

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

The Indian caste system is a hierarchical structure segmenting the Hindu population into four main categories. These categories are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Although these caste systems have officially existed for thousands of years, caste discrimination was technically outlawed in 1950, yet it still influences life in India today. The fifth group, the Dalits or “untouchable” caste, is a caste so low that it does not fall within the official caste system. Untouchables are significantly marginalized as this group occupies the least prestigious standing in Indian society. Yet, caste discrimination is not the only discrimination affecting India today. Rates of domestic violence in India, as in many other nations, saw an increase during the COVID-19 pandemic with strict gender roles compounding domestic violence against women. Domestic violence is widespread and deep-rooted in India and its ubiquity was highlighted prominently during the COVID-19 lockdown. This paper explores the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on domestic violence on women, the shifts in forms and intensity of this violence, and women’s responses through an analysis of cases of survivors that Swayam (a feminist organisation, headed by the author, working on the issue of violence against women in Kolkata) dealt with in the first half of 2020.

Keywords: Pandemic, Covid 19, women, domestic violence

Introduction:

Around the world, domestic violence has been addressed only from the 1990s onward; indeed, before the late 20th century, in most countries there were very little protection, in law or in practice. Women who are displaced, who are migrants or refugees, and those living in conflict-affected areas, older women and women with disabilities are particularly at risk of violence and are likely to be disproportionately affected by violence during COVID-19. Stress, the disruption of social and protective networks, loss of income and decreased access to services all can exacerbate the risk of violence for women. In many countries, where people are encouraged or required to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase. Violence against women is highly prevalent, and intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence. During health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against women tends to increase.

Whilst data are scarce, reports from across the world, including China, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and other countries suggest a significant increase in domestic violence cases related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports from other countries suggest a reduction in survivors seeking services due to a combination of lockdown measures



and not wanting to attend health services for fear of infection. Violence against women is a grave violation of women's human rights, no matter when, where, or how it takes place. There are many forms of violence against women, which have many potential negative health consequences for women and their children. Violence against women can result in injuries and serious physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and unplanned pregnancies. In extreme cases, violence against women can result in death.

The effects of violence are very often long-lived. Violence – in all its forms – can have an impact on a woman's well-being throughout the rest of her life. This is unacceptable, and the risks of violence that women and their children face during the current COVID-19 crisis cannot be ignored. When we are able to prevent violence, or to support women survivors of violence, we help to safeguard women's human rights, and promote physical and mental health and well-being for women throughout their lives. This also helps to alleviate pressure on already stretched essential public services, including the health system. It also evaluates the response of state agencies and the challenges faced and strategies used by civil society organisations, which, for years, have been active in working at providing and ensuring survivors' access to support services.

On 23 March 2020, one of the most sudden and stringent and COVID-19 lockdowns in the world was imposed in India, without any clear-cut directives on how state agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) should respond to the enormous challenges it posed. The impact of the lockdown was particularly severe on certain sections of the population, including migrant workers, daily wage labourers, domestic workers, other marginalised groups and, unsurprisingly, women and children facing domestic violence. The lockdown exacerbated the factors contributing to domestic violence, severely limited survivors' ability to seek help and redress, and placed severe burdens on providers seeking to intervene and respond to survivors.

This paper explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic violence, the shifts in its forms and intensity, and women's responses through an analysis of cases that Swayam—a feminist organisation, headed by the author, working on violence against women (VAW) in Kolkata for over 25 years—dealt with during this time. It analyses state agencies' responses, the strategies and advocacy efforts of CSOs nationally to assist survivors to access support services, and presents the resultant learnings based primarily on the experiences of members of Aman: Global Voices for Peace in the Home, a network of organisations working on domestic violence across the country. It highlights the need for survivor support services to be classified as “essential services” and for the stipulation of specific procedures and protocols to ensure these services are operational, available, and always accessible to women, particularly during pandemics, disasters, and conflicts, since these inevitably lead to increased VAW.

Discussion:

India is home to the world's second-largest population and more than two-thirds of its 1.2 billion citizens live on less than \$2 per day. These strained and taxing living conditions of poverty hurt women and children most because they also suffer from increased domestic violence. In the United States, women earning less than \$10,000 in annual income report a five



times greater rate of domestic violence than those with income exceeding \$30,000. Most Indian women fall in the former category. Accordingly, reports of domestic abuse to three major Indian newspapers from March to July 2020 increased more than 47%.

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 defines domestic violence¹ as physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and financial abuse against a woman by her partner or family members residing in a joint family (Kalokhe et al. 2016) and also includes unlawful dowry demands (Ram et al. 2019). Domestic violence is a public health concern and has adverse effects on the physical and mental health of women (Abramsky et al. 2011). India shares a significant global burden of domestic violence. Data from the National Family Health Survey 2015-16 shows that 31.1% of the ever-married Indian women aged between 15 and 49 years experienced spousal violence and almost 4% experienced violence during any pregnancy (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF 2017). According to the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) latest data, domestic violence against women topped the list of categories of violence against women in India. Almost 90,000 cases related to crimes against women were registered in 2018. Out of these, almost one-third were related to cruelty by husband or his relatives (Outlook 2020).

The Pandemic's Effect on Domestic Violence :

Like pandemics in years past, COVID-19 produced an increase in domestic violence because it gave greater freedom to abusers. During the pandemic, already high numbers of domestic violence cases in India increased "at an alarming rate." According to a piece published in the Indian Express, most Mumbai citizens lack running water in their homes. As COVID-19 lockdowns caused people to spend more time at home, more women resorted to underground or early morning markets for water. There, women were subject to more verbal and sexual harassment while waiting in line. While domestic violence increased both in India and globally during the pandemic, Delhi-based NGO Jagori actually saw a 50% decline in helpline calls. This seems counterintuitive at first glance, but many are likely hesitant to report abusers who are constantly under the same roof and who can also restrict their victims' access to phones and online resources. The popular phrase "locked down with the abuser" expresses this unfortunate reality.

Domestic Violence During COVID-19 :

There is a preliminary evidence to conclude that domestic violence during the COVID-19 increased globally. The restrictions imposed to curb the spread of virus resulted in an increase in violence. For instance, the frontline practitioners dedicated to support victims of domestic violence in Australia reported an increase in the frequency and severity of violence against women during COVID-19 (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2020). There was an increase in new violence incidents as well. Around 42% of the Australian practitioners noted an increase in first-time family violence reporting by women (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2020). Mahase (2020) reported a 60% increase in emergency calls related to violence against women by their intimate partners in Europe. Similarly, Agüero (2020) found a 48% increase in helpline calls related to domestic violence in Peru. While analyzing



Domestic Violence in India during COVID-19 :

On 22nd March 2020, the Prime Minister of India announced a nationwide lockdown for one day. This lockdown was subsequently extended for a week, then for 21 days and finally until 3rd May 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19. India declared COVID-19 a “notified disaster” under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 (Sharma et al. 2020). Extended lockdown and other social distancing measures imposed to curb the pandemic made women more vulnerable to domestic violence. Women were fighting a shadow pandemic inside their homes (UN Women 2020).

National Commission for Women’s (NCW) data showed that domestic violence complaints doubled after the nationwide lockdown was imposed in India. Tamil Nadu Police reported an increase in domestic violence complaints. They received approximately 25 calls every day during the lockdown period and registered at least 40 such cases (Kannan 2020). Similarly, Bangalore Police reported a spike in complaints from 10 calls to 25 calls every day from the victims of domestic violence (Peter 2020). These data from different sources indicate that domestic violence incidents increased across the country during the lockdown. On the contrary, organizations such as Jagori, Shakti Shalini, and AKS Foundation reported a decrease in complaint calls related to domestic violence (Ghoshal 2020). The decrease could be attributed to confinement at home, constant monitoring and controlling decision-making by the abuser, social isolation of victims from friends and family members and reduced options for support (Usher et al. 2020).

Some studies explored the phenomena of domestic violence during and post-disaster in India such as Hines (2007) and Rao (2020). However, existing literature on domestic violence during the lockdown is scarce. Moreover, the lockdown situation is different from other types of disasters. Almost all the states were affected by the presence of this virus at a single time. The question remains as to what factors are associated with an increase in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic? Whether any theoretical framework could explain these factors? Limited studies used routine activity theory (RAT) in unfolding the complex phenomena of domestic violence (Roman and Reid 2012). To our knowledge, no study is conducted in India to date that applied the framework of RAT to understand factors resulting in the perpetration of domestic violence, especially during a pandemic. Several authors pitched for the application of criminological theories such as RAT to predict an increase or decrease in crimes during COVID-19 by linking it with specific changes in routine activities (Piquero et al. 2020; Stickle and Felson 2020). Therefore, this paper aims to explore the factors resulting in an increase in domestic violence cases in India during the COVID-19 pandemic by incorporating the routine activity theoretical model.

Methodology :

Data Collection :

Firstly, we searched news articles on the Google search engine using a combination of certain keywords. These keywords were “domestic violence,” “intimate partner violence,” “spousal violence,” “marital violence,” “lockdown,” “COVID-19,” “coronavirus,” and “India.” We used online newspaper sources namely The Economic Times, The Times of India, Scroll.in, The Hindu, The Diplomat, Deccan Herald, The Wire, News18, BBC News, Times Now, and



Al Jazeera. Using Google search date and site syntax, we collected news articles published between 22nd March 2020 and 31st May 2020. We collected news articles published in the English language only. Hence, translation and back translation was not required.

Data Analysis:

After data collection from the online newspapers, we arranged the articles chronologically. In total, we analyzed 59 news articles. We analyzed the content of these articles manually. We excluded repetitive articles or articles with no mention of domestic violence incidents or associated factors from the analysis. Themes were established a priori rather than adopting an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). More specifically, we examined incidents of domestic violence reported in these articles to understand how the existing factors resulting in domestic violence perpetration fit into the three factors under RAT. Our pre-existing themes were the three factors under RAT. Initially, both the authors coded the data individually. Later, we exchanged the data to achieve consensus concerning the codes related to appropriate themes. We merged similar codes into a single code. To obtain maximum information, we coded incidents in which more than one code emerged individually. In total, we obtained 27 codes under the three different themes. Any disagreement between the authors was mutually resolved.

Ethical Considerations :

Research participants' safety is of paramount importance while researching domestic violence during COVID-19 (Sexual Violence Research Initiative 2020). Due to the government's guidelines on travel restrictions, we could not go onto the field and collect firsthand data from either victims of domestic violence or institutions working towards domestic violence such as law enforcement agencies, NGOs, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers. We also decided not to go for telephonic interviews with domestic violence victims due to their safety and to prevent them from re-victimization. As a feasible option, we decided to collect and review domestic violence cases reported in newspapers during the lockdown period in India. The data used in this article is secondary. Therefore, ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board was not required.

Findings :

Descriptive Statistics:

In total, we reviewed 43 articles that published news related to domestic violence during COVID-19 in India. The majority of the articles were published in The Times of India (13), followed by The Hindu (12), and Hindustan Times (7). We found 25 incidents of domestic violence wherein the experiences of the victims were described. One incident was repetitive and excluded from the analysis. Additionally, one case was of domestic violence from the parents of the victim and not included in the analysis. The final number of incidents reviewed was 23.

In one case from Rajasthan, the complaint was registered by the victim's father (Vijayalakshmi and Dev 2020). In another case, the complaint was filed by the victim's brother who was based in Nepal and could not intervene physically (Ratnam 2020). In some cases



condition of women who sought help from their parents was deplorable due to mental and financial stress posed by the lockdown. For instance, a victim of verbal and physical abuse by her husband went to her mother's house to save herself just before the first lockdown was imposed. Rather than feeling safe, she started feeling like a burden on her family due to the dipping income and loss of job of her brother. As a result, she was beaten up by her brother (Joy 2020). In general, the travel restrictions imposed by the government limited the ability of victims' families to intervene and act as a capable guardian.

Discussion :

The primary objective of this article was to explore the factors resulting in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. From the content analysis of the online newspaper articles, we found that alcohol consumption, unemployment and job uncertainties, and frustrations explained the motivation in offenders.

There are certain limitations to this article. First is the nature and source of data. This article examined domestic violence cases reported in newspapers that are a secondary source of data. The dependence on online newspapers only to search reported cases of domestic violence is a limitation of this study. The limited content in the newspapers limited our ability to distinguish between situational couple violence and domestic violence. While domestic violence is perpetrated to exert a general control over one's partner, there is no general pattern of control in situational couple violence (Johnson and Leone 2005). From the content analysis, we could not identify the context and severity of the violence which is a major limitation of this study. Further, all the newspapers were in the English language. There is a possibility of reporting more cases of domestic violence in local newspapers and in regional languages which this study did not consider. As noted by Carlyle et al. (2008) that newspaper framing of domestic violence is heavily skewed, there is a possibility of selection and reporting bias among journalists about news related to domestic violence.

Last, there was a discrepancy in reports regarding the magnitude of domestic violence during the COVID-19. While the majority of the sources in India reported an increase in domestic violence complaints than normal during the pandemic, a few sources reported a decrease in complaints related to domestic violence. For example, organizations such as Jagori and Shakti Shalini reported a drop in domestic violence complaints (Ghoshal 2020). Similarly, officials of Karnataka's women and child development department reported a 57% decrease in domestic violence calls between 23rd March 2020 and 13th April 2020 (Mulla 2020). More empirical studies are required to get a lucid picture.

Conclusion:

Some countries are making exceptions to movement restrictions for reporting of violence specifically. Remember that reporting may put you at risk, so ensure you have a safety plan in place. You may find making a report mentally or emotionally difficult. Seek the support of friends, relations, neighbours or colleagues, or local support services for survivors of violence. Numerous NGOs in India are working to improve women's quality of life. Sayodhya Home For Women In Need is a nonprofit created in 2010 with offices in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh. The organization provides assistance on issues "related to education, employment, domestic violence, harassment, abuse, mental health and other legal matters." The organization



runs a shelter for vulnerable girls and women and also provides “legal and psychological counseling” to victims of abuse. Since its creation, Sayodhya has given shelter to more than 1,000 vulnerable women. Furthermore, the organization addressed 1,500 “cases of domestic violence, harassment, child marriages, physical and mental abuses.”

Often the problem lies in a lack of accountability in regard to the abuser. Organizations like Sayodhya Home For Women In Need look to create that accountability and empower women with a viable source of help.

Declarations :

Ethical Approval: Data used for this study was secondary in nature. No ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board was required.

Informed Consent: This study did not involve subjects. Therefore, informed consent was not required.

Conflict of Interest: The authors report no conflict of interest.

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