

Short Communication

Shadow pandemic: domestic violence and child abuse during the covid-19 lockdown in India

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ABSTRACT

For many women and children around the world, staying at home is no longer a safety aspect during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a surge in the number of cases of inter-personal violence and child abuse during the lockdown. The stigma and socio-cultural norms create hesitance in subjecting the family and its intimate relationships to public scrutiny. Therefore, building awareness around domestic violence is vital.

Keywords: Child abuse, Covid-19, Domestic violence, Stigma

INTRODUCTION

Stay Home, Stay Safe; this slogan is trending everywhere during the Covid-19 pandemic. But, for many women and children around the world, staying at home is no longer a safety aspect. World Health Organization defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.¹ Domestic violence and child abuse come under inter-personal violence.¹ Post-conflict situations or natural disasters like Covid-19 pandemic are a silent risk factor for such violence.²

Globally, several countries like United States, United Kingdom, France, China, and India have reported an increase in domestic violence during this Covid-19 pandemic. The U. S. National Domestic Violence Hotline received about 2,000 calls during this lockdown.³ On April 6th 2020, UN chief António Guterres insisted the countries take steps on addressing the horrifying global surge in domestic violence that occurred as a result of

lockdown.⁴ The WHO also said that the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase, as a result of social distancing and people are advised to stay at home.⁵ The European Parliament extended their support to victims of domestic violence and released a press statement as we won't leave Europe's women alone during pandemic.⁶

Even in India, nationwide lockdown was implemented since March 25th 2020 up to 1st June 2020. Two most talked about pandemics during this period were the Covid-19 pandemic and economic loss pandemic. However, at the bottom of the iceberg lied a third pandemic domestic violence and child abuse. Previously, according to the NHFS-4 data, every third woman in India suffers sexual or physical violence at home.⁷ It brings havoc on women's physical, mental, and emotional health. The National Commission of Women (NCW) reported that the cases of domestic violence had doubled during lockdown compared to pre-lockdown days. Between March 23 and April 16, the commission received 239 complaints, mainly through email and WhatsApp number messages.⁸ About 92000 calls were made to India's Childline 1098 helpline for seeking

protection against abuse and violence on children between March 20-31, i.e. during the first week of the lockdown.⁹

Vulnerability of women and children

The most important reason for domestic violence is domestic labor. During lockdown there is a clustering of all the family members at home. The burden of household chores fall under the women's shoulders. There is more work at home and if the chores are not divided between family members, puts pressure on the women. The men either don't go to work or have lost jobs during this time leading to poverty, frustration, and violence. Not only men, but, women also lose their jobs during this lockdown, further increasing the chances of getting abused. Some alcoholic husbands don't get alcohol during this time and due to that frustration, they abuse the women in an intimate relationship. Most of the times, it is the husband who is responsible for violence which can be either physical (27%) or emotional (13%). Unmarried women may experience violence from mothers or step-mothers (56%), fathers or step-fathers (33%), sisters or brothers (27%), and teachers (15%).⁷ With the government considering mass release of prisoners to reduce their risk of spreading Covid-19, there is a significant risk for victims and households if domestic violence offenders are among those released.¹⁰

The NFHS-4 data reveals that 26% of urban poor women are more prone to domestic violence by their spouses, partners, or other relatives as compared to 12% in better-off urban women. Also, the prevalence of violence is much higher against women belonging to the scheduled castes and tribes (SC/ST) as compared to women outside these categories.⁷ In a work on Domestic Violence and Dalit Women, it is reported that, the dalit women worked away from their homes to earn for the survival of the family. Despite this, the dalit women were subordinated in terms of power relations to men, both in terms of patriarchy and caste hierarchy.¹²

Some of the risk factors for child abuse are social isolation, parents' and caregivers' stress, and uncertain access to food and housing. With schools and daycare centers closed for months, children are no longer in the watchful eyes of their teachers, counselors, extended family, and friends. They are physically separated and unable to provide the same social and emotional support.¹¹

The health impacts of intimate partner violence or domestic violence, on women and their children, are significant. Violence against women can result in injuries and serious physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections, HIV, unintended pregnancies, etc. According to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report, 47 million women in low and middle-income countries

would be unable to access modern contraceptives due to lockdowns and major disruptions to health services during the Covid-19 pandemic. This could lead to seven million unintended pregnancies in the coming months.¹³ Impacts of child abuse include death, severe injuries, impaired brain and nervous system development, negative coping, and health risk behaviors, unintended pregnancies, and a wide range of non-communicable diseases.²

Dealing with the stigma and raising awareness

According to NFHS-4, less than 1% of the victims of domestic abuse sought help.⁷ The complaints received by the NCW were mainly from literate and upper class who have access to technology. In many cases, due to the restrictions imposed by the abusers and continuous surveillance of social media, internet, and cell phones by abusers, limits the ability of the victims to reach out for help electronically.¹⁰ The victims usually seek help in the form of temporary housing and emotional support from their family and friends. But, in case of a lockdown this becomes a challenge. During these times, most women have difficulty in getting access to phone/helpline and are left battered and homeless. In India women are afraid to report domestic abuse because of the fear of being stigmatized. The woman is made to feel that the fight between husband and wife is their private matter and that makes it hard for women to leave their abusive partners. They often rely on others to report on their behalf. The reason for this silence is attributed to patriarchal family structures and the idea of honor. These social and cultural norms have created hesitance in subjecting the family and its intimate relationships to public scrutiny.

Building awareness around domestic violence is vital. Globally, WHO recently launched INSPIRE which consists of seven strategies for ending violence against children.¹⁴ This aims to help achieve SDG target 16.2 on ending violence against children. It also launched RESPECT which provides guidance to tackle violence against women.¹⁵

In India Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act' (PWDVA) was passed in 2006. The law recognizes domestic violence beyond physical or sexual violence, including mental, economic, and emotional violence, and provides resort to both married as well as unmarried women.¹⁶ It is necessary that all state governments ensure 181 helpline services are up and running. In Uttar Pradesh, an NGO called Breakthrough started a community radio program, which helped to raise awareness about violence against women. It taught people how to recognize domestic violence, and ways to address the issue. Callers were encouraged to call in and share their experiences.¹⁷ The NGO also developed a platform called StreeLink which allows women to share, exchange, and collaborate with other women in dealing with problems at home, in public spaces, and at work to

get practical, actionable solutions and find strength from each other.¹⁷ In same state, the police also launched Suppress corona, not your voice initiative asking battered women to call a helpline number to enable women police officers to reach them following a complaint. Another campaign, Bell Bajao! (Ring the Bell), was launched which calls on men and boys to take a stand against domestic violence.¹⁷ In India, the NCW re-launched a WhatsApp number for the duration of the lockdown. This would allow women to contact them for help related to domestic violence through messages.⁸ Odisha Police has launched a drive to contact and ascertain the status of all previous cases of domestic violence in the state. In Pune, Maharashtra, perpetrators of domestic violence will be institutionally quarantined. Women's Entrepreneurs for Transformation (WEFT), a non-profit organization has started red dot initiative where people can identify and inform authorities about the domestic violence victim by seeing a red dot on the palm.¹⁸ The mask19 campaign in France and Spain, is on similar lines. Some door to door service providers like postal workers, garbage collectors, food delivery staff, and home repair agencies may have the opportunity to detect violence in the home and report their concerns to the proper authorities.

It is necessary to make information about these services (e.g. hotlines, tele-health, shelters, rape crisis centers, counseling), known to the general public through a range of sources, including social media, the mainstream media, and health facilities.

CONCLUSION

While the government is very eager to flatten the Covid-19 pandemic curve, the policies to check on the violence against women and children taking place during this time are lagging behind. Violence against women is a relatively less discussed issue, although it is a determinant of morbidity and mortality worldwide. The attainment of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of health will remain difficult unless all forms of violence, especially against women, are eradicated. Greater social awareness, better and more sensitive policing, improving early access to abortion and pregnancy testing, and providing safe shelters for victims of domestic violence can help deal with the silent epidemic of domestic violence.

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