth highlighting. And the reasons maybe considered as for the reason say,

1. **Confined stay:** The lockdown that has destabilized families has also handicapped the women by preventing them from moving to safer places in cases of violence and other abuses.
2. **Absence of proper medium for communication:** The number on whatsapp launched by the NCW had a very limited reach. It is reported that only 30 % (Thirty percent) women had a reach and that too who has a smart phone and a proper internet

¹³ National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). Crime in India-2018. Retrieved from <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/crime-india-2018>

¹⁴ Domestic Violence Reporting in India during COVID-19, Kanika Arora and Shubham Kumar Jain 03 Aug, 2020

connectivity, majority of women who have undergone domestic violence at the far remote places, etcetera have never reported the violence on them in these times.

3. **No contact with the natal family:** Natal family is usually the first point of contact for the victim. They are not only essential in supporting the victim in filing a complaint but also facilitate filing of complaints to the police. The constant presence of the perpetrator made it difficult for the victims to contact their first respondent which ultimately deterred them from reporting to institutionalized channels.
4. **Absence of the formal support system:** The machinery under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act had not been identified as an essential service during the lockdown. Hence, the protection officers were not able to visit households of victims, NGOs were not able to have physical interactions with them and the police officers being at the frontline in our effort to tackle COVID-19 were overstretched to help victims effectively.

VI. Conclusion:

Violence against women increased globally during the COVID-19 pandemic especially intimate partner violence and Domestic Violence. The lockdown exacerbated several factors that affect violence against women. It increased household tensions, affected gender roles, decreased independence, decreased access to supportive services, decreased stress relieving activities, and increased economic burdens. COVID-19's response plan prioritized the collective safety of the community to limit its spread over personal freedom and individual's safety for not being exposed to increased violence. This article sheds the light on factors that reasoned for violence against women during health emergencies.

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