

Gender Based Violence and Covid-19

A Review of Extant Cases

Ms. Bharati Kudchadker, Dr. Gautami Pawar

PhD Research Scholar, Prof & Head Dept.ofEnglish AG College
Dept. of English, (Arts and Humanities),
Savitribai Phule Pune University, IASE, Pune-7, India

Abstract—Covid-19 swept the world by storm and caught everyone unawares. No one could have imagined the devastation, despair and loss of life that it brought along with it. When the first cases were reported from Wuhan in China, people around the globe felt it would die down and would not affect them. Little did they know the entire world would be brought to its knees because of that microscopic virus with such an aristocratic name. People across all nations were made to stay at home, not being allowed to venture outside except in case of emergencies. It was a difficult and traumatic time which people became used to very slowly. No one was even aware about another ‘virus’ which was spreading equally rapidly. The cases of gender- based violence grew manifold. The very situation requiring spouses to remain in close proximity to each other ensured that there would be an increase in the number of cases being reported. This paper seeks to review two actual cases which were successfully handled by the counsellors at the Family Planning Association of India (FPAI) analyze them and thereby conclude that proper education, legal aid and creating awareness of women’s rights is the need of the hour.

Keywords: COVID-19, isolation, gender-based violence, education, FPAI, support, counselling

INTRODUCTION

Gender based violence is an all- encompassing term which includes physical, mental, sexual and economic abuse. It also involves threat of harm, under age marriage, killing people to uphold the honour of the family and inflicting injury to the genitals of females. Every human being is entitled to some basic fundamental human rights. However, females have always been regarded as being the weaker sex and hence violence against females is wide spread and almost normal in some communities and some countries. Gender-based violence cripples the physical, emotional and social well-being of females. Apart from this, the self-respect, safety and independence of these women suffer a massive beating. They often have to bear the consequences of unsought for pregnancies, hazardous termination of pregnancies, sexually-transmitted diseases and sometimes even death due to these factors.

In a study undertaken on around ten thousand women, 26 per cent women said they had suffered physical violence from their spouses. In another study that was conducted, statistics revealed that only 25 per cent of victims who survived asked for help and 33 per cent did not disclose the incidents to even their neighbours or friends. [1] Along with the fear of being beaten up for the slightest of reasons, is the danger of having to go through dangerous procedures for abortions. They end up becoming anemic and helpless, with no control over their own bodies. This coupled with the shame and hesitancy to report against their own spouses results in these women continuing to tolerate such humiliation and trauma for years together. Often these women have little children to look after, they fear for the future of these children and hence choose to remain silent rather than seeking help and counselling. Most of these women are also illiterate or haven’t been educated enough to know their own rights or the laws in place for their protection. Families often turn a blind eye, even though they know of female members suffering abuse. During the Covid-19 pandemic when everyone was supposed to stay indoors for extended periods of time, women who suffered in silence earlier had an even greater ordeal to face- prolonged abuse and control of their lives by their spouses. It became unbearable for them. Their safety- the very reason for which they were being asked to stay at home became a life-threatening situation for them instead. With their every movement being monitored, it became impossible for them to even ask for help from anyone. The very purpose of their isolation was defeated and they began to face all forms of abuse at the hands of their spouses and partners. As governments everywhere could not provide any remedy, very often, non-governmental organizations had to step up and assist these women. [2] In India, this was no exception and what governments failed to grasp was that a pandemic might affect men and women differently. Most non-governmental organizations also were working virtually. There were no walk-in services and most victims had to call on helplines or send an email. [3] One organization however which managed to remain open throughout the pandemic to aid and assist these helpless women was the Family Planning Association of India. It has been rendering sterling service in the field of women’s health and well-being. Covid-19 and the pandemic proved to be a set-back in the efforts and good work being carried out by organizations such as the FPAI. However, the Covid warriors working here persevered and continued to assist women in need. Two cases that were successfully dealt with by the counsellors at the FPAI Pune have been discussed below-

CASE ONE

Sabiya (name changed to protect identity) is a thirty-one-year-old Muslim woman, educated up to class 4 having four children- two boys and two girls. The pandemic was at its height at the time and most government hospitals were struggling to manage the patients suffering from Covid-19. They could not cater to other patients. Sabiya contacted the FPAI, Pune after being given

a reference by her neighbour. She was pregnant with her fifth child. She was screened for gender-based violence and she disclosed that she comes from a very poor and uneducated family. Her husband used to abuse her physically, emotionally and sexually. He would neither use nor allow her to use any methods of contraception and in their community, sterilization for women is taboo. She was angry and upset with her husband and also afraid as she had not told him about her visit to the FPAI clinic. She believed that she would need her husband's signature for the medical termination of pregnancy. The counsellors made her feel comfortable and explained in great detail the procedure for pre and post abortion and sterilization, gave information about sexual and reproductive health rights, women's abortion rights and the laws in place, namely The Domestic Violence Act 2005, whereby any woman facing abuse at the hands of her husband may file a complaint against him. She was advised that her husband's signature would not be required and she would only require a female friend or relative to be with her and take care of her after the procedure.

In the middle of the pandemic where there were shut-downs everywhere and people were being advised to stay in isolation, FPAI Pune managed to treat Sabiya successfully and helped her take one step ahead towards a healthier future. Sabiya felt empowered to make her own decisions after this counselling session and decided to go ahead with the procedure to terminate the unwanted pregnancy as well as undergo sterilization for her improved health in the future. She however refrained from lodging a complaint against her husband as she was worried about the future of her children and their upkeep.

CASE TWO

The second case is of Meena (name changed), 26 years old, a graduate (BA), pregnant and having a three-year-old son. She had approached the FPAI for some issues with excessive bleeding. However, during the gender-based violence screening, she broke down in tears and confided that she was an orphan belonging to a middle-class family. Her husband took advantage of her and abused her physically, emotionally and sexually. Her husband had forced her to undergo the medical termination of pregnancy procedure four times earlier, as he never used protection nor would he allow her to take precautions. This time when she learnt she was pregnant, he took her to a hospital, got her some pills and got the pregnancy terminated. However, the day before she approached the FPAI, she had been cooking in the kitchen. Her husband found fault with her for some trivial reasons and kicked her in the back twice. She fell down and hurt herself and her bleeding began anew. The pandemic and isolation at home had made Meena's husband feel frustrated and angry. He took out his temper on her Meena had to bear the brunt of his rage. Luckily for her, she decided to come to the FPAI for help. The counsellors at the FPAI informed her that her pregnancy had not been terminated properly, hence the bleeding. She was counselled and given information about abortion rights, sexual and reproductive health rights. Her self-esteem was boosted and she was comforted by their encouraging, sympathetic and helpful words of advice. She decided to take charge of her own life and body and was made to realize that her dependency on her husband was what was causing her misery.

ANALYSIS

1. **CASE ONE-** It is evident from the first case that there are many women like Sabiya who due to their lack of education, lack of knowledge and restrictions placed upon them by the community to which they belong, suffer abuse and fear their husbands. So much so that they endanger their own health and well-being. Ignorance and fear are the two biggest causes why women continue to suffer abuse. A lifetime of submission and being obedient to their husbands, never having the courage to go against their wishes have turned women into victims facing unimaginable horrors and misery. Sabiya could have avoided years of suffering and hardship, had she approached the FPAI or any other organization which provides support and counselling, much earlier. Apart from the obvious benefits to her physical, emotional and sexual health, it is important to note the change in her attitude and rise in levels of self-confidence. She became empowered to make her own decisions without any fear and took control of her own life and welfare.
2. **CASE TWO-** From the second case, we can conclude that despite being educated and a graduate, Meena was still allowing herself to be dependent on her husband. She was allowing herself to become a victim of abuse. If education is meant to enlighten and uplift our status in society, what had happened in the case of Meena? Obviously, education in the form of bookish knowledge alone is not enough. She was to blame in part for allowing herself to become the injured party. Being a graduate does not mean one is equipped to deal with the curveballs that are thrown at us by life, from time to time. Unless a person especially a woman, is confident about herself and her ability to stand on her own feet, no matter how many degrees she may acquire, she will never be able to stand up for herself or be able to fight for her rights. In case she suffers violence or abuse, she must know where to go to seek help and support.

CONCLUSION

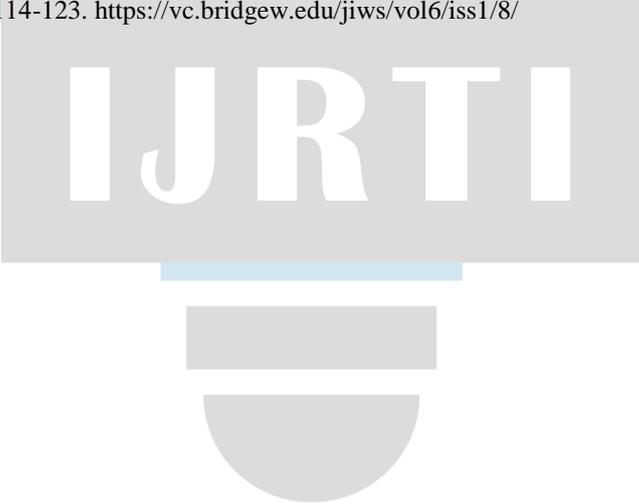
By comparing and contrasting the above two cases, we can conclude that education, though it is meant to be an empowering tool does not always guarantee a positive outcome for us unless we take charge of our own safety and well-being. In the case of Sabiya, another conclusion that can be drawn is that had she been educated; she might have been in a better position to stand up for herself. She would not have been at the mercy of her husband or lived in constant fear of reprisals. Blindly obeying the husband and neglecting to take care of herself was a cardinal sin committed by her.

Meena was a graduate and still was unaware of her rights. Repeated harm to herself and her health had still not opened her eyes to the dangers that lay ahead. She remained submissive and bore the difficulties and trauma over and over again. It was only after the counselling session that she realized what must be done. When everything was closed during the

pandemic, the fear and anxiety levels multiplied, and the mental trauma added to the physical injuries turned into a breaking point. Apart from the education levels of these two women, the social and cultural background, their religious affiliations and also their economic background, historical factors and psychological factors had a huge role to play in their lives and the misery that both had to undergo, before finally realizing their self-worth and sense of independence. Since ancient times, women in India have always faced discrimination and have been treated as being inferior compared to men. Years of subjugation, lack of independence and having no say in their own lives and futures have resulted in many women, who lack education, suffer at the hands of their own family members and especially their husbands. From these two cases, we can thus conclude that all-inclusive care must be provided to survivors of gender-based violence. Various departments like the department for women and child welfare, the judiciary, the police and governmental as well as non-governmental organizations must work hand in hand to provide support and counselling for these helpless women. All delicate questions resulting from violence must be handled compassionately and with sensitivity. Preferably all services from screening, investigation, counselling, shelter, legal aid, economic assistance, mental therapy to recovery and follow up should all be provided at one location. At the grass roots level, in all schools and colleges, sex education, gender sensitization and education about life and survival skills must be imparted at the adolescent stage. There should be widespread awareness about the helpline numbers and locations of organizations that work in the field of women and child care. The society also has to be sensitized not to label the survivors or shun them. The families also need to be counselled so that the survivor is accepted into the family and concrete steps taken to ensure that such violent incidents do not recur in future. In case the victims are from weaker socio-economic backgrounds, free legal services, food, clothing, medicines and treatment must be provided. Constant follow up also must be done so that the victim is also reassured that the support provided was not a one-off case and that she will continue to have backing and support whenever required. Above all, everyone must treat women as being equal to men, they should treat her with respect and let her retain her self-esteem. Girls in all schools and colleges must be given education about their legal rights, creating awareness about the organizations working in the field of women welfare so that they know who they should approach when the need arises. Educating everyone about gender discrimination and why it must end. Make use of mass media and social media to spread Awareness about gender-based violence and how to prevent it. [4]

REFERENCES

1. Harbishettar, Vijaykumar, Math, Bada Suresh, "Violence against women in India: Comprehensive care for survivors," The Indian journal of medical research, vol. 140, 2 (2014): 157-9
2. Mittal, Shalini, Singh, Tushar, "Gender-based violence during Covid-19 pandemic: A mini review," Frontiers in Global Women's Health, 2020. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fgwh.2020.00004/full>
3. Roy, Anusua Singh, Sen, Nandini, Bagchi, Subrata Shankar, "Gender-based violence in India in Covid-19 lockdown", 2020. http://jcla.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/JCLA-44.1-Spring-2021_Anusua-Nandini-Subrata.pdf
4. Sharma, B.R., Gupta, Manisha, "Gender based violence in India: A never-ending phenomenon," Journal of international women's studies, 6(1), 114-123. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol6/iss1/8/>



IJRTI