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Letter to the Editor

Domestic violence and COVID-19 in Colombia



Dear Editor,

Due to the novel Coronavirus pandemic strain SARS-CoV-2, many countries around the world have implemented preventive measures to try to control the spread of the virus, such as social distancing and quarantine. However, in the pursuit of reducing severe negative effects on public health, these unprepared strategies brought along the increase in domestic violence rates worldwide (Deniz et al., 2020).

Domestic violence refers to aggressive, hostile, and violent behaviors within families that may be psychological, emotional, physical, or sexual (Rocha et al., 2020). Moreover, it can be described as the establishment of fear and control in a relationship through violence and other forms of abuse. Religious practices, political and economic conditions, intimate partner violence, witnessing family violence as a child, lack of high school education, alcohol and drug use, as well as poverty are among the variety of factors that may set the precedence for perpetuating domestic violence (Susmitha, 2016).

According to the United Nations Population Fund, in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there would be an average of 31 million cases of gender-based violence globally, if lockdown restrictions were to be as long as six months (UNFPA, 2020). Additionally, prior to the coronavirus crisis the World Health Organization informed that nearly 35 percent of women globally have already suffered violence from an intimate partner during their lives (WHO, 2017).

Several countries in Latin America have reported a significant increase in emergency calls to report domestic violence incidents. For instance, calls on emergency helplines increased by 50 percent in Brazil (Graham-Harrison et al., 2020), 48 percent in Peru (Agüero, 2020), 40 percent in Argentina, and 60 percent in Mexico (Fumega, 2020).

As the coronavirus outbreak has been intensifying internationally, in Colombia the national government also implemented social distancing and quarantine as an effort to contain the negative consequences of the COVID-19 on its population. But, after three weeks of quarantine, the Colombian Women's Observatory immediately reported a 142 percent rise in domestic violence service calls (Salamanca, 2020). Moreover, between March and July 2020, the ICBF helpline (*línea 114*) recorded a total of 51.999 requests for the increased abuse and neglect of children and adolescents (Radio Nacional de Colombia, 2020). After six months of lockdown order, the FISCALIA reported 60.581 cases of domestic violence across the country, more specifically, Colombia's capital Bogota reported 12.860 cases of domestic violence during the lockdown (Amat, 2020). It is important to note that data sources are mainly based on press articles and issue briefs, considering the lack of scientific information in the academic literature about the current crisis in Colombia.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and lockdown restrictions were implemented, the FISCALIA reported nearly 45.373 cases of domestic violence in 2019 (Amat, 2020). In comparison to current rates, it

is evident the severe impact of the Coronavirus outbreak on the high rates of domestic violence across the country.

In most cases, many victims are forced to be at home with their aggressors because of stay-at-home policies and away from families who can give help and emotional support, which tends to exacerbate the high rates in demand for domestic violence issues. Besides, those experiencing familial abuse, even children and adolescents may be worried to report incidents for fear of retaliation, becoming a primary concern to policymakers and the government (Buttell and Ferreira, 2020). This is actually the second most reported offense after theft in the country during the ongoing pandemic.

From a mental health perspective, women who have suffered from domestic violence are at a higher risk of experiencing multiple mental health issues such as alcohol abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, or eating disorders (El-Serag and Thurston, 2020). Furthermore, recent literature indicates that children and adolescents witnessing or exposed to domestic violence settings are more susceptible to experience mental health problems in emerging adulthood such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), problematic alcohol and drug abuse, anxiety, depression, self-harm, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and poorer mental health (Clarke et al., 2020). Prior research conducted in the field of domestic violence indicates that children and adolescents are more likely to perpetrate violence in their own future relationships (Lohman et al., 2013).

In Colombia, recent statistics on domestic violence have highlighted the need to restructure the national public health system, and to adopt effective strategies and emergency response plans to mitigate the nationwide impact of the COVID-19 on women, children, and adolescents' mental health.

First, these new strategies should be focused on reinforcing the current health care system with a highly qualified mental health workforce, capable of helping victims by providing first-line psychological support, and connecting them to pertinent support services in such stressful situations. Second, the Colombian national government should raise awareness of the highly increased rates of domestic violence across the country and future psychosocial and mental health long-term consequences, recognizing public mental health as an important priority area to work on. Educational initiatives should promote the importance of familial support as a protective factor, and its impact to mitigate adverse outcomes for victims. Third, another key measure for battling domestic violence is to ensure proper legal prosecution against aggressors, being able to respond to reported cases during the quarantine periods. These strategies were suggested by the World Health Organization (2020) in order to prevent the rising pattern of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide.

Although it is too early to measure the effectiveness of these strategies not only in Colombia but also in other countries, due to the fact that

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the Coronavirus pandemic still rages on, and stay-at-home policies are still being implemented globally, many researchers and international organizations suggest that public health policies to mitigate physical abuse and mental health outcomes of COVID-19 must be applied. In this regard, this brief report aims to contribute to recent research in the field of domestic violence in Colombia, emphasizing the need of implementing effective programs or actions that may lead to reduce its impact on the mental and physical health of Colombian population.

To date, there is no education campaign in the national territory to raise awareness of the negative effects, due to the stay-at-home policies, on mental health in general. Specifically those suffering domestic violence, because most of them are particularly focused on preventing COVID-19 virus.

In conclusion, mental health is a serious concern that more countries should actually be focused on, creating new action plans to prevent severe mental health outcomes adapted to the real context of its population. Women, children, and adolescents are more likely to be exposed to different types of violence within the family and should be considered as a priority at-risk group because of the impact domestic violence has on mental health, but above all, in times of the Coronavirus pandemic to meet the coming challenges.

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