The Shadow Pandemic - Escalation of Domestic Violence during Lockdown

Bharati Kudchadker
PhD Research Scholar
Dept. of English, (Arts and Humanities)
Savitribai Phule Pune University, IASE, Pune, India

Abstract: The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has turned the world upside down. Life will never be the same again. The Merriam Webster Dictionary has pronounced the word “Pandemic” as the Word of the Year 2020. Stories of despair hope and survival have unfolded over the period of time since the pandemic was declared in March 2020 and the lockdown was announced. As with any event of such magnitude, positive as well as negative effects were experienced all over the world. The physical and mental trauma has been immense, and a bewildering maelstrom of emotions have been brought on by the pandemic.

Alongside the actual COVID-19 pandemic, there is another invisible pestilence which is lurking beneath the surface very stealthily and that is the pandemic of domestic violence which has seen an upsurge during the lockdown. For existing victims, their situation was exacerbated drastically. Newspapers in all the countries of the world have reported an increase in the incidents of domestic violence after the lockdowns began.

This paper attempts to explore the causes for the escalation in cases as well as suggest remedies for this pestilence.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, domestic violence, lockdown, newspaper reports, non-literary writings

INTRODUCTION

The insidious evil of domestic violence has been existing in every society across the globe since times immemorial. In countries with a traditional structure and patriarchal set ups, the prevalence is noticed even more. What is alarming is the fact that domestic violence is regarded as something to be borne silently by women especially when it is spousal abuse. Men consider it their right to ill-treat or humiliate women as they are regarded as the weaker sex.

Domestic violence in the olden days used to mean a husband beating up his wife. Today the ambit of the term has been broadened considerably. It includes any kind of violence including physical, emotional, sexual, and economic. It can also refer to violence committed by the wife or same sex partner. It also includes violence committed upon children and this is called family violence.

There are many causes of domestic violence such as lack of self-esteem, experiencing violence during childhood, drug addiction, lack of employment, psychological issues, dearth of survival skills, seclusion or solitariness, and extreme reliance on the perpetrator of violence. The consequences are many and far reaching for the victims of domestic violence. The adverse effects of domestic violence on mental health are far more hazardous than the effects on physical health. It brings with it immense depression, nightmares, eating disorders as well as other social problems. Women who experience violence toy with thoughts of suicide. Hence immediate steps are needed to conquer these prolonged social issues. [1]

There are numerous theories of domestic violence too, including Feminist Theory which deal with gender discrimination as the foundation of domestic violence against women.

From verbal to physical abuse and murder, domestic violence is a silent menace which has crept into the everyday lives of millions of women across the world. Sweeping it under the carpet or acting like an ostrich that buries its head in the sand has not helped at all. It is only of late that women have been standing up for themselves and trying to escape from the trauma that is invariably caused to them.

The stigma of a wife complaining about domestic violence by the husband is sometimes what prevents the woman from reporting about it. The fear of the societal norms and sometimes concern for her children are what shackle her to a life of repeated beatings and worse. Economic dependence on the husband and lack of support from parents are what keep her mutely suffering the atrocities that are heaped upon her on a regular basis.

Apart from the physical violence, sometimes the mental torture of her husband’s taunts, suspicions and verbal abuse are enough to shatter her self-esteem, and these leave her broken and helpless, unable to fend for herself or take recourse to legal aid. In some parts of the world, the mind set of it being considered as destiny or, it is the lot of a woman in life to suffer at the hands of the husband, has been ingrained into the psyche of young girls. Often the husband is regarded as God to be worshipped and served on hand and foot. A blind eye is turned on anything untoward that he does. In a country such as India, where the girl child is killed at birth or even before and the male progeny is revered and celebrated, it is the norm to expect women to remain submissive and compliant to every wish of her husband.

Hence in such a scenario, the malady of domestic violence has flourished and thrived with impunity. It is only recently that most countries have formulated legislations and formed organizations to intervene and help the women who are brutally battered and bruised at the hands of their so-called ‘caregivers’.

Although women have been suffering silently against this violence at home, their situation was exacerbated when various governments across the world announced lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.
When the COVID-19 pandemic was raging across the world with ferocity, this evil took on even more sinister connotations for millions of women all over the world. Aptly termed ‘the shadow pandemic’, stay at home orders had only fuelled the increase of this heinous crime. ‘Stay home, stay safe’ was the war cry of every government and it had become a cliché in these times of turmoil. Apart from the evident fact that one could beat COVID-19 by staying isolated at home, what was overlooked blithely was the fact that many women ended up being locked up in their homes with their abusers. They had no avenues of escape and nowhere to turn during the days of lockdowns.

Adding to their woes, they were shut off from the regular means of communication with their extended family members. Constant 24x7 monitoring or surveillance with their spouses breathing down their neck ensured that they could get no privacy to make that all important phone call to reach out to their support systems for help. Often women had no phones to call the helplines and travelling to their parents’ homes became impossible due to curfews and travel restrictions. [2] Being cut off from all help whatsoever, these hapless women and their children were made to suffer the ignominy of repeated domestic abuse without any recourse to aid or intervention.

This circumstance is rightly called the “shadow pandemic” as it goes hand in hand with isolation and staying at home. The government authorities could never have guessed the magnitude of the problem as this bane of domestic violence was exacerbated manifold during the lockdown. The perpetrators having the upper hand in these circumstances ensured that the women were made to feel even more dependent and helpless than in normal circumstances.

Due to the unprecedented situation, we ended up with a new “normal”, a transformed routine and non-literary writing archived the effect. Infectious diseases remind us forcefully that the social and cultural borders we use to structure society are delicate and permeable rather than secure, and impenetrable. Scourges tend to bring out the best and the worst in us and newspapers keep the record. Although many people had stopped their newspaper subscriptions during the lockdowns, the online versions kept everyone informed about the spread of the pandemic and the breakthroughs and progress made in the vaccine development effort.

In addition to this, an alarming fact came to light through these newspaper and other articles, and that was the increase in the number of cases of domestic violence during this same period. Women in India filed more domestic violence complaints during the first four phases of the lockdown in India as compared to a similar period during the previous ten years. [3]

Some incidents were disclosed, others were tried to be kept hidden but eventually it became a well-established fact that this bane was assuming disturbing proportions as each lockdown was extended. These writings give us an opportunity to bring into the open and discuss this vital, though often hidden issue of domestic violence. It also provides ideas about how we might structure our societies more fairly in the aftermath of a pandemic. Without initiating dialogue on these heinous crimes, these reprehensible acts would continue to be perpetuated with impunity. The stigma and socio-cultural standards create reluctance in subjecting the family and its intimate relationships to public scrutiny. Therefore, building awareness around domestic violence is urgent, including possible prevention and mitigation measures—rather than simply examining trends.

The researcher has identified significant causes for the increase in cases during the lockdowns, as reported in various newspapers reports and journal articles worldwide. For the purpose of this paper, only the rise in cases in India will be dealt with. According to a newspaper article published in the Indian Express, there has been a manifold increase in the number of complaints regarding domestic violence during the lockdown. In merely four months from March to July 2020, the count of domestic violence cases recorded is more than 25% of the total complaints registered in the last three years. There were many difficulties faced by women when it came to reporting such cases in the midst of a pandemic. Women were being prevented from stepping outside their homes, they did not have access to phones or internet, they lacked the support of their extended or native families. All this led to a decrease in the reporting of cases whereas the situation was to the contrary. [4]

CAUSES

One of the most important reasons for the rise in cases was due to economic hardship, loss of jobs and the atmosphere of uncertainty that was prevalent during the lockdown period. The pandemic wreaked havoc on many people as they lost their jobs, and they faced a bleak future filled with unpredictability and anxiety. Also, women were the first to lose their jobs and when they were no longer able to contribute towards the household expenses or provide their spouses with money, they became victims of domestic abuse. [5] [6] This in turn made many alcoholics hit the bottle at home even more during the lockdowns, again liquor shops were shut and this added to the general feeling of frustration which resulted in violent attacks on their partners. Children also bore the brunt of their ire. During lockdowns, the usual support workers from NGOs working in this domain were also unavailable. Isolation and social distancing meant no more home visits or personal contact. [7] Migrant workers lost their jobs and their spouses had to face violence as a consequence. They vented their frustration at their inability to provide for their families by beating up their wives and abusing them. As a result of schools closing down and financial repercussions, young girls faced an additional risk of getting married while they were minors as a consequence of the adverse coping mechanisms employed to beat COVID-19. It was evident that during an emergency when women and children are trapped inside their homes, they become more susceptible to domestic violence. Generally, the bone of contention resulting in disputes is one among the following—who will do the household chores, whether one partner is spending more than necessary, whether one partner is resorting to binge eating or drinking and when the emotions of either spouse are not being dealt with, leading to communication breakdown between them. [8] In order to eradicate this plague, the Legislature should make the required amendments in The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 by giving protection to women and children.

Although the Indian government has made huge strides in curbing the rampant epidemic of violence against women, there is still much to be done. Just making laws against domestic violence in India to safeguard women from abuse is not sufficient. Even after the 2013 amendment in criminal law whose goal was to mete out stringent and speedy punishment for those who
perpetrate violence against women, brutal crimes continue to take place. It is also evident that our laws are less than efficacious, especially in the handling of current epidemic related problems.

REMEDIES

An important measure for progress is changing the whole perception of society towards women. More sensitization on how to treat women as equals is required, along with counselling. These seem to be the most practicable remedies during an epidemic outbreak which brought about a national lockdown. Professional counsellors, experienced mediators, trained lawyers, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, psychologists, or anyone who could help must volunteer to help those in need. This could be achieved through phone, WhatsApp, videoconferencing or even via mass media.

 Celebrities who wield great influence over the masses must be roped in to convey a strong message for the safety of women and children who are trapped at home with their abusers. Pharmacies can be made use of to provide some succour, when women go there, the women could use secret signs or code words to convey that they were suffering from abuse at home. Neighbours too play a vital role in preventing such violent incidents. Destroying the commonality encompassing domestic violence, the general public should be vigorously committed to stop the increasing occurrences of domestic violence. The ‘Bell Bajao Andolan’ in India rallies neighbours to bang on doors, ring the doorbell and make some noise to let the abuser be aware that he is being watched. Witnesses can be motivated to report the occurrences of domestic violence by ensuring that their complaints are anonymous.

 Legal help, advice, and refuge must be provided to women experiencing violence; building special codes to provide help to transwomen, women with disabilities, and itinerant women who are all the more neglected and have very little access to aid; and creating a committee of lawyers providing legal information to women over the telephone, are some of the urgent steps to be taken. Providing them with food, medicine, medical aid as well a safe shelter to stay in case they cannot return home is imperative.

CONCLUSION

It may thus be concluded that there is a requirement for a comprehensive and integrated response design to handle the problems of gender-based violence during the current as well as possible future pandemics. Health professionals, the media, and community endeavours must be united to efficiently solve the issue of gender-based violence. In addition, constant, and uncompromising efforts are needed to end the shame and disgrace connected with gender-based violence. The availability of 24/7 immediate counselling, overhaul, and availability of mental health services in the safe houses should be categorized as fundamental services. Along the lines of the national campaigns on COVID-19, the government could use various mass media platforms to increase awareness about the resources that the victims of domestic violence can access.

 Combining the current emergency-reporting phone services with Short Message Service or WhatsApp might make it simpler for the victim to register the occurrence in the event they are frightened that their phone call might be overheard. Advertising campaigns can be run that reiterate the crucial point about sharing household work, as well as creating awareness about the ramifications of domestic violence on the abuser.

 Although the police should be contacted as the last resort, the police officers, who are frequently the first responders to assist the women, also require to be taught to make sure that the abusers are not merely let off with a word of caution and that women’s domestic violence complaints are dealt with utmost priority. They must exhibit sensitivity and compassion while dealing with the victims.

 Above all, there is a dire need to acknowledge domestic violence as a silent pandemic by the governments of all countries. It is equally imperative to identify the financial expenses of this silent pandemic to allow governments to include a separate budget during stimuli packages to resolve the issues pertaining to domestic violence. Before the pandemic, it was calculated that limited participation of women in the manual workforce due to the physical and mental trauma caused by domestic violence would prove expensive. However, this statistic would definitely increase with the rise in the domestic violence cases and create an even more serious financial penalty.

REFERENCES
