

THE 'SILENT' PANDEMIC THREATENING THE WORLD IN COVID-19 TIMES

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ABSTRACT

Policies of governments are usually political. But, they are presented in a manner that has the mask of neutrality. The space within four walls is the critical locality of violence against women. Engendering the State is not a simple matter. It has complex undertones. Some voices are heard while others are ignored or silenced. Data can be partially ignored or manipulated and can have multiple interpretations. There may be differences between the Global North and the Global South in responding to domestic violence (Mangala Subramaniam, Preethi Krishnan and Christopher Bunka 2014). But, whatever the differences, the facts are that many women around the world are facing violence in their homes. The culprits may be their near and dear ones.

KEYWORDS: Domestic Violence, Women, Government, Response

United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women has defined violence against women as physical, sexual or psychological acts or threats of such acts in the public and the private sphere. The problem with domestic violence against women is that it is mostly unreported, due to socio-cultural factors. Even before the pandemic of corona virus struck, this was a complex issue in many countries of the world, which wanted solution. With the rise in the spread of corona virus in 2020, domestic violence against women is spreading widely as a silent pandemic. It had increased to such a level that the World Health Organization had to address the issue publicly (Violence, Injuries and Disability 2020). It brought into public notice that domestic violence against women in the pandemic was seeing a global increase. Due to several factors, like, physical distancing, isolation, staying at homes, lockdown, potential job loss, etc, the incidents of domestic violence against women increased. During the lockdown, the victims of domestic violence have been forced to share the domestic space with their perpetrators. The power dynamics in the house is in favour of the controlling and abusive perpetrators. The mobility of the abused woman is restricted. Even her phone calls may be limited and controlled. This limits the ability of the abused woman to seek respite (Lisieux E. de Borja Telles, Alexandre M. Valença, Alcina J.S. Barros, Antônio Geraldo da Silva 2020). This paper will try to analyze the rise of domestic violence against women during the calamities; mainly, provide a picture of the status of domestic violence against women in the world during the lockdown imposed due to the spread of the pandemic of corona virus; and the steps taken by the governments around the world, including India, to cope with this menace.

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
INCREASES IN CALAMITIES**

Calamities usually lead to spiralling of domestic violence against women. When calamities strike, there are multiple factors, varying from economic stress to domestic confinement, unemployment, lack of basic necessities and lack of support from friends and relatives, which create rise of differences, abuse and violence among the family members (S. Gearhart, M.P. Patron, T. A. Hammond, D.W. Goldberg, A.Klein, J.A.Horney 2018). In natural disasters, when men lose source of income and economic security; they try to increase control over their partners. In that situation, when women are earning, it creates greater insecurity for the men at home. In order to cope up with the insecurity, men vent their anger on their partners in the form of physical, mental, sexual or other forms of violence. For women, employment is a cushion towards a good life. But, during the calamities, when women lose their source of earning, they lose their cushions for a better life. They are forced to depend on the male members in the family, even for their basic needs. They lose connections with friends and families and fail to get their support, during trying times. They easily become victims of domestic violence. (D. Schneider, K. Harknett, S. McLanahan 2016). During times of natural or man-made calamities, usually, women are imposed with additional domestic chores without the support of domestic help. With the surge of demands on women at home, the workload can increase friction with the other family members. Disparity in relation to household work may lead to situations of domestic violence (COVID-19, Domestic Abuse and Violence: Where Do Indian Women 2020).

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE
CORONA PANDEMIC**

It has been observed that the pandemic of corona virus has created a calamity, where almost, all sections of the world population got affected. Along with this, came the restrictions,

lockdown, night curfews and the curbs that were imposed by the governments all over the world, to slow down the spread of the pandemic. Domestic violence against women increased in most countries during the period of lockdown.

The United Nations also reinforced the fact that the “shadow pandemic” of domestic violence increased by 20 per cent during the lockdown for the three months in the 193 countries of the world, imposed to bar the spread of the corona virus (Coronavirus: Domestic violence 'increases globally during lockdown' 2020). The figures include the anticipated under-reported cases. This year, there is a prediction that there would be much more than 15m cases of domestic violence across the globe ('Calamitous': domestic violence set to soar by 20% during global lockdown 2020). The UN Women stated that among the women and girls in the age group of 15-49, there were 243 million who suffered from sexual and physical violence in the last 12 months, by an intimate partner. With the pandemic, it would grow exponentially. The home quarantine has increased the domestic violence against women in several countries, including Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, India, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Singapore, South Africa, United States of America and China (Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence 2020). In Singapore and Cyprus, there was more than 30 per cent rise in calls asking for help regarding domestic violence. In New South Wales of Australia, the frontline workers reported regarding rise of complaints (Communications 2020). World Health Organization's regional director in Europe stated that in countries of Europe, in April 2020; there has been 60 per cent rise in emergency calls from women facing domestic violence, compared to last year. In Italy, calls to help lines dropped, but through text messages and emails, women were asking for help as they were facing domestic abuse. There was big rise in domestic violence during lockdown (Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence 2020). Reports have also come from countries like Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Ireland and others.

Latin America has been referred to as the most dangerous place for women (Anyá Prusa, Beatriz García Nice & Olivia Soledad 2020). In Latin America, many shelters for women have been closed as it was difficult to follow social distancing in Covid times. In Brazil, police stations were working under reduced hours under the 2006 Maria da Penha Law, except in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Federal district where it is open for 24 hours (Anyá Prusa, Beatriz García Nice & Olivia Soledad 2020). It has been reported in the social media in Brazil that during the period of lockdown, there was 431 per cent increase in domestic violence against women and girls. The victims failed to file complaints, due to restrictions imposed. They could not reach the police for help. The Brazilian non-governmental organization, Forum on Public Safety, reviewed around 50,000 posts on the social media platform of Twitter. Out

of them, 6000 had reported regarding domestic violence, where the victims are women and girls. Traditional researches have shown that women hide occurrence of domestic violence incidents, as they are scared of the potential aggressors. So, the views of the neighbours and relatives in the social media were also taken into concern. Poor abused women who were daily wage earners are failing to make phone calls, access help centres and their condition has really been of concern (Bruna Pereira, Macarena Aguilar 2020).

The situation is equally serious in other countries of Latin America' like Mexico, where since the quarantine started, 200 women were killed. Similarly, 18 women were killed by their present or ex-partners when quarantine was imposed in Argentina. The situation is also bad in Chile (Domestic Violence Increases 431% in Brazil Amid Lockdown 2020). In Mexico and Brazil, there has been rise in complaints, while, in Chile and Bolivia, there is fall in the number of complaints against domestic violence. Experts observed that this has happened in Chile and Bolivia because women facing violence at home could not report the abuse due to failure in the reporting system through normal channels. This reason has been seconded by the prosecutors and the UN Women (Lucila Sigal, Natalia A. Ramos Miranda, Ana Isabel Martinez, Monica Machicao 2020). Argentina has an emergency number for abuse victims, which is 137. This year in April, there is a jump of 67 per cent calls, when compared to last year. Lockdown was imposed on March 20 to prevent spread of corona virus (Lucila Sigal, Natalia A. Ramos Miranda, Ana Isabel Martinez, Monica Machicao 2020). Buenos Aires province, in Argentina, has seen a rise in 60 per cent calls in the national emergency number from the victims of domestic abuse in the lockdown.

In the initial phase of lockdown in South Africa, there were more than 87,000 complaints. The complex interplay of violence, domesticity and structural inequality took place. In South Africa, violence was in the form of physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, financial, harassment, abuses etc. It is badly affecting not only the victim, but also the domestic structure. In the lockdown, there is need for greater coordinated act by the State, the private organizations and the civil society organizations through education awareness programme, donations etc. The reality is that during the lockdown, it becomes really difficult to attain a properly coordinated social and criminal reply (Weiner 2020). In Kenya, the rise in calls for help by victims of domestic violence was 34 per cent in the initial period of the curfew imposed from dusk to dawn.

In Bangladesh, a local human rights organization, *Manusher Jonno Foundation* has conducted a survey on domestic violence in this lockdown period. It found out that about 4249 women were subjected to domestic violence in 27 districts of Bangladesh. It interviewed 17000 women and children. Out of them, 848 faced physical tortures, 2008 mental

torture, 4 raped, 1 killed and there were 1308 women who faced restrictions by their husbands, financially in April, 2020. The situation was same in other places in Bangladesh where the survey was not carried out. Some of the women who faced domestic violence blamed that such situation arose due to lockdown. Their husbands were feeling frustrated as there was lack of social interaction and it led to such violence. More women are falling prey to domestic abuse in this precarious situation (COVID-19 lockdown increases domestic violence in Bangladesh 2020).

In India, domestic violence among the educated middle class in India is prevalent, though hidden. It is routinely faced by women in most working class families; unless the violence becomes inhuman, it is hardly reported (Bhattacharyya 2004). During the lockdown due to corona virus, the domestic violence complaints have reached a ten year high in India (Vignesh Radhakrishnan, Sumant Sen, Naresh Singaravelu 2020). The toxic misogynistic culture that is layered in the everyday lives have a disguised presence in the form of sexist conversations, jokes; stalking culture; degrading customs which women have to face (Nandan 2020). Even in the lockdown, women had to face these, covertly and/or overtly.

REASONS FOR RISE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN COVID TIMES

Patriarchal societies assign domestic work to women. Household chores and care work are attributed as a woman's job. Unpaid work, though most significant for running everyday lives, are always ignored and demeaned. With lockdown imposed in different parts of the world, work load has created differences and arguments among themselves. In some cases, it has translated into violence (COVID-19, Domestic Abuse and Violence: Where Do Indian Women Stand? 2020).

Natural disasters tend to increase violence against women and girls (Rezaeian 2013). Gender based violence tend to increase even in the developed countries like, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, United States; after natural calamities take place. Domestic violence has been the most prevalent among the gender based violence (Unseen, Unheard: Gender-based Violence in Disasters Global Study 2015). Those women, who were facing domestic violence earlier, had to face it in a severe manner in the lockdown. Sexual violence also tends to increase in these times. Economic instability has increased in the families. People have become unemployed. It is affecting them psychologically. Everyone has to adjust to the 'new' normal.

Consumption of alcohol has increased violence within the homes. Alcohol consumption could be another reason for rising domestic violence against women during the pandemic. In the initial phase of lockdown, the liquor shops were closed in India. Men were drinking in the house and committing violence on the weak in homes, which included women and children. When men did not receive alcohol, all their anger fell on their

family members, especially wives. When restriction on sale of liquor was removed, drunken men were again becoming violent and were bashing women and children. So, the end result was domestic violence on women. Moreover, in the lockdown, when the victim is trying to call the police, there is a chance of being overheard by the abuser. Even after reporting, there is a chance of not receiving proper response from the authorities. This is preventing women to report to the authorities. Women are pushed into position of greater vulnerabilities and powerlessness and men turn inhuman under the influence of liquor. Law enforcement authorities were all involved in dealing with the calamity and have less time for cases of domestic violence, which are relegated to lesser important issues.

When a woman wants to take the help of Prevention of Domestic Violence Act 2005, in India, her complaint can harm the dynamics in the family, which many women avoid. When she complains, she may be prone to harassment. In this epidemic, she will only engage in such a step, when the violence becomes unbearable. In West Bengal, India; there were calls to the Women's Commission from the neighbours of the victims of domestic violence. But, when the Commission reached out, there were denials. Even in very trying situations, under-reporting is there.

A study conducted on the South Asian diaspora in the United States found that nearly 40 per cent of the women were facing violence by the intimate partner. It was a community-based survey, done in 2012, by Neely Mahapatra of the University of Wyoming and in 2002, by Anita Raj and J.G. Silverman of the University of California. The mores of shame, honour and guilt enhances under-reporting. The undocumented women who depend on their husband for everything are in the most deplorable condition. In the times of the pandemic, their position has turned more vulnerable. Their condition is deplorable (Kamdar 2020). The shame, honour and guilt crises of women even holds true in the lockdown period regarding informing the authorities. Their cry for help remains subdued.

The administration and the police have been engaged in the work of handling the pandemic of corona virus. Surveillance of domestic violence has gone to the back shelf. Public transportation was stopped in the lockdown, so reaching the shelters became difficult. In the shelter, getting a bed in the quarantine was becoming difficult. The shelter has a long waiting list. Moreover, the police are not reacting or taking the calls from domestic violence victims seriously (Emil Filtenborg, Stefan Weichert 2020). Following social distancing also became difficult in these shelters. There is a prediction that there would be an additional 31 million cases of domestic violence, if lockdown is extended for six more months according to the United Nations Population Fund (Coronavirus lockdown | Surge in domestic violence, says WHO 2020). On Twitter, the Secretary General of the United Nations urged all governments,

across the world, to provide woman's safety preference while dealing with the pandemic (Taub 2020).

HOW THE WORLD TRIED TO REIN IT?

The pandemic in the year 2020 brought into fore the horrible face of domestic violence against women. It has increased the silence of women suffering domestic violence. Isolation in the lockdown has made their position worse. Usually, people look the other way to incidents of domestic violence as it is considered a 'private' matter. But, after the States, nongovernment organizations and UN Women realized that the 'silent pandemic' of domestic violence was creating havoc in the period of spread of corona virus, steps were taken at different ends, to rein it.

Covid has opened up option in Texas for tele-health services and supporting survivors through virtual platforms. They have tried to reach out to rural women in Portapique in Canada. To provide support to victims among rural women in the United States and Canada, organizations, like Domestic Abuse Survivor Help have provided online support connecting the victims and assuring them that they are not alone. There are many others who are suffering in the same boat (Moirá Donovan, Sara Miller Llana 2020). In Massachusetts in the United States, the shelters are declared to be "essential service". They are remaining open. Smaller organizations, like the Saheli are cooperating together with Jane Doe etc and the government of Massachusetts in United States, to offer more safe spaces in the corona times. They are trying to find solutions by discounted stays in hotels and apartments (Kamdar 2020). In El Salvador, there was special provision where abused women were allowed to report complaints and leave their house. But, the police may not be aware of such a provision and the woman may be at high risk of detention.

When domestic violence increased in Italy, representatives of the Italian trade union federation CGIL were fast in lobbying policy makers and others so that publicizing of the hotlines for assisting victims of domestic violence, are done effectively. They also asked to create a mobile app that would help women to ask for support from the police at the press of a button. The government in Italy responded quickly and an app, YouPol, came into effect (Thompson 2020). In Italy, the shelters were all open and they were trying to increase their lines of communication so that any victim, who wanted to reach them, could do it easily. They can be contacted through phone, email or even Facebook (Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence 2020).

In the United Kingdom, the leader of Women's Equality Party demanded special powers of the police to evict the perpetrators from the house, so that the victims of domestic violence are free from their clutches. It also requested the authorities to provide protection orders and to waive the fees of the Court.

In Germany, there were suggestions from the Green Party that government has to keep money aside for safe houses. They could also transform hotels and guest houses into safe houses so that the victims of domestic violence can get safe shelter (Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence 2020).

In Spain, women facing violence can go to pharmacists. They can ask for 'Mask 19' a code word to be utilized by victims of domestic violence. This is a code word to contact the police. In Spain, even after there is strict implementation of the rules of lockdown, the government has assured that if any woman is facing domestic violence, she can leave home to report violence. They will not be fined for the violation of the rules of lockdown.

Pharmacies in France doubled up as reporting domestic violence using code word, which they reported to the police (WHO 'Deeply Troubled' by Spike in Domestic Violence in Locked Down Europe 2020). In France, the government is paying for the victims of domestic violence to stay in the hotel. Counselling centres are being set up nearby, for abused women so that when they go out for shopping for grocery, they can easily contact the centres. The government has funded 1 million Euros for those organizations that are fighting abuse in the domestic sphere (Agarwal 2020). In Greece, campaigns through mainstream press, social media and television channels against domestic violence are taking place (Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence 2020).

In some places like Sao Paulo and Rio da Janeiro, in Brazil, virtual complaints of domestic violence are allowed. Judges are also granting virtually emergency protection orders. Summons is sent through whatsapp. Public service campaigns are conducted, advertisements in television are produced in Brazil with the UN Women, social campaigns have been done in Argentina are been undertaken in order to create awareness for the decision makers and the law enforcing ones (Anya Prusa, Beatriz García Nice & Olivia Soledad 2020)

In the initial days of the outbreak of corona virus, in the lifts of some residential buildings in Brazil, there were anonymous notices which were supporting women by providing shelter to women and warning the abusers. Grass root activists have utilized text messages, voice memes and other ways to help the deprived women to report abuse. An organization in Sao Paulo for black women who are offering food deliveries, observed that they have been able to identify women who were at risk of domestic violence. Code words have been zeroed on through which the victims of domestic abuse can send message even if they fail to access mobile. The networking in these trying times is working very well. Women are coming forward to help the vulnerable ones. The relief is that if anyone is facing abuse, they have someone to contact and later receive psychological

support. Psychologists are counselling on online platform (Bruna Pereira, Macarena Aguilar 2020)

Church leaders in countries of Africa extended their hand to deal with the silent pandemic. The pandemic of corona triggered insecurities and hopelessness as they were not ready to face the current challenges. The South African Council of Churches has stated that domestic abuse had risen due to the lockdown. Zimbabwe's domestic violence rate has also risen. In Zimbabwe, the Jesuits' Silveira House utilized the national radio to send message against domestic violence. In Zambia, the President of the Bishops' Conference asked to consolidate on the ties of the family, and not engage in domestic violence. In Ghana, there has not been any public case. Experts have informed that Ghana is a society controlled by men. Cases of domestic violence may be there, but they are not being formally reported. Church leaders in Africa are trying to work towards curbing domestic violence (Nzwili 2020).

In India, the National Commission for Women has launched a separate whatsapp number for the women facing domestic violence in the period of lockdown (NCW launches WhatsApp number to report domestic violence during COVID-19 lockdown 2020). Mental Health Help lines have been announced. Victims have been shifted to hostels or their maternal home.

The Delhi High Court had ordered the Centre, the Delhi government, the Women's Commission at the National and state levels to support the women who were facing violence at home, during lockdown. Proper training should be imparted to those who were attending help lines is necessary. The Jammu and Kashmir High Court considered suo moto that in the lockdown period, domestic violence is really an important issue. It ordered to create dedicated fund to fight domestic violence. Domestic violence should be allowed to be reported in the pharmacies and groceries. Vacant hostels of academic institutions should be utilized for safe shelter for women facing domestic abuse (Agarwal 2020).

The Delhi government has ordered that the chemist shops and the booths of Mother Dairy should double up in taking up complaints of domestic violence. The Anganwadi and the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) should be sensibly utilized for understanding the critical situation of domestic violence while undertaking door to door visits. Free legal aid could be accessed through the mobile app, Vidhik Sewa. Toll free number and whatsapp number were also made available to the public. In Uttar Pradesh, advertisements were there in the newspapers addressing women to suppress corona and not their voice. A female officer has been assigned to deal with any case of domestic violence. Assurance was also given that the perpetrators of violence will surely be arrested (Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence 2020). Tamil Nadu government has appointed a nodal officer for each district

to look after domestic violence cases during this crisis. When a case of domestic violence is reported, a representative is sent to the disturbed family from the police station. Counselling and follow up action are taken, simultaneously. In Punjab, monitoring of domestic violence cases has to be done regularly. Women Response Team in this lockdown situation has been specially created. Tele-counselling is going on. Law officers have to be roped in. Police are helping the abused women to go to the maternal home or the safe shelters. For physical abuse, medical examination was conducted. Distress calls came from families of women married to non resident Indians in Canada, Dubai, United States and other places (Sharma 2020). The Director General of Police has regularly corresponded through video-conferencing with the Deputy Superintendents of the Crime against Women cell. A phone-up programme has been launched by the police in Odisha to fight domestic violence in these times. The police have identified those women who had reported domestic violence in the three previous years. The State level call centre will enquire about their well-being. If they are facing domestic violence, the police will conduct physical verification (Coronavirus lockdown: Odisha police launches initiative to address domestic violence 2020).

POSITIVE STEPS THAT COULD SHOW THE PATH TO A BETTER WORLD

Domestic violence against women does not have a one stop vaccine. In the pandemic of the 1918 Spanish influenza, in United States, the responses of the states were not properly coordinated. It led to the spread of the virus into areas which were not affected earlier. When major crises take place, it is necessary that proper coordination is looked into at every level of the government. The pandemic of corona virus has also created waves of domestic violence against women. To face it, the government and the non-government need to work hand in glove. Learning from others is always a great way to be ahead. When the 'silent' pandemic of domestic violence was spreading in other parts of the world; every other State needed to tighten their belts to face it.

In order to address the silent menace of domestic violence against women, services to protect the victims in the trying times of Covid 19, should be declared as 'essential' ones. Services should be made accessible to the sufferers. Extra funding should go for the support services. Health providers have to listen to the victims of domestic violence more empathetically, without judging them. Temporary shelter homes need to be created. Educating and training ASHA workers in India to properly conduct door to door surveys regarding domestic violence, is necessary. Tele-counseling and tele-medicine support could be enhanced. Women victims need to keep their communication open with their family and friends. If any scary situation arises, they need to keep their safety plan ready. They should also be ready with money, significant

documents, personal objects etc, if they had to leave home suddenly (COVID-19 and violence against women- What the Health Sector/System Can Do 2020). Victims of domestic violence should never blame themselves. The perpetrator is responsible. Victims should never protect the persecutor. If the victim cannot report to the police, she must have a safety plan ready. They can use code word to alert trusted friends and families, if need arises. They should keep themselves informed of online support groups, help lines etc, and use them whenever required (Damania 2020).

In India, nongovernmental organizations with the support of Hindi film celebrities drew attention to the crime of domestic violence in lockdown in the social media. They encouraged people to talk about domestic violence by lessening the shame around it. Another campaign was launched asking the men to help in the domestic chores of cooking, cleaning and washing (Vijayalakshmi 2020).

CONCLUSION

The UN Women has emphatically felt that matters regarding security, health and finance created strenuous situation within the family and have pushed the level of domestic violence (Tih 2020). There is need to hear the voices in private sphere, which were earlier silenced or ignored by the State. Time has come for the State to be more vocal and active in dealing with complaints of domestic violence. The social and cultural norms that normalize and accept domestic violence against women have to be seriously questioned. Asserting power to control women at home is driving the perpetrator to indulge in terrorizing the women in different manner. In Western Australia, the campaign of Freedom from Fear targeted men who were perpetrators of domestic violence. They were asked to take responsibility of their behavior as their domestic violence has negative impact on their children. It was reported that this campaign brought positive results (Violence Prevention The Evidence-Changing Cultural and Social Norms that Support Violence 2009).

The governments initially failed to recognize the enormity of the issue of domestic violence during lockdown. Delay in responding to the calls of the victims of domestic violence could mean that harm has already been done. The arguments peaked. The abuse turned worse. Methods of oppression are re-invented every time. In lockdown, it went to the level of preventing the victim to use soaps, sanitizers, masks etc. Home isolation has empowered the perpetrator to control others. Experts are considering it to be 'intimate terrorism' which is contributing to public health crises. The institutions supporting victims of domestic violence are usually underfunded and weak. They fail to properly respond to the rising crime in the private space. During imposition of lockdown, adequate provisions were not properly made for the victims of domestic violence (Taub 2020). Sensible multi-dimensional

approach that would aim at solving problems is required. Victims should feel that they are being heard and supported (Nandan 2020). To solve this public health crisis, the State mechanism needs to be more sensitive and sympathetic towards the unheard, ignored and harassed voice of women, which has also led the World Health Organization to recognize the gravity of the issue.

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