The Bane of Society: Why Domestic Violence Cases Go Unreported During Lockdown

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Abstract—Domestic violence is a social evil that has been prevalent since ancient times. In orthodox or traditional societies, people prefer to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to it. It is only in more progressive societies that women are encouraged to report instances and seek justice. In India, the tide has changed and more and more women are coming forward to file complaints. The necessary support they require is slowly becoming available. What was once considered a taboo, has become an issue of grave concern to be addressed immediately. During the recent lockdowns, this scourge once again reared its ugly head and with a malevolence that was palpable. Every newspaper worldwide carried reports of violent incidents and alarm bells started ringing. Apart from the media, the World Health Organization, government agencies as well as NGOs and health care professionals gave wide coverage to this pestilence and attempted to create awareness among women in particular so that they may be encouraged to come forward and report their problems. Unfortunately, the very purpose of the lockdown which was meant to keep people safe in their homes proved to be deadly dangerous for hapless women victims who were locked behind closed doors, in the close confines of their homes. Separated as they were from any external support or help, they suffered helplessly and some paid with their lives.

This paper attempts to outline the causes for a decrease in reporting of domestic violence cases during lockdowns.

Keywords: COVID-19, domestic violence, lockdown, decrease in cases, confinement, danger, no refuge

INTRODUCTION

A woman’s home is her refuge, a safe place for her to reside, her world revolves around it. For every woman, danger is perceived to be lurking around every corner, the minute she steps outside her home. The bitter reality is that for a majority of women, their own homes have become minefields and battlegrounds. Waging a daily battle against violence has become commonplace for them. So much so that they have learnt to take it in their stride, sometimes tolerating the beatings and vicious physical, sexual and verbal attacks without so much as a batting an eyelid. They have become thick skinned and inured to the lashings because they know they are trapped with nowhere to go. The mental trauma along with the physical torture might even lead some to contemplate suicide as the only escape. The only light at the end of the tunnel for these women invariably was the hope of meeting their parents, siblings or friends with whom they could share their woes and lighten their burden. Sometimes meeting a social worker, health care professional or a counsellor also helped immensely. It gave them the opportunity to cope better and face the humiliation and indignities with courage and fortitude. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and its corresponding lockdowns turned their whole lives topsy turvy. Even the tiny sliver of hope left in them was brutally extinguished. The reason was the restrictions in movement outside their homes. This was being enforced strictly during the lockdowns. [1] Even if they would have braved being hauled up and penalized for venturing forth, out of their homes, the terror induced by the sinister, miniscule virus would have stopped them short in their tracks. When some newspapers reported that there was an actual decrease in the number of cases of domestic violence during the lockdown [2] it was actually misleading. In fact, the scenario was just the opposite. Cases were on the rise. The only difference between pre-pandemic and pandemic statistics was the decrease in the reporting of cases rather than a decrease in cases per se. Generally, when a woman becomes a victim of domestic abuse, the first person she confides in is her mother or a friend. These are the people who guide and support her, advise her to report the incident to the police. Frightened, humiliated and beaten, she would never be able to fight the situation and her perpetrator alone. If it is a recurrent situation, social workers, doctors and counsellors are the only ones who can come to her aid. With their backing, she would muster up courage to file a complaint. However, during the lockdowns doctors and social workers took up new roles as front-line warriors and grew busy in fighting the deadly virus. No one had time to even think about the plight of these vulnerable and defenseless women who were in dire need of assistance. Their needs were neglected and combating the virus became top priority. Only Covid cases were being dealt with in hospitals and doctors’ clinics. Anything that was not an emergency case was being turned away. Hospitals were filled to capacity with Covid patients and people dying like flies. The sexual and mental health of the domestic violence victims were not considered at all. It was each one for themselves. Survival became key in such a crisis. In India, the National Family Health Survey-4, conducted in 2015-16, revealed that 33% of married women in the age group of 15-49 experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence. Of these women, only 14% sought help and 77% never spoke about it. Among those who sought help, 65% reported to the natal family and only 3% reported the case to the police. The National Commission for Women monthly data provided a different picture. It exhibited an overall reduction in the complaints received during the months of lockdown in comparison to even the first few months of 2020. The complaints that were received were: January: 538, February: 523, March: 501, April: 377. Later, the progressive loosening of the lockdown restrictions witnessed a consequent increase in the complaints. While 552 complaints were recorded in the month of May, June had more than 730 complaints. This data proves that while the
concern of a swift escalation in domestic violence cases during the lockdown was genuine, the incidents were not actively reported.[3]

CAUSES

The first and foremost cause for the decrease in reporting cases was the curbs imposed on mobility of people. Women victims experiencing violence could not leave their homes and seek refuge with their natal or extended families. Even if they wished to report the incident to a health care professional or social worker, they could not move out of their homes. The second cause was the constant surveillance the victims were subjected to. Being cloistered in their homes 24x7 with their abusers, without any kind of privacy or alone time meant they could not call for help even over the telephone. Even meeting neighbours was prohibited as social distancing measures were in place. The third cause was inability to access the phone helpline number provided by the National Commission for Women as the platform used was WhatsApp. Only 38% of women in India own mobile phones and out of these, even lesser have an internet connection. This number thus proved to be inaccessible to a large part of Indian women. [4] The fourth cause was the fact that generally women victims prefer to complain to their natal family, who in turn help them to file a police complaint. When the backing and support of their natal family itself was absent, these women victims could never think of approaching the police or other law enforcement institutions on their own to lodge complaints. The fifth cause was the unavailability of social workers and NGO personnel. Only essential services were functional during lockdowns and the protection officers had not been approved as being essential service providers. They could thus not call on them at their residences nor could they have any face-to-face communications with them. The sixth cause was that even if these women mustered their courage and tried to approach a police officer or went to the police station to lodge a complaint, there was a severe shortage of manpower. The police personnel were involved in frontline work of maintaining law and order and enforcing and regulating the COVID-19 restrictions during the lockdown. Due to this manpower crunch, very little could be done to help victims of domestic violence.

The most compelling and overriding cause was the fact that women were plagued with the fear of contracting the virus. Social distancing, wiping down of surfaces, masking of faces and other restrictions had instilled terror in their hearts and this had been fuelled by their abusive partners, who preyed on their gullibility and sometimes lack of education or knowledge. The controlling behaviour of the partners received a fillip during the lockdowns as they could then dominate and control every move, deed, word and act of their victims.

REMEDIES

In spite of the existence of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, very few women take recourse to legal help. First and foremost is because of absence of knowledge about its provisions. Next is an inherent scepticism about the efficacy of the police and legal systems. And lastly many women do not have the means necessary to acquire legal help. In such a scenario, aid, support, shelter become unattainable to them. With stringent restrictions in place during a lockdown, where for instance only one family member may be permitted to leave the home even to buy groceries, the woman of the house will face difficulties in leaving the marital home to report the abuse. Instead of using only WhatsApp numbers as their helpline numbers, social agencies and NGOs must put out regular telephone numbers as Internet access is very limited to only a few women. These telephone numbers must be widely publicized through various mediums like television, radio, newspapers (if printed hard copies are permitted). They must also be prominently displayed in doctors’ clinics, family welfare and health centres, hospitals, grocery stores and super markets. A lot can be done by neighbours who are always of such violent incidents because of their proximity to the victims’ homes. Instead of ignoring such situations, they must step in and do their bit. Even coming forward and ringing the doorbell and going away will suffice. In case they do not wish to embroil themselves in complex situations or wish to avoid confrontations, such an act on their part will at least stop the perpetrators in their tracks and will bring some respite to the victims. It could instil fear in the minds of the perpetrators that there is someone who knows what is going on and who might report the incident to the police. During lockdowns during pandemics, a protocol must be put in place at the outset itself. Social workers, NGO personnel and the like who work in the field to provide succour to women who face violence must be recognized as essential service workers to enable them to gain greater mobility. This will also allow them ingress into homes of victims and thus these women will be aware that help is at hand nearby. The sense of isolation which is so terrifying during a pandemic, coupled with the constant abuse at the hands of their perpetrators could make vulnerable women contemplate suicide. Knowing that help is at hand, will prevent such women from taking such a drastic step. Education ultimately is the key to eradicate ignorance, lack of knowledge about their fundamental and other rights. If such education is given from an early age to all girls in school, it will go a long way in enabling and empowering them to stand up for themselves, fighting back and building self-confidence. This could perhaps nip this curse in the bud and prevent untoward incidents from happening or becoming a regular feature in the lives of women.

During a pandemic, information about the contagious aspects, how the virus spreads and how the transmission can be prevented is of utmost importance. Generally, in rural areas where women are often not educated at all or possess just basic education, many superstitions prevail, hindering the safety of women in particular. Perpetrators exploit the ignorance of their victims and thus exert complete control and dominance over them, solely through creating and maintaining the ever-present fear in their minds about the disease and its spread.

CONCLUSION

It may thus be concluded that while domestic violence is regarded as a long-standing and recurrent problem faced by many societies, during a pandemic situation, the crisis worsens. The contradictory picture that emerges is one of lowering cases and amelioration of the violent abuse situations. However, the reality is quite sinister and malevolent. Decrease in cases does not
indicate a genuine decrease, rather it is proof that the number of cases actually sky-rocket. What changes is the reduction in the number of cases being reported. Rapid response and requisite efficient systems must be in place to combat this evil. If such a contingency is anticipated well in advance, only then can appropriate measures be taken to reign it in. If the powers that be are caught napping and are lost in their proverbial slumber, not much can be done to help save the lives of the vulnerable victims of domestic violence. The COVID-19 pandemic has in many ways been an eye opener as it brought to the fore such issues which were never thought of earlier. Governmental as well as non-governmental agencies can learn from these experiences to devise a better plan and implementation strategies to be put into effect in case of future epidemics and lockdown situations. Apart from providing physical and material support like shelters and safe houses for women, there is a pressing need for mental health education, counselling and psychiatric support to help women deal with and overcome the physical and mental trauma associated with domestic violence. Women must be encouraged to speak up rather than suffering in silence. The entire mind set of the society needs to be changed. Domestic violence always regarded as a taboo topic must be talked about openly. Discussions on public forums must take place regularly. The shame and stigma connected with domestic violence must be eradicated. Women must be made to understand that they are not to be blamed for their misery. There is no shame in bringing it out into the open and seeking help. Ultimately women must be empowered to become dauntless and self-reliant. Too much reliance on their partners in the form of economic reliance as well as emotional and physical reliance will only end up making them more vulnerable. They are often afraid for their children, the future of their children and societal disgrace. To avoid any gossip or scandals, they continue to tolerate and suffer every torment and persecution in silence. The days of martyrdom are long gone.

REFERENCES


