

Home is where the Hurt is! The Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Women in India

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The psychosocial impact of domestic violence with reference to the outbreak of COVID19 and the subsequent lockdown has increased anxiety and fear among women in India. A growing body of researches that has emerged during recent years across the world reveals that domestic violence is detrimental to women's health including their very survival. Similarly, past studies on impact of public health problems on women indicate that unequal gender relations and lack of control of women over their own bodies and lives make them more vulnerable to contracting the infection. This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of print, electronic and social media data, experiences of earlier researches and observations. It examines and highlights rise in cases of domestic violence faced by Indian women during the lockdown period from a social norm lens, its psychosocial impact on them and discusses possible measures to address these challenges. The findings of the study reveal that the pandemic and the lockdown have impacted Indian society significantly - socially, economically and health wise. In case of women, their domestic and household chores related responsibilities have increased substantially. The country has witnessed spike in reporting of the cases of domestic violence during the lockdown period indicating women's increased vulnerabilities at such critical time. The paper argues that this situation of women in India is due to the presence of myriad of beliefs, customs and prevailing social norms that are based on strong patriarchal mind set. The response of the State in terms of setting up of a special helpline number is not adequate as large number of women in India do not have awareness, accessibility, availability and affordability of means like personal mobile phone or landline telephone connections to contact these special helpline numbers. And even if they have it, they lack enough courage, inclination to do anything about it due to socialization and existing social norms. The existing services of the state to help women in need are functioning with limited resources and diverted attention to the pandemic. During the pandemic situation and lockdown the Government, State authorities and civil society organizations are more focused on relief work like economic loss, availability of medical facilities and other basic necessities. Thus, addressing the issue of domestic violence has taken a backseat during the pandemic. The paper suggests consideration of domestic violence as a social disaster and inclusion of it in emergency services and disaster management programs of the state and civil society organisations.



Key words: *Domestic Violence, COVID19, Indian women, Lockdown, Psychosocial Impact, Social Norms*

Introduction

‘Home is where the heart is’, is a phrase popularised since time immemorial. It reflects how emotionally attached one is to their home and how, no matter where they go, their hearts always long to go back to that place which they call home! A place, which gives them a sense of comfort and protection, and a space they call their own; a place where they seek refuge and feel secured. However, this emotional feeling might be a horrid reality for many.

Barring few, many countries of the world are under a state of lockdown from the month of March 2020 and following stricter regulations with regard to curtailing the spread of the pandemic COVID-19. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown (wherever declared) have affected all – people of all nations, class, caste, ethnicity, race, religion, age and gender to some extent or the other. ‘Stay Home, Stay Safe’ is the *mantra* (Chant), declared by WHO as the best remedy to protect oneself from the infection. And this has given rise to number of psychosocial issues like hysteria anxiety, depression, stress, phobic behaviour; economic issues among masses like loss of income, job, and closure of business to mention a few (Dubey, 2020). These issues have thrown opened a number of challenges which the entire world is grappling to overcome. However, one of the issues that have affected women across the globe irrespective of their background is – Domestic Violence (DV).

On April 6, 2020, UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres tweeted, “Many women under lockdown for COVID19 face violence where they should be safest: in their own homes. I urge all governments to put women’s safety first as they respond to the pandemic.” This brought to light a very grim reality of the society that cases of Domestic Violence (DV) had increased exponentially during the lockdown period. Staying at home is considered as the best way to protect oneself from Covid-19 but it is not the same for many Indian women. In India with the Government declaring lockdown to control the pandemic, women living in abusive relation are forced to stay home with their perpetrators putting them more at risk (Natarajan, 2020).

Methodology

This paper is inclusive of the domestic violence during the lockdown period, its psychosocial impact on women in India and discusses possible measures to address it from a social norm perspective. The authors have attempted to review various published reports, studies undertaken during the period in order to find the problems and challenges related to domestic violence faced by women, especially during the lockdown, and how the government and non-government agencies reached out to help them. The paper makes an effort to appraise the major issues and solutions sought to help women. About 32 articles pertaining to domestic violence, causes, effects and increase during the pandemic are reviewed for the purpose of writing this

paper. Details are also prepared based on the data published in the periodicals in India during the lockdown period, beginning from March 25, 2020 to May 31, 2020. Search of combination of terms like, 'COVID-19', 'domestic violence', 'impact', 'lockdown', 'response' and 'violence against women' are used to gather online data related to the theme of the paper. Relevant retrieved articles, news items are studied to understand the magnitude, nature of DV and its aggravated psychosocial impact in pandemic time. Patterns are culled out after segregating the emerging data from these online materials and inferences are drawn. The 68-day lockdown period recorded a rise in the cases of violence against women that were published periodically in the newspapers as well as magazines. Total of 1,477 complaints of domestic violence are made by women in India during the period (Radhakrishnan, Sen, & Singaravelu, 2020).

Understanding DV

Typically DV include violence that occurs within the private sphere generally between individuals who are related through intimacy, blood, or law (Gabriel, 2015). It includes any nature and type of violence taking place within the domestic place called home, household or family and it can be violence against women and girls of the family, violence between siblings on child/children, elders of the family.

A widely accepted definition of domestic violence as given by the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) defines domestic violence as “Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation.” (United Nations Human Rights Office of The High Commissioner, 1993, p. 2) Whereas the Indian legislation (Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005) defines it “As any act, omission or commission or conduct against women that harms or injures or endangers the health, safety, life or limb or well-being whether mental or physical or tend to do so and includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic abuse by any adult male with whom she is in domestic relationship or any of her family members” (GOI, 2005). Thus, DV is usually understood as physical or emotional harmful acts between husbands and wives or between other individuals in intimate relationships to include all gender based violence and abuse taking place on women in adult marital relationships (Kaur & Garg, 2008). This also includes any threat of such violence or any unlawful demand for any dowry or other property or valuable security from her or any of other people related to her. On a closer examination of both these definitions, we find that it accentuates on the health, safety and wellbeing of women. It recognises that violence, be in any form – threats, coercion, deprivation, physical, sexual, verbal, emotional economic abuse, harm – affect women’s physical, psychological sexual and reproductive health.

Domestic Violence –A Hidden Epidemic to a Shadow Pandemic

According to a recent report by UN Women (2020), 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 across the world have been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner in the past 12 months. This ‘Hidden Epidemic’ now also termed as a ‘Shadow Pandemic’ (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020) of COVID 19 has captured many countries of the world including India

In India, within a few days of the lock down, the National Commission of Women (NCW) noted a rise in the number of domestic violence complaints received via email. The NCW chairperson believes that the real figure is likely to be higher, since the bulk of complaints come from women who send their complaints by post, and might not be able to use the internet. The number of cases reported are most likely not proportional to the actual rise in domestic violence (Gupta, 2020). Studies conducted and evidences received by the National Commission for Women during the span of lockdown reveal a two-fold increase in the domestic violence across the country (EPW Engage, 2020; Kasarla, 2020; Kashyap, 2020; Pachchigar, 2020; Patil, 2020; Radhakrishnan, Sen, & Singaravelu, 2020; Ramesh, 2020; Shalu, 2020; Suri, 2020; The Hindu, 2020) (The Indian Express, 2020; The Tribune, 2020; Times of India, 2020; Vora, Malathesh, Das, & Chatterjee, 2020). According to another report, a woman’s probability of being assaulted by her husband during the lockdown has increased by 17 times (Kasarla, 2020).

Table showing Number of Complaints of Crimes against Women received by NCW during the Lockdown

Month & Year	Number of Complaints
March 2020	1347
April 2020	800
May 2020	1500
TOTAL	3,647

The table is adapted from the data published in (The Hindu, 2020)

These alarming figures represent only the cases where women have attempted to seek help by reaching out, complaining; but from the experiences of more than three decades of work on the issue of domestic violence we know that these figures may just be the tip of the iceberg as many women prefer to suffer in silence in India and not talk about it to any one as that is the way they are socialised or for the sake of family pride, or accepting it as their way of life. And many times even if they wished, they are not in a position to make calls or reach out because of lack of courage or access to phone to call for help, or they fear being caught by abusive partners, or are stopped from going out of their homes. According to an article published in The Hindu, about 86 percent of Indian women who experienced violence never sought help, and 77 percent of the victims did not even mention the incident(s) to anyone (Radhakrishnan,

Sen, & Singaravelu, 2020). Moreover, most avenues to seek help or to physically remove themselves from their situations are impaired during the lockdown.

There is a pattern identified among all the reported cases of domestic violence which lead to certain commonalities in the way it is inflicted on women in Indian society. Violence in all its forms like bigamy, polygamy, dowry deaths, and harassment for dowry was observed during the lockdown, this is other than the physical, psychological and sexual violence inflicted on women (Ramesh, 2020). The state wise data collected by The National Legal Services Authorities (NALSA), during the lockdown suggested that the State of Uttarakhand reported the highest number of domestic violence cases followed by Haryana and Delhi respectively (The Indian Express, 2020).

Social Norms, DV and the Lockdown

While there are many reasons associated with why domestic violence takes place, in India its causes are deeply rooted in the patriarchal and cultural norms which view women as subordinates (Visaria, 2000). These cultural norms are deeply rooted and begin right before the child is born in the form of preference for a male child over a female one. This is amongst the major causes that make women susceptible to domestic violence. Young women who give birth to only female children are more likely to experience abuse (Mahapatro, Gupta, Gupta, & Kundu, 2011). While there are practices related to domestic violence similar across cultures, there are some aspects which are unique to India. These aspects relate to normalisation of violence, psychological neglect and abuse, dowry harassments and no control over reproductive choices. The case of practices related to domestic violence also have causal factors associated to social norms. The deep rooted patriarchal system where men are given an upper hand over their female counter parts are all results of norms that people follow. There are certain social norms like - a man has the right to hit her wife if she does not behave in a manner appropriate to him, or that the woman has to silently bear the violence and not speak about it as it can go against the '*izzat*' of the family or the pride. Behaviours conforming to these norms are glorified and at times rewarded with appreciations and role model setting examples for others (Mehta B. , 2007). The social norm perspective described by Bicchieri establishes that in any society social norms govern the individual and communities behaviour. And, it is this rule of behaviour that individuals prefer to conform to it (Bicchieri, 2005). Men use violence to exert their power over women because they believe that it is the expected behaviour from them and women continue to suffer in silence because that is what they are taught and think is expected of them.

Global slowdown, massive economic dislocation, closed businesses, the threat of hunger, and poverty are some of the fall outs of lockdown which have subsequently increased anxiety and frustration among individuals. The frustration felt by males is manifested towards their female counterparts who are powerless or considered as their subordinate. Despite the progress made by the Indian society in the acceptance of the diversity of women's roles, the domestic role

somehow does not seem to be separated from the woman's persona even till today. Indian women maybe moving out of their homes, seeking employment and carving out a niche for themselves at workplaces, but society sees them more as accomplished mothers and wives in primary role, relegating other roles to secondary positions (Dutt, 2017). Moreover, an Ipsos study (2017) showed that a vast majority of Indians (64 percent) are of the view that the role of women in society is to become good mothers and wives and they should focus mainly on home (Emes, 2017).

During the lockdown period, as part of adapted 'work from home' arrangements, working employed Indian women had to not only work at home but also work from home. There was an absence of domestic help for most of the middle- and upper- class Indian women. This hired help called 'domestic servant' usually serve as a biggest support to working women in India in sharing their daily household responsibilities. Absence of this help during the lockdown, suddenly increased household chores related workload for working women. And for women belonging to the lower strata of the society loss of income, rise in poverty and shortage of resources were additional issues. The burden of dealing with children's education, elderly care, maintenance of a home, domestic chores, cleaning and cooking, meeting increased demands of family members due to their all-time presence at home due to lockdown and their own work from home (if employed)- a 'new normal' situation made it difficult for women to keep a track of everything. The increased workload of the women deteriorated the quality of work life balance resulting in more anxiety, stress and depression amongst them. While lockdown for many was a way to relax and work from home, for women, it only meant an augmented amount of work and pressure to perform better, failure of doing so would invite negative sanctions.

The lockdown period of the pandemic has been testing times for men as well as women. While the issue of joblessness, salary cut and more workload has been glorified in case of men, the impact of the same on their female counterparts is largely neglected. Women fear joblessness as in most of the middle and lower income households they too share the economic burden of the family. In addition to these, evidences of the articles published during the lockdown period have mostly hinted that if women failed to undertake any of their responsibilities or made an attempt to be assertive or put their foot down for some reasons or otherwise, they are subjected to domestic violence. Due to the pandemic and long drawn lockdown men feared of losing job, uncertain future, and salary cuts, are told or asked to help in household chores or support women in some way. But due to the stereotypical ideologies, and patriarchal mind set it is usually observed that men's egos are being rubbed, as they are unable to stand being told to help. Men refuse to participate in domestic work leading to interpersonal tensions between spouses (Patil, 2020). The literature reviewed also highlights "Confinement is fostering the tension and strain created by security, health, and money worries. And it is increasing isolation for women with violent partners, separating them from the people and resources that can best help them. It's a perfect storm for controlling, violent behaviour behind closed doors." (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020, p. 1)

The Lockdown and Psychosocial Impact of DV on Women

A growing body of researches that have emerged in recent years reveal that during the period of disaster and/or crisis, women's vulnerabilities increase so as their experiences of violence in general and domestic violence in particular. (Dagn, Jeejeebhoy, & Rajgopal, 1998; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Radhakrishnan, Sen, & Singaravelu, 2020; Ramesh, 2020; The Equality Institute, 2018; True, 2013; Suri, 2020) A study on Intimate Partner Violence in Great Recession published in Demography magazine found that rapid increases in the unemployment rate during the Great Recession 'increased men's controlling behaviour toward romantic partners' (Schneider, Harknett, & McLanahan, 2016). Another study, 'Gendered violence in natural disasters', by Australia-based researcher Jacqui True argues that if gender-based violence and women's particular needs are not addressed in disaster preparedness, disaster recovery plans, and humanitarian assistance, then women and girls' vulnerability will increase. (True, 2013) And violence in any form or its fear is detrimental to women's health including their very survival. It increases women's risk of future ill health more frequently than other women with regard to physical functioning, psychological wellbeing and the adoption of further risk behaviour. Similarly, past studies on impact of public health problems on women indicate that unequal gender relations and lack of control of women over their own bodies and life in general make women more vulnerable to contracting the infection. (Mehta B. , 2007) Domestic violence impacts women's mental health and overall wellbeing. (Dannerstein, 1993). And increased cases of domestic violence are usually found as a repeated pattern in many emergencies, economic crisis, and disease spread.

Anxiety related to COVID 19 pandemic coupled with lockdown and experiences of DV or its fear have triple-barrelled psychosocial impact on women. Being trapped in a space with violent or manipulative individuals can lead to increased rates and intensity of threats, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, humiliation, intimidation, and controlling behaviour. (Basu, 2020) The ability to isolate a person from family and friends, monitor their movements, and restrict access to financial resources, employment opportunities, education, or medical care is heightened during the lockdown. A study to understand the impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Mental Health conducted in the city of Lucknow in India found the level of anxiety was high in women as compared to their male counterparts. (Kazmi, Hasan, Talib, & Saxena, 2020) Another study revealed that loss of jobs and income, extended domestic stays and habits due to work from home are leading to an increase in the cases of domestic violence. (Sharma & Borah, 2020)

For many working women in India, going out of home to work itself is a very empowering experience. It is their personal time away from four walls of the house and familial tensions, to make friends, meet new people, network, and time to recharge and reboot themselves (Mehta, 2020). The lockdown made the situation worse for women especially their mental health as they lost these outlets helping them deal, cope with difficulties of their lives. During the lockdown many men and women became unemployed (BusinessToday, 2020). Loss of income



in case of men creates psychological tension which in turn is projected and ventilated towards their partners. Unemployment for female projects risk of not only dependency on the males but also the massive fear of being locked up with the perpetrators of violence all the time. (Schneider, Harknett, & McLanahan, 2016) And though it is possible to see the short term triangular impact of the pandemic, lockdown and domestic violence all together aggravating horrid experiences and conditions in case of women in India, it is only the matter of time that will reveal its long term psychosocial impact.

Response to DV in India during Lockdown

Due to rise in the reported cases of DV in various parts of the India during the lockdown period including violence against children, child marriages and young girls facing physical and psychological violence in their own houses if they tried to escape such marriages and their inability to reach police or help lines due to the lockdown (Kulkarni, 2020), Child sexual abuse the National Commission for Women (NCW) launched a dedicated social media-WhatsApp helpline number to help women report any case related to domestic violence (Deccan Herald, 2020). This has not only made the service more accessible to the women as they can complaint without getting noticed by perpetrator but has also gave an opportunity to seek help to be rescued if required from the abuser/s. The launch of the social media platform has spread awareness among women to speak up and encouraged them to reach out for support than suffering. Along with Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, NCW has also taken initiatives at the local level encouraging ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers, *Anganwadi* (Government run Nursery) workers, Self Help Group's and *Panchayat* (rural local self-government) members to promote women and child wellbeing during the time of pandemic crisis. Women who are facing any kind of violence can report to these workers. Such initiatives at the community level can prove useful as there is a close knit interaction amongst the community members which can in a major way help in breaking the taboo regarding speaking against the violence inflicted upon the woman (Gupta, 2020). Voluntary and women's organisations working on the issue of DV have also evolved innovative ways to reach out to women in need and to create mass awareness on the issue during lockdown period. Like an NGO *Sneha*, which works for women rights started a '#LockdownMeinLockup'(In Lockup During Lockdown) Campaign on social media platform-Instagram during the time of lockdown to make people aware about the issues related to domestic violence (RediffUpAhead, 2020). The campaign used social media with the help of celebrities to influence women and normalize talking about domestic violence. It is also used as a fundraising drive to generate resources to fight cases of domestic violence registered with the organisation. A city police in the state of Chhattisgarh started a campaign – *Chuppi Tod* (Break the Silence) in order to encourage the victims to report the incidents of violence and not be scared of talking about it (Vijayalakshmi, 2020). Breakthrough, an organisation working for the rights of women and girls used various social medial platforms like Facebook, Twitter to create awareness on the issue of DV, dealing with mental health issues of COVID 19 with the use of various audio visual materials. A short film 'Listen to Her' prepared by a social worker

turned Hindi film actress Nandita Das was released during the lockdown period to exhort women to break the silence on domestic violence in India. The film was supported by the UNESCO, United Nations Population Fund, UN Women and the South Asia Foundation. Apart from these new initiatives, existing efforts, programs of the government to address the issue of DV like *Abhayam 24 x7* women helpline, all women's police station, SAKHI- One Stop Centre to provide integrated support and assistance under one roof to women affected by violence, both in private and public spaces continued to function though with limited staff, diverted resources and attention to the pandemic.

During the lockdown period there was a spike in usage of social media in India (Keelery, 2020). People used social networking sites to stay connected, entertain, educate themselves and for many other purposes. Recognising this power of social media, many organisations, groups working on the issue of domestic violence as stated above, used it effectively to reach out to masses so that silence around the issue can be broken. Such initiatives are attempt to use digital platforms to create a wave of change and new social norms where eventually men and women alike think that it is wrong to inflict domestic violence and endure the same and that there are many others who would support them to break the chain of norms that normalise violence. While the impact of all these initiatives in curbing the issue of DV in general and helping women deal and cope with the situation in particular will require another examination, the COVID 19 pandemic has surely bought the issue of DV to the foray in the list of disaster management programs needing attention.

Suggestions

Gender equality and having a violence free society for women especially within the home, is not a onetime separate agenda of social change. For that, all the institutions and processes of socialization, development must be free of gender biases, discrimination accepting women and girls as an equal and dignified population who deserve to be acknowledged for their efforts for the work-paid, unpaid and care work undertaken as it is acknowledged for men. Services such as Women's help lines, women's police stations, One Stop Crisis Centres (OSC), safe shelters for women and children need to be declared as essential services that need to be functional, available and accessible to women all time irrespective of circumstances, situations. And this can happen only when the country has a zero tolerance towards any forms of violence against women. Stereo typical mind set of the people who believe that violence is 'Normal' and changing it to 'New Normal Norms' that are based on the principles of equality and justice is quite essential. Social Norm related to 'protecting the institution of family is in hands of woman of the family' need to be replaced with a new social norm that 'having violence free homes is in hands of man of the family.'

Mobilisation of grass roots institutions through cultural and media campaign like *Bell Bajao* (Ring the Bell) involving local youth, men of neighbourhood to take a stand against DV and reach out to women to help goes long way in helping women during situations like COVID-19

lockdown. Young people and children are the passports to future, in terms of time and the social and cultural practices that would be followed in the future. It becomes very important to make personal issues like domestic violence a social issue and bring it to the notice of the larger community to accept that violence is unacceptable and enduring it is not going to end it. Designating safe spaces for women at various places in the communities where they can report abuse or seek help without alerting the perpetrator e.g. groceries, medical shops, hospitals are some other micro interventions that is possible to help. However, no actions to bring about a change towards building a just and fair home and thereby a world for women is possible unless respect, love, care, equality, dignity, rights and power over oneself and not over others become a 'New Normal' part of our lives!! Social norms based on this new normal shall surely be an important step towards the goal!

Conclusion

India is fighting the battle against COVID-19 vehemently. Lot of measures are taken by the government to combat the issue and curtail its spread. The state has taken many steps to help, support people struggling to handle and deal with the impact of this extra ordinary situations. With the prevailed culture of philanthropy and voluntary services in the country during any crisis, disaster, calamity time, response of civil society organisations during the pandemic has also remained enormously phenomenal (WHO, 2020). However, most of these responses have addressed practical issues related to migration, poverty, food & hunger, hygiene, COVID-19 treatment and care, education of children, youth etc.; but sadly issue like DV having its roots in the basic structure of the society – social norms related to patriarchy, in the belief system of the community has received lesser attention than it needs. DV is a denied and covered up gender issue so well intertwined in the fabric of societal culture that addressing it means doing the unpleasant task of disturbing the existing status quo.

While the pandemic has brought with itself social and economic wrath, the psychological brunt of pandemic is something that has not been looked into in its entirety. A need of the hour is to remain at home to stay safe, but for many women in India, it is their home, which is not safe for them. Hence, the pandemic jingle 'Stay Home, Stay Safe' does not hold true for aggrieved women suffering domestic violence. While for most of us, the adage 'Home is where the Heart is' holds true, for the aggrieved and suffering women, it needs to be revised and redefined as 'Home is where the Hurt is' (pun intended!). Barring few initiatives of the state and voluntary organisations committed to the cause of women, not much has been done for almost half of the adult population of the country facing the triple burden during this pandemic period that is expected to last at least for some time now! Instead of one-time agenda or fragmented efforts, the systematic sustained gender sensitive interventions addressing specific practical and structural needs to change the existing power structure, establishing positive social norms and gender relations will help society at large sail through any unprecedented time!



Acknowledgments:

The authors are grateful to various suggestions received from Dr Venkat Pulla in relation to this study right from the beginning and a special word of thanks Also to Professor Neera Agni Mitra, department of Social Work, Delhi University for reviewing a pre-final draft and offering suggestions to us. The authors would also like to thank the anonymous referees for their suggestions that we have incorporated.

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