

IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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Abstract: *COVID-19 has interrupted our way of life and has further disrupted individuals, families and communities putting them under stress of health and economic burdens. However, there are other reasons of stress caused by the COVID-19. In times when social isolation and distancing practices are being applied, there are increased risks of violence against women, their abuse, exploitation and neglect. The present paper is to examine the impact of Covid 19 and the resultant increase in the cases of domestic violence during the lockdown. The data collected in this paper are from the secondary sources which include articles, e-newspaper, online journals and internet sources and the methodology adopted is content analysis. The objective of the study is to examine the reasons for the rise in cases during pandemic and understand the barriers related to the problem of domestic violence.*

Keywords: Women, Domestic violence and Covid 19

Introduction:

The emergence of novel Coronavirus Disease also called Covid 19 was detected for the first time in December 2019 in Wuhan, China which eventually was declared by the World Health Organization as a global pandemic. According to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, the first case of Covid 19 was reported on January 30, 2020. All these cases had a travel history from Iran, Italy and China of which the state of Kerala had detected the first case which is now the epicentre of the Pandemic (Dodda 2021).

It is observed that many countries including India were at their best in restructuring the policies to curb the pandemic in every possible aspect. The initiatives taken unfolded a spectrum of diverse measures to reduce the spread of disease. Despite various attempts and strict implementation of the measures resulted in unintended and negative consequences which brought new kind of stress such as isolation and loneliness, physical and psychological health risk, closure of many businesses, and job losses. All these challenges resulted in a steep rise in violence against women. According to the report of the National Commission for Women (NCW), which receives complaints from across the country, has recorded a more than twofold rise in gender-based violence. Complaints of rape or attempted rape have risen sharply from two to 13, while cases of domestic violence have increased from 30 to 69 over the same comparative period. Simultaneously, there has been an almost threefold increase in police apathy towards women's complaints with the NCW receiving 16 complaints on the

issue as compared to six earlier, as the police are busy enforcing the lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19 (Chandra 20202).

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Literature review:

According to a study by Fatke et al. which reports on the clustering of patients presenting with psychiatric symptoms during COVID-19, including increased cases of domestic violence are generally seem to be associated with increased drug or alcohol use in both victims and perpetrators. Another study conducted by Sediri et al. found higher scores of depression, anxiety, and stress among women who faced violence during lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Tunisia. The severity and brutality associated with domestic violence has also been on the rise in this pandemic period. Gosangi et al. reported a higher rate of physical intimate-partner violence with more severe injuries on radiology images during COVID-19 despite lesser number of patients reporting intimate-partner violence compared with past 3 years in their study conducted in United States (Sharma and Khokar 2021).

Covid-19 and women:

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is having potentially catastrophic secondary impacts on the health of women and girls around the world. Decisions made at every level of the response to the pandemic are resulting in women being further cut off from sexual and reproductive health services, threatening sharp rises in maternal and neonatal mortality. The pandemic is both exposing and amplifying pre-existing inequalities between women and men. While men are suffering higher mortality rates, women are especially affected by the economic and social fallout: as victims of domestic violence locked down with their abusers; as unpaid caregivers in families and communities, picking up the slack where schools, childcare and other services are shut down or scaled back: and as workers in jobs which lack social protection, and which are being lost at an alarming rate. In developing nations, such work constitutes more than two-thirds of female employment. But as countries all over the world locked down, these jobs quickly disappeared which can have catastrophic consequences. Various studies point out that working women currently spend an average of 15 hours a week more on unpaid domestic labour than men. Women are often the main caregivers in their homes, communities, and health facilities, which puts them at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 (Turquet 2020).

Causes of domestic violence :

There are various reasons for the existence of domestic violence in India. The prime factors responsible are broadly classified as biological factors, personal factors, relationship quality are all contributory factors responsible for the occurrence of domestic violence. Marital conflict or discord in a relationship contributes the most to intimate partner violence or domestic violence. Along with it is the economic condition which further deteriorates the situation. There is a strong connection found out between domestic violence and low level of income. People with a lower level of income or lower level of education engage more in domestic violence as per various studies. The studies have also revealed that there exists an inverse relationship between a woman's educational level and domestic violence. Women who are independent and have access to resources are protected against domestic violence. However, several other studies have pointed out how the increased status of women has led to increased domestic violence.

As per the study conducted by South India, it was observed that vocational training, education and employment to women will impart them with resources that will reduce the risk of adverse reproductive health outcomes. But, such a strategy would most probably conflict with the already established social norms and expectations which would further lead to an increased rate of domestic violence. India is an example of the same where around 75% of working women are abused because of their employment status.

Further, gender inequality is another factor that contributes to domestic violence. Violence is considered as a mechanism for enforcing the deeply entrenched gender power inequalities. There are instances of men who abuse their female partner, sexually, physically, and psychologically as they feel that they are entitled to do so. Further, the unemployment of men in a society where they are taught to be the financial provider of the house affects their male-ego and they resort to violence to show their masculinity.

Indian situation during lockdown:

Restriction on movement for stopping the spread of the pandemic has severed the issue of domestic violence. Domestic violence has seen a horrifying global surge amid the lockdown measures that have been adopted by several countries to fight the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has left the public restricted to their house which has led to an increase in domestic violence making it more frequent and dangerous. As per the reports of the UN, Countries like Lebanon, Malaysia, China, and Australia are not spared from the spread of domestic violence during the lockdown. These countries have received double-triple helpline calls as compared to last year. Further, as per the estimation of the UN agency for Sexual and Reproductive health, cases of domestic violence will shoot up by 31 million cases if the lockdown continues for the next six months.

India is no exception and is facing the same situation as the rest of the world. The cases of domestic violence have shot up in India during the nationwide lockdown. As per the data provided by the National Commission of Women of India, there was almost an increase of 100% in the domestic violence cases in mid-April in the country. The commission

launched a Whatsapp number to assist the victims of domestic violence during the lockdown. Initially, there was a surge in the emergency helpline calls received by the Police, organizations, and NGOs which then witnessed a downfall.

Impact of Lockdown:

The impact of lockdown was detrimental on women as over 37% of women facing domestic violence fled or were thrown out of their homes during the lockdown and took shelter with friends and relatives or stayed in hotels, since shelter homes, fearing COVID-19, did not accommodate women. Many walked long distances to safety often with little children; a few were helped by the police through the intervention of women's groups, and others, with great difficulty, cost, and risk organised personal transport through friends and relatives. Some with access to a safe place were unable to do so due lack of transport and money. Others stayed in abusive homes as no alternative shelter was available. Over 20% women fled home post lockdown.

Increased violence during lockdown, the fear and anxiety around COVID-19, compounded by financial insecurity took a critical toll on women's mental health and affected their sleep, appetite, general functionality, and interpersonal relations. Single women and elderly women living alone were depressed and unable to communicate with or meet friends or relatives. Those trapped with the abusers were traumatised, helpless and scared for their lives. There was a significant increase in the number of survivors reporting suicidal ideation.

Children of survivors were also negatively affected by the pandemic. Pre-lockdown, children of women living with their abusers found ways to cope with the situation by staying out of the house, going to play, meeting friends, and attending school or college. During the lockdown, the stressful situation at home increased, but children were stranded without their coping mechanisms. Schools and colleges were shut, mobility restricted, and children's stress levels were high. Children witnessed increased violence by their father towards their mother and, if they intervened, faced violence. In a couple of cases, college-going daughters encouraged their mother to leave abusive husbands. In other instances, the father left the home during the lockdown, leaving the mother and child to fend for themselves financially. Financial insecurity added to the stress the children faced. The transition to online classes post lockdown was challenging for many young students as the new medium was difficult to grasp, and focusing attention online was demanding. Constant monitoring of the child by the mother also increased pressure on the child. Whilst online classes resulted in increased schoolwork, children found no outlet for stress release. In some cases, fathers refused to let children use the computer or phone for their classes.

Challenges during pandemic:

The series of Covid-19 lockdowns in India diminished the opportunities of reporting of domestic violence cases.

Restricted movement:

The lockdown incapacitated women by preventing them from moving to safer places in cases of violence and abuse. With men and women cohabiting together for longer periods, the privacy of women plummeted and instances of violence rose.

Handicapped mediums of communication:

The Whatsapp number launched by the NCW had a limited reach as only 38% of women in India own phones and fewer have an internet connection, making this platform inaccessible to majority of women in the country.

Reduced 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.

Unavailability 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 (Arora and Kumar 2020).

Conclusion:

To conclude at present there are various studies exploring the impact of Covid-19 on women and the problems faced by them due to domestic violence. It can also be observed that there is a lack of rigorous literature highlighting these issues from the perspective of gender. This also involves the issue of rising gender violence during the pandemic. Covid-19 has not only led to an increase in the cases of gender-based violence but has disconnected them from their support networks. To reduce the prevalence of the issue, it is crucial to acknowledge the extent of gender-based violence, reimagine government policies, and support networks to make it easier for the victims to access them and, lastly, create awareness about the issue as well as the resources available to tackle it.

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