

## COVID-19 lockdown: danger for victims of domestic violence

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### ABSTRACT

Recently, the UN Secretary General appealed to governments to pay attention to and prevent a “horrifying global surge in domestic violence” over the last few weeks amid lockdown measures imposed by several countries to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. The article is created on “Addressing Domestic Violence: A forgotten agenda while locking INDIA down.” which was issued in observer Research foundation on 08/04/2020. It talks about the issue of increased cases of domestic violence faced by women and lack of machinery to support them during the lockdown. In India, The National Commission for Women (NCW) has also identified the issue of a spike in cases of domestic violence since the execution of the national lockdown.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Domestic Violence

In the 1st phase of the lockdown, the women’s organisation said that they have received 587 distress calls or complaints between March 23 to April 16. Out of these, 239 cases were related to domestic violence. Earlier, the commission had said they received 69 cases of domestic abuse between March 24 to April 1. The call helps to highlights the plight of many silent sufferers of domestic violence across the world in these times. Along with India in China, France, the U.K. and other countries, there have been reports of a important rise in domestic violence cases since the imposition of lockdowns. These reports focus the need for Indian authorities to take this issue seriously too.

The literature review on domestic violence suggests that when men and/or women get employed, domestic violence tends to fall as interactions between couples reduce. Under a lockdown, communication time has increased and families have been left without access to the outside world. The literature also suggests that violence is a way for the man to assert his notion of masculinity. The current atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, food insecurity, and unemployment may create feelings of insufficiency in men. All these factors are only likely to aggravate tensions at home and make women victims of those tensions. The lack of access to friends, family and support organisations is expected to heighten the situation for abused women further.

In the middle of the corona virus pandemic many countries have reported an increase in domestic violence and intimate partner violence. United Nations Secretary- General Antonio

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Guterres, noting the "horrifying global surge" has called for a domestic violence "ceasefire". The European Parliament came out with a press release addressing the issue writing "we won't leave Europe's women alone" and asked member states to increase support to domestic violence victims during pandemic.

Domestic violence also sees a rise whenever families spend more time together, such as the vacations. As stated by the French Secretary of Equality Marlene Schiappa: "Confinement is a breeding ground for domestic abuse."

Women call in distress because they or their children are being abused at home, with or without physical violence. It occurred in China, then as the Covid-19 disease spread to Europe, the "Shadow Pandemic" (as UN Women calls it) spread to Italy, Spain, France, UK, US and finally to the India.

Several commentators had raised concerns at the start of the lockdown that confinement at home with an abusive partner is likely result in greater physical and emotional violence against women, with disastrous consequences for their health and well-being.

Earlier evidence has also shown that domestic violence increases whenever families spend time together, even during happy and festive occasions, such as Diwali, Christmas, Thanks giving, and family vacations. A lockdown, induced by the apocalyptic scenario of death and disease, is the exact opposite of a happy occasion; why should we expect abuse to follow a different pattern? Indeed, it doesn't. The lockdown provides the perfect chance to the abuser to practice "intimate terrorism" dictate and control all actions and movements of women, with violence if needed.

The increased violence is not just a result of the frustration due to physical confinement. The pandemic has brought in its wake a global slowdown, massive economic dislocation, closed businesses, the spectre of looming unemployment, often accompanied by the threat of hunger and poverty for what seems to be an indefinite future. While both men and women are affected by the economic downturn, there is evidence from the past that violence against women increases during episodes of high unemployment.

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

The term '**Domestic Violence**' (DV) is used in many countries to refer to intimate partner violence (IPV), but it also encompasses child or elder abuse, or abuse by any member of a household.

According to the **World Health Organisation**, **one in every three women across the globe experience physical and/or sexual violence** by an intimate partner or sexual violence by any perpetrators in their lifetime. Domestic Violence may include acts of:

- ✓ **Physical violence**, such as slapping, hitting, kicking and beating.
- ✓ **Sexual violence**, including forced sexual intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion;
- ✓ **Emotional (psychological) abuse**, such as insults, belittling, constant humiliation, intimidation, threats of harm, threats to take away children.
- ✓ **Controlling actions**, including isolating a person from family and friends; monitoring their activities; and limiting access to financial resources, employment, education or medical care.

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The **National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) (NFHS-4)** suggests that 30% women in India in the age group of 15-49 have experienced physical violence. The report suggested that among married women experiencing physical, sexual or emotional violence, an alarming 83% claimed that their husbands were the main perpetrators of such forms of abuse, followed by abuse from the mothers, fathers and siblings of the husbands. The major crimes reported by women in India are cruelty by husband or relatives, assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty, kidnapping and abductions and rape.

In 2018, a **United Nations study** mentioned worldwide, of all female murders, an overwhelming 82% happen in their marital homes, and are committed by an intimate partner or a family member.

### CAUSES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- ✓ **Patriarchy:** Some people with very traditional beliefs may think they have the right to control their partner, and that women aren't equal to men. According to NFHS data 42% of the surveyed men think there is at least one valid reason for wife-beating.
- ✓ **Societal influence:** Some abusers learn violent behaviour from their family, people in their community and other cultural influences as they grow up. Boys who learn that women are not to be appreciated or respected and who see violence directed against women are more likely to abuse women when they grow up. Girls who observe domestic violence in their families of origin are more likely to be offended by their own husbands.
- ✓ **Economic causes:** Alcohol, drugs and unemployment may also contribute to violent behaviour.
- ✓ **Socio-Cultural:** Dowry related demises and honour killings are also a reality that testifies domestic violence.
- ✓ **Individual Factor:** Some abusers may feel this need to control their partner because of low self-confidence, high jealousy, difficulties in regulating anger and other strong emotions, or when they feel lower to the other partner in education and socioeconomic background.

### SCENARIO IN INDIA

*National Commission for Women (NCW)* has seen a more than double rise in gender-based violence during the lockdown in India. Total complaints from women rose from 116 in the first week of March to 257 in the final week. Between 23 March and 16 April NCW registered 587 domestic violence complaints, and 45% increase from the previous 25 days. Factors compounding the situation include the confinement, financial worries due to the lockdown, and lack of access to alcohol. There has also been a threefold rise in police apathy towards women complaints, with the police busy with lockdown orders. Indian women rights activist Kavita Krishnan said that women told her that had the Indian government given a warning about the lockdown, they could have tried moving to safer locations in time.

#### Is India different?

There is evidence for India that alcohol consumption by men increases violence against women, both inside and outside the home. In principle, therefore, any increase in the total cases of violence induced by confinement, stress or unemployment could be offset by reduced incidents of street violence, as well as reduced alcohol-fuelled violence. There is also an opinion that the joint family could protect Indian women against domestic violence, a protection not on the cards for western women.

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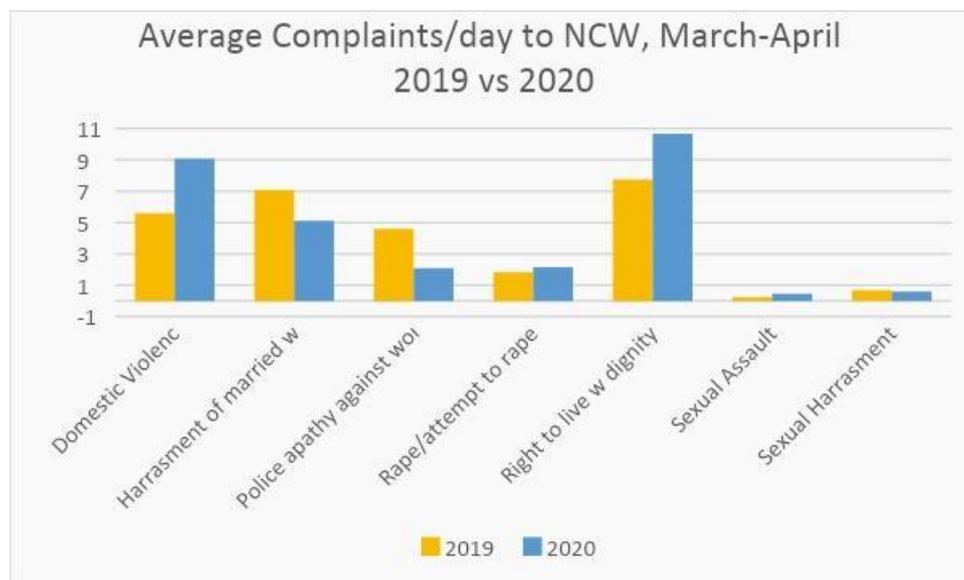
The public concern about violence outside the home, which results in advice to women about how they should dress and stay off public spaces, obfuscates the enormity of intimate violence inside homes, by husbands, fathers, uncles, including members of joint families. Accounts of survivors disclose how other women in the family either watch helplessly or condone/minimise/ignore the abuse. This abuse, because of its place (inside the home) and its culprit (a close relative), is widely underreported. Women who are fearless enough to complain about domestic violence represent the tip of the iceberg.

With these caveats in mind, the first set of numbers from complaints made to the National Commission for Women (NCW) is telling. We need to remember that NCW receives very few complaints about most people tend to contact the police first. Thus, these numbers are massive underestimates, over and above the larger issue of domestic abuse being under-reported. However, police data is made available to the public with a huge lag, hence this is the best we have right now.

Comparing figures for March–April 2019 to March 2020 and April 1 to 13, I calculated the average per day complaints. These comparisons are very rough. As the lockdown proceeds, it is likely that rest of April sees a further spike, with rates higher than last year.

The chart shows that there is already a sharp jump in complaints related to domestic violence and the “right to live with dignity”, and a smaller increase in rape/attempt to rape and sexual assault. The last two charges are telling, as this number covers two weeks of complete lockdown (therefore no movement outside the home), and reduced mobility in March due to fear of infection. Thus, these rapes and assaults include those perpetrated by family members.

India, unfortunately, is not an exception to the global trend of increased pandemic induced domestic violence.



### **ACTION PLAN OF GOVERNMENT**

Governments have come up with new ways to tackle domestic violence in the times of restriction imposed due to lockdowns during the corona virus pandemic. Italy has launched an app that allows asking for help without the need to make a phone call. The French government has launched an initiative to help victims by new hotlines and a website for

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resources, along with implementing code words to tell Pharmacy staff after learning of the program from Spain and the Canary Islands. Western Australia has created a COVID-19 Family and Domestic Violence Task force with the Department of Communities to work with the police force and service providers to ensure the continuation of services, allowed courts to impose electronic monitoring on offenders and raised penalty amounts.

The Scottish Government re-launched its previous awareness campaign against domestic abuse on 10 April 2020, with Justice Secretary Humza Yousaf emphasising that victims can call on police and support services round the clock, even during the crisis, and they do not have to wait until the crisis is over. A government advertisement released on the same day was more emphatic: 'Don't delay in seeking help during the current coronavirus situation.'

In India, the National Commission for Women re-launched a WhatsApp number for the duration of the lockdown. This would allow women to contact them for help related to domestic violence through messages. One in every six new complaints during the lockdown has been made over this WhatsApp number. Odisha Police has launched a drive to contact and ascertain the status of all previous cases of domestic violence in the state. In Pune, perpetrators of domestic violence will be institutionally quarantined. Three Indian agencies related to women's welfare will conduct an anti-domestic violence drive similar to the United Nation's "Ring the bell campaign".

Due to increased tension in the household during a pandemic, women and girls are likely to experience higher risk of intimate partner violence and other forms of domestic violence. In Kosovo, there has been a 17% increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic. During periods of lockdown, women experiencing domestic violence have limited access to protective services.

### IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN INDIA:

- ✓ **Under reporting of the Cases:** The National Commission of Women has recorded 291 complaints of domestic violence in April 2020 and is now only receiving complaints via email or Phone calls. However actual reported cases may be quite low. With curtailed mobility and a police force being engaged in ensuring that lockdown properly followed, women are losing even the avenues that could have saved them from abuse, and in extreme cases, death. Further, due to the prevalence of orthodox social norms and the stigma that is placed on survivors of domestic violence, such cases are being **grossly under-reported**. Women belonging to poor and vulnerable classes are not able to file any complaints.
- ✓ **Defunct NGOs:** The counselling centres are supposed to reach out to the complaint pertaining to domestic violence. However, amid lockdown the **NGOs and volunteer organisations that** are usually the avenues for women to report such attacks are not working.
- ✓ **Destabilization of Gender Equality:** The **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)- 5** that seeks to “eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women in the public and private spheres, and to undertake reforms to give them the same rights to economic resources and access to property by 2030,” is being enormously compromised.
- ✓ **Impact of psychosocial factor:** An additional challenge has been the importance of intertwined **negative psychosocial impact on mental health of women.**

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As the steps to contain the transmission of the virus might require more stretches of isolation and confinement for the public, the government all around the globe, need to address the upsurge in domestic violence immediately. In this context:

It is critical that governments utilise a human rights and intersectional based approach to ensure that everyone, including the most marginalised, has access to necessary information, support systems and resources during the current crisis.

- ✓ The state governments need to declare **help lines as “essential services”** that should remain open during lockdowns.
- ✓ **Media can make awake the public** against gender-based violence, publicise resources and services available and boost the equitable sharing of domestic tasks at home.
- ✓ **Increase resourcing for NGOs** that respond to domestic violence and help including shelter, counselling, and legal help to victims and promote those that remain open.
- ✓ Ensure women’s timely access to essential and **comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services** during the crisis, such as maternal health facilities, safe abortion etc.
- ✓ Finally, the perpetrators of domestic violence must be brought to trial and repeated offenders must be dealt with strictly as per the provisions of law.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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