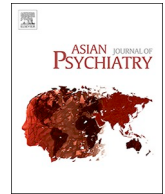




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Letter to the Editor

COVID-19 and domestic violence against women



Dear Sir,

As the world is trying to cope with the current Corona Virus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) crisis, many countries took resort to 'stay at home' orders. India being one such country, ordered a complete Lockdown nationally. Though steps such as these are essential to contain the global pandemic, this 'Hobsons choice' has brought along some unintended negative consequences. One of them is Domestic Violence (DV) against women (Tandon (2020)).

The incidents of violence against women have increased worldwide since the lockdowns were implemented (UN Women, 2020). The hashtag #antidomesticviolenceduringepidemic was searched more than 3000 times in Chinese social media (Moutafis (2020)). As per the statistics released by the National Commission for Women (NCW) India in early April 2020 there has been 100 % increase in complaints related to violence against women after the nationwide lockdown was imposed in March 2020. This twofold increase has pushed NCW to announce Mental Health Helplines for those witnessing any form of DV (Chandra (2020)).

'Domestic Violence' is defined in The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (India, 2005) as "any act of commission or omission or conduct resulting in physical, verbal, emotional, sexual and economic abuse" and this can range from calling names, insulting, humiliating, controlling behaviour, physical violence to sexual violence (Govt of India., 2005). Past studies have shown association between exposure to natural disasters or other extreme events and increase in rates of DV. (Gearhart et al. (2018)). The causation of DV during any natural disaster is multifaceted, precipitated through multiple, interdependent causes like stress due to physical confinement, economic disruption, slowed down businesses, possible unemployment, scarcity of basic provisions, limited social support. Though precedent for the current situation (lockdown) are limited, but studies of past disasters and its effects can put some light on factors behind current trend of increase in IPV.

Loss of income, especially for males leads to lesser control over economic security and there by making them exert more control on their partners, this scenario is worse if female spouse is employed and male is unemployed. Whereas For females, it acts in different pathway. Employment and income source for females acts as a buffer against violence since their income supports the family to be financially better, unemployment of females takes off this buffer and makes them vulnerable to violence at the hands of spouses. Unemployment for female also mean being dependent on male spouse, loss of social ties and being locked up with perpetrator 24 by 7, which again makes them vulnerable to violence (Schneider et al. (2016)).

Rise in DV could also be attributed to household work related disparity. India being a patriarchal society, domestic work is primarily considered women's job. Absence of domestic help and people thrown into close quarters, increases workload and cabin fever ensues, adding

fuel to the ongoing friction between the couple and results in increased chances of DV (EPW Engage, 2020).

In addition to above, among the families affected by substance use disorder, COVID 19 has worsened the DV. The stress of economic instability itself has resulted in increased consumption of alcohol, thereby increasing DV independently. During lockdown, the perpetrator might inflict violence on the spouse demanding to fulfil his alcohol consumption needs or might consume alcohol at home, in presence of his family members, as the liquor outlets are closed. In both above scenarios DV worsens.

Sexual violence is also likely to increase during lockdown. India noted a surge of porn usage and sale of condoms and sex toys, reflecting increase in sexual activity thereby indirectly indicating increase in chances of sexual rights violation (Dedhia (2020)). As authorities are busy containing the spread of infection, perpetrators often take the chance of being the unchallenged abusers of their partner.

Though it is understandable that provisions of basic needs and measures to contain the pandemic may take precedence over surveillance of DV, the long term consequences of DV can be equally devastating, thus active measures towards surveillance and management of DV needs to be an indispensable part of fight against COVID-19. Effective implementation of The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, is the need of hour. The above Act mandates wide publicity through different medias (print and broadcast) to create awareness in general public, which can include information about Interpersonal Violence Cycle, measures of de-escalating a situation at home, helplines, shelter homes and legal assistance available for women. A makeshift arrangement of safe spaces (space away from the abuser) by creation of temporary shelter homes should also be considered. Educating and using available human resources like ASHA workers and other health workers, who are currently conducting door to door surveys about covid-19, in identifying subtle signs of DV would be prudent.

While the world and policy makers are focused on 'here and now' at the moment, as said by Mohammed Naciri (Regional Director of UN Women, Asia and Pacific), "the differential needs of women and men in medium and long term recovery efforts also need to be considered" (Owen (2020)).

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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