



## HAS BRUTALITY GONE A STEP HIGHER IN INDIA DURING THIS COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

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**ABSTRACT** Domestic violence has been happening extensively in India, but mostly it has been out of public view. However, this COVID 19 pandemic has played havoc in the lives of many Indian women. The nationwide lockdown has made this situation worse and dreadful for the victims. The layers of the strong Patriarchal society and abuse have been exposed and brought out in the open. Levels of abuse had heightened because of the job insecurity and uncertainties in the households. This situation has given us an opportunity to understand how much of the suffering is happening in silence and how the government has to change and bring in various health models in order to focus more on such happenings.

**KEYWORDS :** Domestic violence, Gender based violence, COVID 19 pandemic, Patriarchy, lockdown, abuse.

### INTRODUCTION:

It spares none, anyone can be a victim of domestic violence irrespective of caste, colour, creed, class, age, or gender. Domestic abuse, also called "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence", can be defined as a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse can occur in any form, beginning from physical aggression to fatal events. It can be physical, mental, emotional, sexual, or even economic in nature.<sup>1</sup> From the records of the World Health Organization, it has been stated that about 1 out of 3 women worldwide go through some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime and the abuser is usually a member of the family.<sup>2</sup> Less than 40 per cent of the victims to violence go in search of any form assistance.<sup>3</sup> The National Family Health Survey-4 revealed that 33% of married women aged group-15-49 experienced bodily, sexual, or emotional spousal violence. Of these women, only 14% went to seek help, and 77% never spoke about it. Among those who came forward to seek help, 65% opened up to their natal family and only 3% to the police officials.<sup>4</sup>

Domestic abuse is an ongoing situation worldwide, especially in India. Owing to the strong patriarchal society and stringent socio-cultural norms, women and girls have been established as the most vulnerable population.

With the increasing inflow of COVID-19 cases worldwide, the government brought in strict public distancing reforms and lockdowns. Only 48 out of 206 countries have included services associated with violence against women/gender in their COVID-19 protocols; India is one of these countries. Pandemics like this add fuel to the fire by bringing factors such as job insecurity and fear which exacerbate abuse in women. Home is not always a safe place for everybody, especially in situations where both the abuser and the victim are in the same place.<sup>5</sup>

### COVID-19 2020 Lockdowns:

On 24 March 2020 a nationwide lockdown was introduced in India. Within a short time, the National Commission of Women showed a 94% increase in domestic violence instances. The NCW had launched a nationwide WhatsApp helpline number for telephonic assistance.<sup>6</sup> However this lockdown had deprived the women of their usual support systems thereby showing a pseudo underreporting in such a situation. The major barriers which led to this include restricted movement during the lockdown, reduced means of communication with the support system, and decreased visits to the natal family.<sup>7</sup>

With this lockdown in action, there has been an exponential rise in gender inequality and domestic abuse. This pandemic has affected women in two ways, 1: First, the upper- and middle-class women were exposed to various forms of domestic violence within their homes,

gender-based roles, and increased domestic work for the women led to a heavy burden on them.<sup>2</sup>; poor women living on the roads and slums had no place to go and had hardly any amenities or even room for social distancing. Migrant employees, including pregnant women and children, had to travel several kilometres by walking, fighting starvation for mere survival. It is not that domestic violence never existed before, but during the lockdown, the severity of the discriminations, inequalities, patriarchal domination, and layers of the hierarchical society were exposed to a greater extent.<sup>8</sup>

### Steps taken by India during lockdown to prevent domestic abuse:

In May 2020, it has been witnessed that domestic violence complaints were 131% higher in red zone districts than in the green zone districts.<sup>12</sup> Although the domestic violence levels had gone up rapidly, not much effort was taken to curb this. Several NGOs petitioned courts for which certain courts had issued some protection against women and children. The Delhi High Court on April 24 directed the Delhi Government and the Central Government to ensure effective implementation of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 as a petition filed by the All-India Council of Human Rights, Liberties and Social Justice (AICHS) showed an increased threat to women during the lockdown period especially when they locked in with their abuser.<sup>9</sup> The Jammu and Kashmir High Court took suo-moto cognizance and brought in informal spaces such as grocery shops and pharmacies where women had the right to document and report any abuse they were going through. The Karnataka High Court has issued shelter homes, helpline numbers, and counsellors to aid victims. According to the Domestic Violence Act 2005, Tamil Nadu protection officers were allowed to move around and rescue women in emergencies and shift them to shelter homes. In Uttar Pradesh, helpline numbers under the motto "suppress Corona not your voice" was launched. The ASHA and Anganwadi workers were instructed to counsel the people and record any abusive complaints.<sup>10</sup>

### Where do we fail?

Bearing in mind the present situation of the country, these efforts are not sufficient. A multidimensional approach must be adopted by the country to tackle these issues. Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution guarantee gender equality and rights in women and children, but these laws have not been practised as they are preached. Economic instability during this crisis worsened making the women more dependent and vulnerable to their partners.<sup>11</sup> About half a billion women were going through some form of abuse and once the COVID-19 lockdown was lifted, the liquor shops were the initial outlets to be opened, which has proven the amount of priority given to issues such as domestic violence. The opening of liquor shops had just worsened the situation for the victims. At various levels of planning, the women and child necessities have never been kept in mind or prioritised; monetary benefits were of greater value compared to human emotions.<sup>12</sup>

**Outlook Change:**

The world has entered a new millennium, but from the rise of civilisation, women have always been treated with disregard in this Indian patriarchal society. Gender-based violence has threatened the dignity of women in all social, economic, cultural, and religious domains of life.

In pandemics such as this, where public health is a major concern, policy makers must prioritise women and child rights. Dismantling patriarchy and gender inequalities are the basis for solutions to arise. In such a crisis situation, there are various opportunities to erase all preformed patriarchal notions and biases in society. New democratic views should be brought out, keeping in mind women/child safety and health. First, women's agencies and the financial independence of women must be improved. Second, various community support systems, ranging from their homes to workplaces, should be implemented. Aid of medical social workers of various cadre should be utilised to report such happenings. Implementation of the emergency toll-free number for telephonic support should be streamlined effectively. Measures such as the psychosocial cell which has been materialised by the Ministry of Education during this pandemic should not only address the situation but also aim at permanent solutions. Third, domestic violence has always been handled in silence; hence, awareness of this plays a crucial role. Youth participation in scenarios such as this is very important. By synchronising central/state governments with community support organisations and NGOs, we can break this cycle of violence. Women should be supported irrespective of where they come from all aspects, and they should be socially, economically, and politically empowered. Restoring the rights and dignity of various victims will lead to a danger-free safe nation.

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