

## Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in the wake of COVID-19 in India: a conceptual overview

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### ABSTRACT

Violence against women remains a significant threat to global public health as well as women's health during emergencies. As per the available literature, one in three women worldwide was reported to be experiencing either physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. In this period of COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have reported an increase in the cases related to violence against women. The present paper is a conceptual overview of the chances of victimization by intimate partner violence (IPV) among women in India during the lockdown period associated with COVID-19. Solutions are uncertain as there is no clear model for the current crisis in the literature. Exploring the psycho-social factors contributing to IPV would provide an insight into both physical as well as psychological harm induced to women and thereby enhancing safety and rehabilitation for victims from perpetrators. Implementing intervention programs, creating awareness among the public about the existing civil and criminal legal frameworks, and strengthening women's civil rights can address the concerns on violence against women.

**Keywords:** *Intimate Partner Violence, COVID-19, India, Intervention Programs, Civil Rights*

As COVID-19 continues to be a global pandemic, administrators of the countries like India, with the support of the public, have taken dedicated steps to slow-down its expansion. People are encouraged to practice social distancing and 'break the chain' of the transfer of the virus through activities such as regular washing of hands or by using hand sanitizer repeatedly and wearing masks. Many states undergo lockdown for a period of 15 to 45 days, closing the schools, business institutions, and restricting gatherings, even for a mass or a prayer. At this point, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres notes, it is unfortunate to see a growing number of reports about domestic violence across the world (UN News, 2020). Newspaper reports indicate that despite the decline in crimes such as theft, murder, and rape (The Guardian, 2020; Hindustan Times, 2020; Time, 2020), domestic violence and cybercrime have increased in the wake of the lockdown (The Federal, 2020; Taub, 2020). According to the National Commission for Women (NCW), India, the number of complaints of violence against women in India has doubled during the period of lockdown (Chandra,

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2020; Shivakumar, 2020). During this COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations called domestic violence against women expanding across the world, a "shadow pandemic"(UN Women, 2020).

### ***Cases reported to the National Commission for Women (NCW)***

Referring to the reports of NCW, a total of 370 grievances received on violence against women between March 20 and April 10, out of which 123 were of domestic violence. From March 23 to 29 alone, there were 49 domestic violence cases. Out of 145 grievances received from March 30 to April 5, 28 were domestic violence offenses. From April 6 to 10, there were 48 grievances on domestic violence. The number of complaints related to other crimes against women was 115. Domestic violence reports were high in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, and Punjab. According to Jacob and Chattopadhyay (2019), women in India, who experiences violence, may not use institutional routes to report it. So, the numbers may not be providing a real picture of the violence against women. However, NCW devised an emergency WhatsApp number (+917217735372) to increase the feasibility of registering domestic violence complaints. This is in addition to the available facilities such as an online link in the website of NCW, and email.

### ***Contributing factors for Intimate Partner Violence***

Violence against women that has a high probability of occurring in this lockdown situation is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). According to WHO (2012), IPV is a common form of violence against women and includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and controlling behaviors by an intimate partner. Conceptually, IPV differs from domestic violence(Patra, Prakash, Patra, & Khanna, 2018). IPV is defined as any behavior within an intimate relationship (married, unmarried, and live-in) that causes psychological, sexual or physical harm to those in that relationship. Domestic violence, on the other hand, is the emotional, physical, and sexual maltreatment of one family member by another. If IPV occurs in a domestic situation, it will become Intimate Partner Domestic Violence (IPDV). The majority of the incidents of IPDV recorded by the police were male-to-female abuse (Hester, 2009). Reports of NCW confirms that the same happens in the current situation also.

IPV can be psychological, sexual, or physical (World Health Organization, 2012). Some examples are physical violence like beating, hitting, slapping; sexual violence including any form of sexual coercion or forced sexual intercourse; psychological abuses such as insults, intimidation, belittling, threats, constant humiliation; and controlling behaviors such as isolating from family and friends, monitoring the activities, limiting the freedom to use economic resources, restricting access to health care, education, and employment(Dokkedahl, et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2012). Based on the severity of the abuse, IPV is classified into three levels (Patra, Prakash, Patra, & Khanna, 2018). Level I comprise the abuses aiming at the intimidation or damaging the property and pet of the victim. Attacks through kicking, slapping, and biting are included in level II. Hostile attacks using a weapon, strangulate, or attempt to choke were classified as level III. One in three ever-partnered women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner (Patra, Prakash, Patra, & Khanna, 2018).

The causal factors or contributing factors of IPV are countless. Studies show that perpetrators are generally arrogant and jealous of their partner(Santhosh, 2016; Jewkes, 2002; Abramsky, et al., 2011; World Health Organization, 2012). They feel that the partner should remain under control. Any contrary indications will arouse their inferiority. They have little ability to control their anger. Education level, age, experiencing or witnessing

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violence during childhood, risky use of drugs or alcohol, personality disorders, acceptance of violence (for instance, accepting that a man can beat his partner), previous history, low social and economic status of women, poverty, lack of women's civil rights, including restrictive or inequitable divorce and marriage laws, weak community sanctions against Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), social acceptance of violence as a conflict resolution strategy; and armed conflict and high levels of general violence in society were identified as the factors that contribute to IPV. Patra, Prakash, Patra, and Khanna (2018) classifies these factors into cultural, economic, legal, political, and alcohol usage related. IPV reports from India in the wake of the lockdown associated with COVID-19 are more likely to be associated with cultural and economic factors.

### ***Role of culture***

Even though India is a multicultural society, a major part of it commonly follows patriarchy. Patriarchal societies have a male-dominated power structure, which sanctions the control of men over women. Traditionally, the majority of the citizens follow the unwritten rule that women are owned by the person who married her, even though the written rules fairly provide freedom and equality despite gender differences. Men in the family are the primary breadwinners and have the power to control women through various means. Culturally and economically, women stand behind men. Women do not have the liberty to make decisions or control the economy without the consent of an authority recognized by men in the family. In certain families in urban areas, women could go for work but still cannot make economic decisions without the consent of men. However, society is currently undergoing a transformation, though at a slow pace.

During the lockdown period, these cultural and economic roots of these power and economic dynamics play a significant role in stimulating intimate partner violence. Men who are usually at the job during the daytime were left at home with nothing to do in the current lockdown scenario. A feature in Economic and Political Weekly (EPW Engage, 2020) quotes the sociologist Marianne Hester to note that violence goes up during vacations when the families spend more time together. Women, on the other hand, were compelled to undergo domestic labor, as it is socially and culturally demarcated as women's work. The workload of women has increased in the houses, as everybody is at home. To make things worse, the housekeeping staffs were not able to attend due to lockdown. The intimate partners were not ready to share the workload. Instead, they closely monitor and find pieces of errors in whatever the women did.

At least to some men, the economic resources to support the families got terminated due to the temporary loss of the job, because of lockdown. This unexpected change resulted in the feeling of insecurity that led to frustration due to the perceived loss of power. Unemployment, low incomes, lack of resources, and lack of social support are likely to increase the perpetrators' misconceptions and pride. Lack of gender sensitization, economic insecurity, and social support based on the traditional and cultural beliefs to look down and control women, might have motivated the perpetrators.

### ***Victim precipitation in IPV***

Victims, on the other hand, were not able to seek help or share their difficulties as they were locked in at home with the perpetrators. Home became an unsafe place for them to stay away from the shadow pandemic, even though they are safe from the pandemic. Because of the social distancing, they were not able to go to the neighbors or friends to seek help. The presence of the perpetrators, and their close surveillance, limited their access to mobile

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phones, and the use of social media and the internet. As per the observation of EPW Engage (2020), Dalit women must be the most affected victims. Unlike the women from the dominant castes, their earning through daily labor is crucial for the survival of the family. They were subordinated in terms of power relations to men. In the lockdown situation, they have to stay home without sufficient earning under the control of the intimate partner, who also does not have sufficient earning.

IPV has direct and indirect effects on the physical and mental health of the victims (World Health Organization, 2012). It may lead to injuries such as bruises and fractures or even chronic disabilities, such as total or partial loss of hearing or vision (Patra, Prakash, Patra, & Khanna, 2018). The impact of the victimization may be there for days or even years, depending upon the severity, in the form of injury, gastrointestinal or gynecological signs including sexually transmitted diseases, chronic pain, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Campbell, 2002). However, it is wrong to think that all the victims may leave the perpetrator over time. As Lori Heise, Professor at John Hopkins University notes based on her 30 years of research in the field of IPV that they may not leave the perpetrator due to fear of retaliation, lack of alternative means of economic support, concern for their children, lack of support from family and friends. Stigma or fear of losing custody of children associated with divorce, love, and the hope that the partner will change. Various studies support these observations (Barnett, 2000; Kaur & Garg, 2008; Copp, Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2015; Tsegay, et al., 2018)

### *Addressing Intimate Partner Violence for a noble cause*

Literature has information about different methods to control and eradicate IPV. One of the most appreciated methods is to promote the social and economic empowerment of women (boys and girls). However, this is a gradual process, which is not possible in a lockdown situation like this. Empowerment orientations through social media will not reach the mainstream, as a majority is still poor in technological skills or do not have access to it. Moreover, the patriarchal culture has trained them to be helpless (learned helplessness) in violent circumstances at home. Another method is to implement a strength-based intervention among the perpetrators, promoting nonviolence and gender sensitization. However, it is also not possible in this short frame of time, as they are culturally trained to be hostile and power inducing. There have to be early intervention services in at-risk families to develop a schema of equality and gender equity. What we can do immediately is to raise the awareness among the public about the existing civil and criminal legal frameworks, organizing media and advocacy campaigns about existing legislation, and by strengthening women's civil rights related to divorce, property, child support and custody, through coalitions of government and civil society institutions

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