

SILENT PANDEMIC OF DOMESTIC ABUSE VIS-A-VIS COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 transformed all countries, businesses, professions and the lives. COVID-19 raised governance concerns for the governments, job issues for the employees and workers and continuous safety fears for those engaged in the health sector. But for the victims of domestic abuse, the pandemic made the lives tougher. The announcement of the lockdown in February- March 2020 all over the world and the second wave of the lockdown in many parts of the world in September-October 2020 allowed the perpetrators excuse to commit the acts of abuse on their partners. As a result, an increase was reported in the cases of abuse made to the Helplines in all parts of the world, beginning with China. The governments and the private bodies took various measures to help the victims during the pandemic. The international organisations issued set of Guidelines for the governments to make gender needs a part of their Plans to deal with the pandemic. The latest Report of the United Nations shows how miserably most of the countries failed to address gender violence. As per the Global Gender Response Tracker, only 704 measures on this area have been introduced worldwide. Considering the countries assessed over 200 in number, many countries failed to implement even a single measure to deal with the issue of gender violence. It is hoped that the COVID-19 would be a lesson for all to be more stringent against the evil of domestic abuse.

Key Words- Covid 19, abuse, woman, helpline.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 is the global anniversaries of momentous policies on women's rights. The world celebrates 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action³, the 20th anniversary of the 1325 U.N. Resolution on Women, Peace and Security⁴, the 100th anniversary of the passing of the 19th Amendment⁵, and UN Women's 10th anniversary⁶. Unfortunately, the global pandemic of the century has brought the women worldwide at the crosshairs of a parallel pandemic- domestic abuse.

The strain and hardship of COVID-19 pandemic⁷ is particularly acute for those who already face the greatest challenges. Women and girls as the vulnerable section of the population have been deeply impacted by the indirect effects of the COVID-19. They came under double burden of managing the homes and work in many cases. The women working in the care or informal sector are experiencing marginalisation. The new term "corona divorce" is now commonly used on Japanese social media to describe the spike in divorce and grievances of couples during the confinement period. The pandemic has exposed the deep-rooted problem of gender inequality in the societies, including income disparity, uneven political and socio-economic representation, and harmful cultural and social stereotypes.

They became prone to abuse at home and online. Increased time spent on phones and using computers to communicate in place of in-person interactions also poses additional avenues for perpetration of new forms of violence online, including sexual harassment, exploitation, and

³ It was adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The definition of violence contained in the Platform for Action is broad, including "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." The Beijing Platform for Action also requires all governments to develop strategies or national plans of action to implement the Platform locally. The National Plans of Action for each country outline specific activities that the national governments will undertake to improve the situation of women, including addressing violence against women.

⁴ The U.N. Security Council adopted resolution (S/RES/1325) on women and peace and security on 31 October 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

⁵ The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was introduced in 1920 guaranteeing American women the right to vote.

⁶ UN Women as the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women was established in July 2010. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life.

⁷ As on 15th November 2020, the world has witnessed over 54 million cases of COVID-19; over 1 million deaths of the patients due to COVID-19 and currently there are more than 15 million infected persons.

abuse. The increased domestic violence against women witnessed during the crisis is spilling into the online space, turning the lifeline of the internet into a hostile space.⁸

Domestic violence tends to skyrocket in the aftermath of natural disasters, financial downturns and even major sporting events.⁹ Before the current pandemic, there has been no longitudinal research on what happens when families are required by government regulation to stay at home for six months. Unfortunately, domestic violence cases are underreported across the world, especially in times of global emergencies like COVID-19.

Movement restrictions aimed to stop the spread of the coronavirus made violence in homes more frequent, more severe and more dangerous. A kind of “intimate terrorism” flourished while the most of the countries of the world were under lockdown. Abuse victims get distanced from their regular support systems making it difficult for them to call out for help. Coronavirus exacerbated triggers and the perpetrators used isolation, financial burden, stress as excuses to commit the acts of physical abuse upon their partners. Lockdown also restricted some women’s access to support or escape. COVID-19 also challenged the ability of health and social services to connect with and support victims of violence.

A surge in calls to helplines and online services since the lockdown conditions were imposed in different countries were recorded. The instances of abuse took place, irrespective of the economic development of a country. This crime prevails ordinarily in almost all countries and same continues during the pandemic situation in developed, developing and under-developed countries.¹⁰ In more developed countries with a robust domestic violence response already in place, the number of calls to domestic violence crisis hotlines go up during the quarantine.

⁸ Web Foundation. (2020) “There’s a pandemic of online violence against women and girls”. available at <https://webfoundation.org/2020/07/theres-a-pandemic-of-online-violence-against-women-and-girls/>. here has been a surge in non-consensual sharing of images designed to threaten, shame and control women. Distribution or threats of sharing non-consensual intimate images also takes place largely within contexts of intimate partner violence.

⁹ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (2015). *Unseen, unheard: Gender-based violence in disasters- Global study*. Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The research took place in Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, El Salvador, Haiti, Malawi, Myanmar, Namibia, Romania and Samoa. The researchers interviewed a range of stakeholders, women and men affected by disasters, representatives of government, and staff from National Societies and international and national non-governmental organizations.

¹⁰ For more details, see Kumar, Ruchi. “Domestic abuse: Women in Herat may survive coronavirus but not lockdown” . 21 April, 2020. available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/21/domestic-abuse-women-in-herat-afghanistan-may-survive-coronavirus-but-not-lockdown> ; Grierson, Jamie. “Domestic abuse killings 'more than double' amid COVID-19 lockdown”. 15 April, 2020 available at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/domestic-abuse-killings-more-than-double-amid-COVID-19-lockdown> ; “The shadow pandemic of gender-based violence”. 1 May, 2020. available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/africasource/the-shadow-pandemic-of-gender-based-violence/>.

However, in poorer countries like Armenia, they dropped significantly even though family violence was still going on.

Against this backdrop, the present paper shall throw a light on the increase in the cases of domestic abuse since the pandemic, under-reporting of such cases and provide some suggestions to deal with the problem.

2. IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON DOMESTIC ABUSE

Previous epidemics, such as the Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa, cholera and Zika virus disease outbreaks, led to regional environments where domestic violence became more prevalent; there were reductions in funding for specialist gender-based violence public health services; and, for survivors of gender-based violence, there was reduced access to health-care services.¹¹

The home is not a safe place for many women and children. When the various governments announced lockdown, a specific negative impact was inevitable on many women and children who were experiencing, or who had experienced, domestic abuse. The pandemic threatened to escalate abuse and close down routes to safety for women to escape. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significant impact of power dynamics in domestic abuse; and witnessed abusers adapting both lockdown restrictions and the virus itself to assert control.

Various country-specific and area specific studies have been done regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the number of cases of domestic abuse.¹² “COVID-19 and Violence against Women and Children - A Second Research Round Up” reviewed 44 papers on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and children.¹³ The study finds out that in total 30 studies aiming to investigate changes in violence, 13 show increases, and 8 show mixed findings, indicating increases in at least one measure.¹⁴ Many European countries have announced second wave of lockdown from October 2020 and it raises concern for the victims of domestic violence.

¹¹ Chandan, J.S et.al. (2020). “COVID-19: a public health approach to manage domestic violence is needed”. available at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30112-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30112-2/fulltext).

¹² For details, see Davidge, Sarah. (2020). *A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them*. Bristol: Women’s Aid.

¹³ Peterman, Amber & O’Donnell, Megan. “COVID-19 and Violence against Women and Children - A Second Research Round Up”. Washington D.C.: Center for Global Development.

¹⁴ Id.

Studies show that abusers are more likely to murder their partners and others in the wake of personal crises, including lost jobs or major financial setbacks. The magnitude of the problem of domestic abuse became more visible or indeed grew during the pandemic, as the reported cases of homicides increased in many countries. The murder of Hannah Clarke and her three children in Brisbane in February ,2020 shows how the offender controlled his wife for years and after she left his home, he killed her, the children and himself.¹⁵ In late July, 2020, a Milwaukee man strangled and killed his girlfriend during an argument, then put her body in a dumpster before turning himself in to police several days later.¹⁶

Survivors explained how the pandemic had made it more difficult for them to leave their abuser. For many this was a result of increased time with the abuser or not being able to leave the house. Others talked about their abuser being less able to leave due to the pandemic.

An abusive relationship is beyond just physical violence. The common modes of abuse also include isolation from friends, family and employment; constant surveillance; strict, detailed rules for behavior; and restrictions on access to such basic necessities as food, clothing and sanitary facilities.

3. COUNTER MECHANISM ACROSS GLOBE

The pandemic exposed the shortcomings of the measures put in place in “normal times” which has in turn limited the capacity to react to the needs during the crisis. The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, the Council of Europe, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and other regional and international bodies have issued clear guidelines that States should use to respond to the pandemic in line with their human rights obligations. National and local authorities should be aware that in contexts of health, humanitarian, economic or other crises, inequality gaps increase when the adverse effects of these crises on women and girls’ rights are not taken into account and addressed. During the pandemic, UN Women published a host of guidelines to help governments and stakeholders come with gender-sensitive responses to the pandemic. In

¹⁵ “Brisbane car fire: Hannah Clarke's family say they tried to rescue her and children from violent husband”. 20 Feb. 2020. *The Guardian*.

¹⁶ “Bond set at \$750K for Milwaukee man accused of strangling girlfriend, killing her 2 daughters so they wouldn’t have to live in world without their mother”. 21 Feb.2020. *Chicago Tribune*.

March, 2020 it published a ten-point checklist for countries, which included building shelters, and hotlines, for domestic violence. In May, 2020 the UN Women's Response to COVID-19 laid out five focus areas for policymakers such as introduction of social protection and economic stimulus packages for women.

UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction in April 2020 called on all national disaster management agencies to give attention to this urgent issue within their governments so that support to victims of domestic abuse are included in their COVID-19 response plans. The European Parliament called on its members to increase support for domestic violence victims. On July 15, GREVIO-monitoring the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence Istanbul Convention joined the UN and regional experts for urgent action to end the gender-based violence pandemic.

Many Countries like Spain, Germany, Argentina, Italy, Norway, and France have launched Campaign Mask-19 also known as the Code-word scheme. When a woman experiences abuse at home or sexual assault, she can visit the nearest pharmacy and request for Mask-19. The pharmacy staff will note down her name, phone number and address and they inform the police stations and emergency services to tip them off about the abuse. The Italian government has launched an app that enables the victims of domestic violence to seek help without making a phone call. It is a great attempt taken by them against the prevalent issue. Many countries banned the sale of alcohol during the lockdown period.¹⁷

3.1 France

The upsurge in the number of cases during the lockdown forced the French government to proclaim that they will open pop-up counselling centres and pay for hotel rooms for victims. It will also fund anti-domestic abuse organizations with an extra one million Euros to help them respond to increased demand for services.

¹⁷ For example, India, South Africa, Greenland.

3.2 Italy

In Italy, the government has introduced an app that enables domestic violence sufferers to seek help without making any phone calls. The government is also considering an offer to allocate 4 million euros for shelters for women who are victims of abuse.

3.3 Malaysia

In Malaysia, the government implemented the Talian Kasih hotline to provide proper assistance to the victims of domestic violence and other forms of violence.

3.4 New Zealand

In New Zealand, motels are offering their vacant rooms as shelters for the citizens who need to leave unsafe houses without the violation of social distancing parameters.

3.5 Canada

Canada kept domestic violence shelters open for victims of domestic and gender-based violence. It is providing \$50 million to support them. UK and Australia have also funded the helping organizations.

3.6 Bangladesh

The national preparedness plan for COVID-19 issued by Ministry of Health & Family Welfare in July 2020 explicitly commits to developing messaging to mitigate the threat of violence, domestic violence and violence against children. The plan acknowledged the need for gender-targeted messaging to address gender specific issues such as domestic violence and the psychosocial burden of increased care work at home on women.¹⁸

¹⁸ Bangladesh Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, 2020 at 15.

3.7 Vietnam

Vietnam's National COVID-19 plan which commits to engaging the Women's Union in epidemic management.

Table1 : Toll Free Helplines for Women across Countries

S.No.	Country	Toll Free Number
1.	India	181, 1091, 1291,1516
2.	Egypt	15115
3.	U.K.	0808 2000 247
4.	Australia	1800 737 732
5.	U.S.	1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
6.	Nepal	1145
7.	Belgium	1712
8.	France	3919, 0801901911
9.	Spain	016
10.	Switzerland	143

3.8 India

More than 50 helplines have been started across India to provide succour to women facing domestic violence during the ongoing lockdown. There are two numbers to provide help to the women through psychologists 90000 70839 and 040- 2760531. A WhatsApp number 96679 92802 was started in New Delhi by the legal service authority. In April 2020, the National Commission for Women launched the WhatsApp number -7217735372, in addition to the online complaint links and emails. The number was launched for the period of lockdown till normal offices resume.

The Indian Merchants Association and International Advertising Association (India chapter) recently launched a campaign, asking men to help with domestic chores and "beat the virus to pulp, not your wife." Take the *Chuppi Tod* (break the silence) campaign was initiated by the Raipur police. This campaign encouraged victims to report any violent misdemeanours at home while police called past complainants to enquire about their welfare. This proactive initiative

from the police will help reduce the stigma associated with reporting incidents but also put fear in the mind of the perpetrators, who will know that they are being watched.

4. PROGRESS VIS-À-VIS IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERNATIONAL GUIDELINES

COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, the Report released by the United Nations in September 2020 assessed 206 countries and territories in terms of measures introduced to address violence against women, support unpaid care workers, and ensure women's economic security.¹⁹ After six months, only 135 out of the 206 countries have introduced measures to respond to gender-based violence. The results showed that while only 25 of the countries had introduced measures to address all three areas of concern, 42 countries had refrained from addressing these issues at all. The Report further has found that most countries have failed to offer adequate protection and support to women and girls to help them through the socio-economic crisis that is unravelling in the COVID19 pandemic.

India is among the 25 countries that had introduced measures to address different key areas. (tackling violence against women and girls, supporting unpaid care, and strengthening women's economic security). It is the only nation in central and southern Asia to take appropriate measures. It is joined by Sri Lanka and Bangladesh etc. on establishing reporting mechanisms for intimate partner violence. The report highlighted the socio-economic schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, National Social Assistance Program, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana Scheme, and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to tackle the effects of the pandemic.

Till date, almost 704 measures on gender violence have been taken the countries assessed by the Report.²⁰ As per the latest data, India has adopted 9 measures to address gender violence. Greece has taken 12 measures, France has taken 10 measures, Fiji and Columbia have taken 13 measures, Egypt have adopted 11 measures and so on. The countries which have failed to

¹⁹ Available at <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>. The tracker is coordinated by UNDP with substantive leadership and technical contributions from UN Women. It assessed over 2,500 measures on three key areas. The tracker is based on publicly available information, including official documents; surveys of UNDP and UN Women experts worldwide.

²⁰ Id. Visited on 15 Feb.,2021. Since the tracker is a live tracker, so the statistics keep on changing.

address the issue completely as per the Tracker include Central Africa, Hungary, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Maldives etc.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

It is dismal that own homes are not a safe place for many of the people, facing abuse inside their homes. The pandemic mandates staying at homes as much as possible as a precaution. Those who have to share homes with the perpetrators of the abuse know and understand the impact of COVID on their lives and safety. Violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence has deepened globally since the COVID-19 outbreak. Many countries need to implement the international Guidelines on addressing the gender-violence at earliest. The countries which have already adopted the Guidelines need to ensure their more effective execution. The pandemic is a continuous challenge and it is upon the governments primarily to protect the victims by providing safe shelter, basic facilities etc.

Suggestions

- The women and girls must be put at the heart of the economic recovery measures that will be necessary for every country after these first waves of COVID-19 have passed.
- The governments must prioritize gender-based violence within their response to COVID-19 and to use their influence within the multilateral system to do likewise. Funding for women and girls doesn't happen automatically; in recent years just 0.12% of global humanitarian funding went to GBV services. Unless sustained commitment is made at the U.N. level through the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, interventions to support the safety and resilience of women and girls will not be funded.
- Women and girls must be supported to participate fully in the design and delivery of COVID-19 response programs at every level from global to local. Listening and responding to their preferences and concerns ensures that they are not put at increased risk, whether that's building gender-segregated COVID-19 treatment and isolation facilities, or safe hand-washing facilities that are lit adequately at night. Data gathered must, at a minimum, include information about the sex and age of the people in need of support. Without this detail, humanitarian programs cannot be adequately tailored to meet the need.

- There is a need to change the saying that women may survive coronavirus, but many might not survive the lockdown.
- Mitigation efforts must address the diverse forms of violence connected with COVID-19. Actions taken must be continuously monitored to ensure they are having intended effects, and do not result in unintended harm.

Women and girls' needs and rights must be placed at the centre of the responses to COVID-19 and beyond. It is crucial to maintain a sense of urgency in cases of gender-based violence even during crisis situations.

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