

# A Study On Domestic Violence Against Women During COVID-19 Lockdown in India.

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## ABSTRACT

As governments across the globe enforce lockdowns of varying degrees to mitigate the spread of Coronavirus, a horrifying fallout has been a surge in reports of domestic violence in several countries, including India. The reports of increasing rates of domestic violence have surfaced across the globe. The reason for this upsurge happens to be with shelter in-place measures and widespread organizational closures related to Covid-19. The other contributory factors to this issue are stress and associated risk factors such as unemployment, frustration, reduced income, limited resources, alcohol abuse and limited social support are likely to be further compounded. Another serious issue with respect to domestic abuse or family violence is an increasing risk of domestic violence-related homicide. Last but not the least in addition to adult victims of family violence there are children and pets who reside in 60 % or more of households where domestic violence is perpetrated are at great risk of suffering from physical and/or emotional distress. According to the National Commission for Women in India the number of domestic violence cases has shot up. Thus there has been a sharp rise in the number of distress calls during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Key words: Coronavirus, Domestic Violence, Lockdown

## Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales. These droplets are too heavy to hang in the air, and quickly fall on floors or surfaces. It can be infected by breathing in the virus if you are within close proximity of someone who has COVID-19, or by touching a contaminated surface and then your eyes, nose or mouth. India has the fifth largest economy in the world but its size hasn't protected it from the impact of coronavirus. On the night of 24 March 2020, while announcing complete lockdown of the country for three weeks (now extended until 30 June), Prime Minister Modi drew parallels between the boundary of the house and the *Laxman Rekha* from the *Ramayana*. For a lot of us, immediate thoughts revolved around disruptions that would be caused to normal life and work due to the restriction. There was also renewed concern about the pandemic that raged outside and how to protect ourselves.

For those living with their abusers, danger now lurked on both sides of the *Rekha*. With no vaccine and no proven cure yet for the highly contagious Coronavirus, 'social distancing' has emerged as the key strategy to mitigate the spread of the disease and lockdowns of varying degrees are being enforced by governments across the globe. A horrifying fallout of stay-at-home orders has been a surge in reports of domestic violence from both developed and developing countries.

### **Staying home, staying unsafe?**

In India, according to latest data of the National Crime Records Bureau (2018), 103,272 women have reported "cruelty by husband or his relatives", constituting about one-third (single largest category) of all reported crimes against women. The National Commission for Women has observed a recent spike in complaints of

domestic violence in the country, having received 123 such ‘emails’ between 23 March and 10 April. State governments and women commissions such as that of Kerala and Punjab have also taken cognizance of this alarming trend.

Crime against women has an under-reporting problem even in normal times. Besides social stigma, a key reason for this is fear of retaliation by the perpetrator(s). With constraints on mobility taking away the option of escaping to a safer place such as parents’ home, under-reporting of domestic abuse is expected to be far greater during the lockdown. Confined with the abuser, it can be harder to make a phone call and talk about your situation – whether with the authorities or friends and relatives. While some women might be able to use the internet to seek help, the prospects are now bleaker for the uneducated and poor, who normally used post to register complaints.

Lockdown conditions may not only intensify the abuse suffered by existing victims but can also create new victims. The sudden, unnatural situation of staying home all day, every day with no visitors and more free time than usual, may in itself cause some psychological issues. Add to this, the fear of the deadly virus, and uncertainty about work and financial security. As we go down the rungs of the social ladder, there is stress even around meeting basic needs in the absence of daily wage and access to regular supplies. In these times of panic, one can also imagine situations where the virus infection is used as an excuse to isolate someone within the household or turning someone out – deepening emotional abuse and mental harassment.

In fact, given predictions of economic recession, abuse driven by mental stress will likely continue well beyond the lockdown as jobs are lost and businesses fail. Women will also be among those who lose work. This loss of financial

independence will cost some of them their sense of empowerment and bargaining power at home. The weakened position of women might embolden their abusers.

### **Acting now: What the Government and civil society can do**

Covid-19 has presented a scenario of increased incidence of domestic abuse, and greater complication in both reporting by victims and getting help to them. There is a pressing need to strengthen existing mechanisms to address domestic abuse, as well as to deliberate on new solutions that are tailored to these extraordinary circumstances. The issues that need to be addressed and the feasibility of measures that can be taken, will differ between the lockdown and post-lockdown periods. It is also important to ensure that the measures cater to women across levels of education, access to technology and the ability to use it.

Tackling domestic abuse should be a key part of the national response plans that are currently being developed to address the Covid-19 crisis. Acknowledgment and prioritization of the issue at the highest levels of policy can send a strong message to abusers and serve as a deterrent. Many believe that PM Modi's leadership has played an effective role in the current crisis; his national addresses and symbolic initiatives have been well-received by millions of Indians. Inclusion of a focus on domestic harmony might just save several abuse victims. This can be supported by a campaign on TV and radio involving messages to the public delivered by celebrities such as film stars and cricketers. Further, when cases are identified and action is taken, these should be publicized by the media (while maintaining anonymity).

In France, victims are being asked to report domestic abuse at pharmacies and to use code if they happen to be accompanied by their abusers. The pharmacies in turn inform the police. A similar system can be set up during lockdown in India as

a few pharmacies and grocery stores are meant to remain open in each area, and walking a short distance to buy essentials is permissible in most places. Local authorities should assure informers that their identity will not be disclosed. In addition, applications for ‘curfew passes’ (issued for a defined period for availing essential services, emergency movement, etc.) made by women can be considered more liberally so that it is possible for them to step out of homes and seek help, if required.

Countries such as Canada are investing in shelters for those fleeing gender-based violence. Resources are being devoted to ensure that there is no overcrowding at the shelters and social distancing and is maintained. As India scouts for accommodation spaces such as hotel rooms and stadiums to set up quarantine wards for Corona patients, providing for abuse victims can be part of the same effort.

Local NGOs can track cases that were known to them pre-lockdown with frequent phone calls, and encourage friends and relatives to keep in touch with victims. Remote counselling of the victim and perpetrator may help in some cases. Where possible, online surveys can help identify new victims. Promotion of app- and email-based reporting by state women commissions is a welcome step.

Microfinance institutions – particularly those with an SHG (self-help group) focus – can now play a much more important role in this regard. Leveraging their pre-existing networks, they can dually serve as complaint points as well as providers of livelihood support in these times of financial hardship.

All such measures require funds and one might argue that State resources are already stretched at the moment. Year after year, it is seen that budgetary allocations for issues related to the safety of women remain underutilized. It has

been recently noted that only 35% of the ‘Nirbhaya Fund’ has been spent across ministries, since it was set up in 2013. While the focus of the Fund has been on initiatives that make public spaces safer for women, the present situation warrants a large allocation towards the support of domestic abuse victims.

To help those locked in with their abusers right now, there is no time to lose. The immediate focus should be on putting together a quick plan of action, and organizing a coordinated effort by local governments, grassroots organizations, and communities for its effective implementation.

## Conclusion

Ironically, women’s role as primary caregivers at home puts them at a high risk of contracting the coronavirus. And for those in abusive relationships, a cough or a sneeze could trigger violence. But this double bind is not new. Women being neglected from public discourse that adversely affects them is early familiar throughout history.

For many women, staying at home is a public health crisis. India’s National Family Health Survey reveals that close to 42% of men agree that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife. It is then not surprising that a third of India’s women have experienced some form of physical, emotional or sexual violence in their lifetime.

Forcing families to stay at home, cooped together in the same small space, increases the risks of interpersonal violence and abuse. Such risks increase as men tend to release their frustration of losing jobs by abusing women in intimate relationships. Admirably, even though women are more likely to lose even the informal sector jobs they had first and faster than men, they do not vent their

frustrations by turning violent, they do not vent their frustrations by turning violent.

Recession studies also show that victims often turn to their friends and family for temporary housing and emotional support. But given the lockdown and the economic crisis, that support network is not within reach, leaving many battered and homeless.

Staying at home adds to other hardships faced by women. This places a disproportionate burden on women of taking care of the house and children. Living with an abusive partner also puts women's sexual health agency at risk. The fear of refusing sex or asking one's partner to use a condom compounds physical and sexual violence between partners and makes it harder for women to access contraceptives, pregnancy kits and abortion services.

Moreover, as the lockdown continues, women and girls will need regular and quality access to menstrual health products. It wasn't until much public outcry that feminine hygiene products were included in the government's list of essential items.

*Notes:*

1. Not surprisingly, Delhi-based NGO Jagori, which runs helplines for women victims of violence, has experienced a 50% drop in calls.
2. The same factors can lead to an increase in abuse of children or anyone else in a weaker position in the household. This post focuses on married women.
3. A recent study by Bhalotra *et al.* (2019) published in *The World Bank Economic Review*, based on representative data from 31 developing countries for the period

2005-2016, shows that a 1% increase in the male unemployment rate is associated with an increase in the incidence of physical violence against women by 0.05 percentage points, or 2.75%.

4. Advertisements with the message “Suppress Corona, not your voice” with a sketch of a woman wearing a mask, is a commendable initiative undertaken by the police in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

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