

Behind the doors of lockdown thrives domestic violence and abuse

By Suryaprabha Sadasivan 14 May 2020



The entire country has been in a month-long lockdown as a protective measure against the spread of pandemic COVID-19. However, there is a shadow pandemic that endangers the lives and well-being of women and children at homes in India today: domestic violence and abuse.

Besides its impact on social welfare and economy, COVID-19 has a darker and more worrisome consequence: a spike in calls to domestic violence helplines across the country. The National Commission for Women (NCW) registered 587 domestic violence complaints between March 23 and April 16, which is a 50% increase as compared to pre-lockdown days.

The grimmest situation to worry about is that our lockdowns will end sooner or later, but violence against women will not. Domestic violence and abuse have been an ongoing threat to the health and well-being of women and children in India. As per the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) (NFHS-4), 30 percent of women in India in the age group of 15-49 have experienced physical violence since the age of 15. About 31 percent of married women have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their spouses. This is further substantiated by the Crime in India Report 2018 by the Indian National Crime Research Bureau (NCRB) which states that a woman is subjected to an act of domestic violence every 4.4 minutes.

This situation is not limited to India, as there has been several global reports of spike in domestic violence across countries like China, US, UK, Australia among others, during this pandemic. Historically speaking, times of economic downturn,

wars and conflicts and natural disasters are linked to a multitude of risk factors for increased violence against women and children. Epidemics have been no exception. During the 2015 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, an “epidemic” of “rape, sexual assault and violence against women and girls” was reported by several international publications.

The confinement due to lockdown is fostering tension and stress at home, creating an excuse and environment for abusers to demonstrate unrestrained violence and abuse behind closed doors.

Factors driving violence against women in the current times

While the questions of immunity from COVID-19 pandemic, its impact and severity on communities remains uncertain, it is clear that families across India and the world will feel the economic shock and repercussions of this deadly disease. Drop in earning levels, food insecurity, job uncertainty, health and safety risks etc. will lead to increased anxiety, which in turn will have a multifold bearing on the well-being of women and children in the household.

With quarantines, social isolation, and limitations on freedom of movement, as per several reports, pandemics and health emergencies, including SARS, Ebola, Swine Flu, etc. have been associated with an increase in women and children’s day-to-day exposure to potential perpetrators. Limitations to reach out to friends, family, and support groups during these times make women more vulnerable.

These are really difficult times to support and respond to the distress calls of domestic violence as institutions are already under tremendous strain from the demands of dealing with the pandemic. The police and healthcare providers are already overwhelmed and understaffed; this coupled with domestic violence shelters being full or limited in its operations, only further worsens the situation for help seekers.

While the issue of violence against women needs a larger debate and solution-finding, in the current context, it is important for Centre and State governments to collaborate and facilitate better support and access to protection to women and children. Infact recently, the Delhi High Court sought responses of the Centre

and the Delhi government on a plea seeking measures to safeguard victims of domestic violence and child abuse amidst the COVID-19 lockdown.

The helpline numbers and NCW WhatsApp numbers are definitely proving to be useful. However, there could be several women who may be unable to seek help through a phone because they are locked in with their abusers. Hence, new and innovative mechanisms need to be developed to support those in need. There are some noteworthy global initiatives that the Indian government could take a cue from. The French government is encouraging victims to discreetly seek help at nearby pharmacies and supermarkets who in turn will inform the local authorities. The Italian and German governments are making thousands of hotel rooms and guesthouses accessible to victims at subsidized costs to quarantine themselves in safety.

It is also important to sensitize and mobilize communities to support victims in their neighborhood. Maybe this is a good time to reinstate Breakthrough's "Bell Bajao" campaign that urged local residents to take a stand against physical abuse through simple acts meant to interrupt domestic violence.

As rightly pointed out by the UN chief António Guterres, violence is not confined to the battlefield, and that "for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes".

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