

## **ARE THERE ANY SAFE SPACE FOR WOMEN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC – A SHORT ANALYTICAL STUDY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The prosperity of a society depends upon the development of men as well as of women. But the present scenario does not portray the same. Though, women have developed in various fields, still now they could not save themselves from violence i.e., physical, emotional and sexual abuse. The extent is so much that even in the time of pandemic like COVID-19, which itself is the unpredictable situation across the globe; women are having a difficult time staying indoors. The crimes against women suddenly ramped up after the announcement of lockdown not only in India but all over the world. Amidst this corona pandemic, a hidden shadow pandemic is emerging out i.e. domestic violence which will not end unlike the lockdown will one day. Therefore, Government should take serious steps to eradicate this grave menace from our country on one hand, and on the other hand, we, as responsible citizens, also should make some awareness, by reaching out to the victims and help them to get justices. Also, the citizens not only should help the victims from their abusers but also respect all women. They should not look down upon the women. They must be given desired respect and acknowledgement which they deserve in our society as a Woman is the epitome of love and patience.

**Keywords:** Women, COVID-19, India, domestic violence, shadow pandemic.

Pandemics and Epidemics affect men and women differently, just like conflicts affect men and women differently. For example- The 2014 Ebola virus and 2015-16 Zika virus in Brazil reinforced long standing gender inequity. It is important to consider gender differences in preparedness and response to the outbreak, because the reverberations are dependent on both physical and social dimensions. Around the World, countries are struggling to rein in the spread of the novel corona virus (COVID-19) outbreak. In India nearly 1.3 billion people are currently facing the nation-wide lockdown. But amidst this, we are facing difficulty, where women are facing physical torture, mental trauma. These incidents are widespread but under-reported in most of the cases. Globally, one in three women experience physical and sexual violence by an intimate partner or any perpetrator in their lifetime.<sup>i</sup> Due to the lockdown, many of the victims were not able to contact the police or social workers as they are trapped at home with the abusers. “Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women...”<sup>iii</sup>

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, reports of domestic violence are up surging all over the World, is a matter to be worried for. The extensive spread of the virus has forced domestic violence victims to stay at home with their abusers, leaving them with little options to find any other shelter or even solace. In abusive households, women have to battle with the male aggressor inside and the virus outside. Since, they stay within these four walls of their houses with abusive partners, who break them both physically and emotionally. Furthermore, the lack of income in the pandemic and the looming threat of hunger due to the effect of pandemic add fuel to the problems. Women who are financially dependent on their husbands suffer more.

The cases of domestic violence have increased (nearly doubled) during the lockdown period, evincing the idea of patriarchy being dominant till today. For example- in France, reports of domestic violence have risen 30% after the onset of lockdown. In China, the offences of domestic violence nearly doubled during lockdown, 90% related to the pandemic.<sup>iii</sup>

India’s condition is not an exception to the trend of an increase in violence against women during the pandemic. In first three weeks of nationwide lockdown, the data of the National Commission for Women (NCW) indicated the expeditions up surge in the number of domestic violence cases, between March 23 and April 16. NCW registered 587 domestic violence complaints which is a significant surge from 396 complaints received in the previous 25 days between February 27 and March 22. In a report of National Commission for Women (NCW),

Rekha Sharma, Chairperson of National Commission for Women said, “The number has increased. Men are frustrated sitting at home and are taking their frustration on women.” It is most likely that the number of domestic violence is much higher than the real figure as one more factor exists which is liable for exaggerating this problem is that the victim locked in with the abusers might not get access to a mobile phone and time to call for help. In the second week of April, Delhi Police recorded calls, out of these 600 were classified as “women abuse”, 23 calls reported “Rape”, while a majority of 1612 pertained to domestic violence.<sup>iv</sup> Most of the cases were reported from the states like, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Punjab. Now, at the time of COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations (UN) recognises violence against women as a “**Shadow pandemic**”.<sup>v</sup> Not only do we see the effect of this silent shadow pandemic in the World but also we experience it in our country, India.

Some examples mentioned here portray the brutality shown towards women in the pandemic where all are struggling for existence. They are:

Firstly, In Delhi, a social worker got a call from a woman saying she was in terrible pain after being beaten up by her in-laws and asked to leave her marital home. When the social worker took her for a medical check-up, she found that the abuse had resulted in broken bones.

Secondly, some female students from North-East India were verbally harassed, had objects thrown at their private parts and their attackers shouted, “Aye corona virus!”

Thirdly, a 14-year-old girl admitted to a 10,000-bed Covid Care Centre in south Delhi’s Chhatarpur, the largest in the country, was raped last week inside the facility by a 19-year-old man who was housed there.<sup>vi</sup>

Fourthly, a 40-year-old woman at Covid Care Centre of the Panvel City Municipal Corporation (PCMC) located at Kon village in Panvel Taluka was allegedly sexually assaulted by a 25-year-old youth, who was also quarantined there.<sup>vii</sup>

From these few examples it may be inferred that women are neither safe at home nor safe at the hospitals where they are admitted for treatment. Not only in hospitals or care centres, but also corona virus may trap women in the “safe haven” of the home. A question may arise, are there any safe spaces where the women are totally secure?

However, it may be said that confinement is one of the breeding grounds for domestic abuse. It is emphasized by the words of sociologist Marianne Haster; domestic violence goes up

whenever families spend more time together, such as the Christmas and summer vacations. The trigger point is economics. A lot of people do not have the means to manage a square meal. All these are flashpoints for destroying the harmony in the home, causing unrest; it is bound to reflect and manifest into domestic violence, and verbal and domestic violence. Stress, the disruption of social and protective networks, decreased access to services is exacerbating the risk of violence for women. Also, the increasing financial burden and the needs of the family especially in poor strata of the society are making the situation worse. Such sorry state of affairs definitely comes under the number of factors which perpetuate the violence. Women's unpaid care work has long been recognised as the driver of inequality. Domestic violence is in the form of rapes and sexual harassment as well and COVID-19 time sets out the classic example of it. Sometimes if there is a lack of adjustment in the household, the best way to solve this problem is a psycho-analytical counselling by a clinical psychologist. This can sometimes reduce the risk of violence.

Witnessing the up surge in violence against women, there is a dire need for us to take steps to dilute the injustices made to the women so that they are safe during any kind of crisis be it natural disaster, epidemic or pandemic. There are things that can mitigate the impacts of violence against women in pandemic.

- Government and policy makers- must include essential services to address various violence against women, resource them, and identify ways to make them accessible in the context of social distancing measures.
- Health facilities- should identify information about services available locally (e.g. hotlines, shelters, rape crisis centres, counselling) for survivors, including opening hours, contact details and whether these can be offered remotely, and establish referral linkages.
- Health providers- they can help the survivors by offering first-line support and relevant medical treatment. First-line support includes: listening empathetically without judgment, inquiring about needs and concerns, validating survivors' feelings and experiences, enhancing safety and connecting survivors to support.
- Community members- should be made aware of the increased risk of violence against women during the pandemic, and the need to keep in touch and support the women subjected to violence, and to keep the information where the help is needed for the

survivors. It is important to ensure that it is safe to connect with the women when the abuser is present at home.

- Women who are experiencing violence- may find it helpful to reach out to supportive friends and family, secure hotlines, or seek out for local services available for the survivors. She may even find a safe place to stay if the violence accelerates.<sup>viii</sup>

In various parts of the World, strategies to protect women from their perpetrators have developed gradually while keeping in view of the lockdown and social distancing measures. Many countries like Spain, Germany, Argentina, France, Italy and Norway have launched Campaign Mask-19<sup>ix</sup> 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.

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. 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.

In India also various steps are taken by the Government to combat with the rising cases of violence against women during the pandemic. The National Commission for Women (NCW) launched WhatsApp helpline numbers to protect them from harassment and in grave cases Crisis Intervention Centre (CIC) through counsellors accompany the aggrieved person and make possible the recourse to public authorities. A laudable initiative by the UP Police has also been launched named as “Suppress Corona, not your voice” which encourages them to be vocal against the crime. The Tamil Nadu Government has also made a fruitful decision on protection officers. Several NGOs and Help lines have been operating 24 hours to help or counsel victims of domestic violence by transferring them into a secure place and also providing counselling over the phone or on an online medium. Hence, it is also necessary for the government to create shelter for the victims and give them a protective environment. The Delhi State Legal Authority has also come up with the idea of helping victims to report abuse. It has authorised Mother Dairy outlets - which are open seven days of the week even during



the lock down, and are frequented by women to buy milk and its products - to become centres where women can discreetly report the abuse they are subjected to. The owners of the Dairy would then alert the legal authority or the police. Similarly, chemist shops have also been authorised to take complaints. Such increased access, it is hoped, will encourage and assist victims of abuse. <sup>x</sup>

Apart from these, professional counsellors, psychiatrists, mediators, lawyers, and even psychotherapists can prove to be a vital asset by helping the needy person through WhatsApp, phone calls, video-conferencing etc. during this time. Furthermore, community gatekeepers including religious, youth, and women leaders can create awareness about the negative impact of domestic violence and familiarise women about their rights within the community and they can safely report the cases of gender-based violence to the concerned authorities.

According to Article 51-A of the Constitution, we have certain fundamental duties to perform on our part, i.e., to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. We need a comprehensive nationwide campaign to bring awareness among the people and make them sensitised towards this issue. These issues must be highlighted through various modes like, radio channels, national news channels. These platforms must be strategically used in the same way as the government has used for washing hands and social distancing to combat COVID-19.

Active measures towards surveillance and management of domestic violence need to be an indispensable part of fight against COVID-19. Effective implementation of the protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, is the need of hour. Domestic violence leads to abuse of human rights and fundamental rights. For example, right to live with dignity (Article 21), right to live in healthy environment and in good health (Article 21) granted by the Indian Constitution is violated. In *Francis Coralie Mullin v. The Administration*, <sup>xi</sup> the Supreme Court recognised the right to be free from physical violence. Moreover, in *Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation v. Nawab Khan Gulab Khan*, <sup>xii</sup> rights against emotional and sexual abuse were also protected by the Supreme Court. Section 11 of the Domestic Violence Act describes that the Government is obliged to raise awareness in the society by

regular publicity of issues through the use of print and media which has not been adhered to. In addition to this, Sections 8 and 9 of the Act have not been implemented in its whole as only some of the States are considering doing this. The Act also mandates wide publicity through different Medias (print and broadcast) to create awareness in general public, which can include information about Interpersonal Violence Cycle, measures of de-escalating a situation at home, help lines, shelter homes and legal assistance available for women. A makeshift arrangement of safe spaces (space away from the abuser) by creation of temporary shelter homes should also be considered. Educating and using available human resources like ASHA workers and other health workers, who are currently conducting door to door surveys about covid-19, in identifying subtle signs of domestic violence would be prudent.<sup>xiii</sup>

There is no doubt in the fact that the judiciary even in these tough times has imparted its services in a very hardworking way i.e., by establishing virtual courts and ensured justice to the victims. But still the efficacy of policies and redressal mechanisms needs re-assessment in one way or the other. So, we need to build a safe and secure place for the women by ensuring checks and balances.

Apart from creating safe spaces for women, guaranteeing rights for women protection, help lines for survivors, laws safeguarding interest of women, there are some virtues which need to be developed first in the minds of the people in the society. The welfare of an individual lies in the welfare of the society, so, our patriarchal society first need to think the welfare of women, respect them and not regard them only as “social ornaments”. Future of the country depends on the students, the values given to them by the teachers in the school. Values are the guiding principle of behaviour. The attitude of fairness and justice developed in childhood and teenage will lay a foundation of responsible citizen. First humanity is to be achieved. The education which does not help elicit humanity is not education. If a man earns wealth, gain education acquires name and fame without attaining humanity, then problems will aggravate. Humanity is one and uniform to everybody irrespective of caste, creed, and culture. All are children of same mother. Hence, it is a high time that we, as responsible citizens start taking this issue as our first priority. To conclude this, a beautiful saying by Swami Vivekananda is not to forgotten. According to him, “There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of woman is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing.”

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>x</sup> Available at <https://edtimes.in/one-can-now-visit-a-mother-dairy-booth-to-report-domestic-abuse-in-delhi/>
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- <sup>xii</sup> Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation v. Nawab Khan Gulab Khan (1997) 11 SCC 121
- <sup>xiii</sup> COVID-19 and domestic violence against women, available at (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7295494/>)