

Domestic Violence: A Silent Pandemic on the Rise During Covid-19

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Abstract

Staying at home is the best way to beat COVID -19. But nobody ever bothers to think about the victims who are stuck up in abusive relationships with their partners. Naturally, lockdown has forced them to suffer even more. Their sufferings have increased in numerous ways. The data around the globe also shows that domestic violence has been on the rise as the entire world was staying indoors. The National Commission for Women (NCW), which is the government body that receives complaints of domestic violence from all parts of India, has recorded more than twofold rise in gender-based violence during this lockdown. Domestic violence cases can go across social, racial as well as economic boundaries. Shattered dreams, bruised mentally and physically, these victims are either shy or afraid to raise their voices against domestic abuse. Attention and care is needed not only for the visible physical injuries, but also for the psychological and emotional hidden trauma. The foregoing article takes stock of domestic violence during COVID-19 lockdown.

Keywords: COVID-19, silent pandemic, abusive relationship, domestic violence, lockdown.

Introduction

'Home' is a place where you get comfort, warmth and safety, and an escape from the busy working schedule of the day and other environmental stressors, but this is not true for all. Some do not get the stability, love, respect, support and happiness which is expected from a place called 'home'. A moment of peace is what any human being would want at home. But for victims of domestic violence, it is not so. Especially with COVID-19 crisis and subsequent lockdown, there has been a huge surge in cases of domestic violence in India as well as in other countries. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), domestic violence is defined as the intentional physical assault, intimidation, battery, sexual assault, and/or use of other threatening behavior by one member of a household against another. Other forms of the abusive behavior include stalking, the use of threatening looks or gestures, attempts to control the reproductive health of an intimate partner and displays of psychological aggression such as putting down, humiliating, or isolating an intimate partner.¹ The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, (2005), expands the definition of domestic violence to

include any act (omission or commission) which harms, injures, or endangers the physical or mental well-being of a woman and includes physical, verbal, emotional, sexual or economic abuse.² Several other classifications of domestic violence include murder, rape, stalking, assault, battery, and assault with a dangerous weapon, and aggravated assault.³

With a sharp increase in domestic violence cases across the world, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of the UN Women, called this increase in domestic violence as a "shadow pandemic". As per the report in Economic Times the National Commission for Women received 587 complaints from March 23 to April 16, 2020, out of which 239 were related to domestic violence. As per the data given by NCW, 123 cases of domestic violence were received between February 27 and March 22, 2020. In the last few days, the commission received 239 more such complaints. NBC News had requested for data on domestic violence from law enforcement agencies across United States, from those who responded 18 departments confirmed that they had seen a rise in March 2020. Houston police received about 300 more domestic violence calls in

March than they did in February, a roughly 20 percent increase during the COVID-19 crisis.

An analysis by UN Women of the gendered impacts of COVID-19 in the Palestinian territories found an increase in gender-based violence, and warned that the pandemic will likely disproportionately affect women, exacerbate preexisting gender specific risks and vulnerabilities, and widen inequalities.⁴ In Latin American countries such as Mexico and Brazil, a spike in calls to hot lines in the months of February, March 2020 also suggests an increase in domestic abuse. Arussi Unda from Mexican feminist organization Brujas del Mar working for women in abuse cases, said initially many calls to the group had come from neighbors hearing fights in other houses. There has been a reported rise in cases of “digital violence” and women were looking simply to escape.⁵

Psychologist Josie Serrata, PhD, a research and evaluation consultant and co-owner of Prickly Pear Therapy and Training, has found in her research that stress and social isolation can raise the risk of domestic violence.⁶ The figures, published by the UNFPA and its partners Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University in the US and Victoria University in Australia, also predict a 20% increase in violence during an average of three-month lockdown in altogether 193 UN member states. Wendo Aszed, the founder of Dandelion Africa, which runs economic empowerment programmes in Rift valley of Kenya, said that from mid-March to mid-April, more than 40 cases of violence have been reported to her organization. That was more than the total number of cases it dealt with last year.⁷

Reports from China, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries suggest an increase in domestic violence cases since the beginning of COVID-19 outbreak. According to one report, the number of domestic violence cases reported to a police station in Jingzhou, Hubei Province city, tripled in February 2020, as compared to the same months the previous year.⁸

The reason behind this sudden surge is that lockdown has brought the couples in close contact 24/7, which was not the case earlier. Where already rifts were there, this forced home stay has increased the level of frustration in them. Sometimes violence is a way men assert their false notion of masculinity. Being stuck at home, they take out their anger, at the same time refusing to share

responsibility of domestic chores. Women cannot go out and share their grief either. As per NCW most of the complaints are coming via email as people are scared of going to the police. *With alcohol being scarce at such times of lockdown, frustration could lead to increase in domestic violence.*⁹

During lockdown even children are under stress due to their daily lives being affected, no schools and colleges, no friends to meet, only being at home with the social media. They are forced to see domestic violence within the family, especially their mother or siblings being subjected to violence. Their psychological distress increases. Some of the children themselves are victims of violence. Such episodes harm their future psychological development and create fear and anxiety in their minds, also affecting their other aspects of life like studies, peer relationships, confidence and self-esteem. According to Gosselin, 2005, if as a child, men witnessed child abuse or battering behaviors, they were more likely to abuse their partners when in adult domestic relationships.

The biggest ever question in the circumstances is; “when the lockdown ends, would their lives return to normal?” The answer is “no”. Domestic violence will not stop on its own. The victims will have to take action and come out of such situation. Then only the life of their children will improve.

Discussion

Domestic violence has a huge psychological impact on the victim. Other aspects are also affected like - physical, social, spiritual. The victim may have low self-esteem, guilt, hopelessness and may go into tension, anxiety, depression¹⁰. Seeing the abuser, the victim may suffer from panic attacks. Suicidal thoughts are common. But some victims bear this as they see no way out and some have futile hope that the days and the abuser may change. Due to prestige issues, they may not complain or take help. Some would rather hide behind a false smile than letting others know about it. As children may be affected due to a police complaint or divorce, many suffer at the hands of the abuser. Many a victims, women in particular, isolate themselves from friends and family to keep it a secret. Though mostly women are the sufferers, it can be the other way round also. Men can also be the victims of abuse. It is seen that some men may take to addictions due to the mental trauma. Thus the psychological and emotional wounds of domestic violence are totally devastating. They can haunt victims

for many years to come, thus cutting short their future dreams of a beautiful life.

Courts and government agencies are doing a commendable work, but only these efforts may not be enough. A recent report indicates that only about 38% of women in India own a mobile phone and so it might not be easy for a victim of domestic violence to use the available helplines. Those who own a mobile may be able to use it for personal safety.

Creating awareness in schools and colleges to raise voice against such injustice should be cultivated in the minds of future generation at a young age. A victim should not blame self or feel guilty. The victims are not wrong, the other person, the abuser is mentally ill, and needs treatment. The treatment can be from a psychologist/psychiatrist or a police or an NGO activist. Violence is never accepted in a society which bows their heads in front of Goddess Saraswati, Goddess Laxmi, and DurgaaMaa. There are also a number of helplines for domestic violence and free online counseling websites as available options. A number of NGOs are already providing support to victims of domestic violence, but due to the lockdown restrictions, it is vital that the government should take the lead. The task is huge; but the lives are precious.

Conclusion

Viruses may come and go, lockdowns may be there in future too. But the silent pandemic of domestic violence shouldn't accompany. Let us start taking action now. Recognize the signs of domestic violence. Look around you. Unexplained bruises, partner putting them down in front of other people, jealous partners, depressed or anxious women who prefer to isolate themselves from social life. Be alert! If you are aware of such victims, approach them in a safe place, not in their homes. Trick them or coax them to come out with you. Be tactful and honest to your motive of helping the victim. Take them to a safe environment to talk. Approach the subject of violence with concern. Be genuine, listen and be empathetic. Then suggest ways in which they can be helped. Let us all keep our eyes open to such cases around us, identify, refer or help them. Let us work to reduce the stigma attached to victims of such violence. Respect women. Let's practice the age old Sanskrit verse and live it ourselves, train our near and dear ones-

Yatranaryastupujyante, Ramantetatra Devata,
Yatraitaastunapujyante, Sarvaastatrafalaahkriyaah.

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