
REBUILDING FOR RESILIENCE: REASONS FOR THE RISE OF PANDEMIC PERPETRATED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INCIDENTS IN THE WORLD DURING COVID-19***Razia Sultana**

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Abstract

This paper intends to identify the links between Covid-19 and domestic violence and expose the potential reasons behind this spike through the systemic review and meta-analysis (PRISMA) framework. Covid-19 has posed several unique risks to women's physical, social, and economic security. The lockdowns and movement restrictions imposed by countries around the world helped to decrease the infection rate of Covid-19, but data suggests that domestic abuse was like an opportunistic infection that flourished in the conditions created by the pandemic. Although home confinement due to the Covid-19 pandemic was a necessary measure of protection against the propagation of the virus, it led to social, psychological, and economical consequences. Women were the major victim of this violence and abuse as they had to bear the increase in tensions in households, increased perpetrator's risk factors for violence, economic burden, and survivors' limited access to support services available pre lockdown. Pandemic is a threat to the decade-long progress in gender equality and women empowerment. It is a crucial time to address this problem and prevent the reversal of gender equality.

Keywords: Domestic abuse, Pandemic, Lockdown, Restrictions, Victim, Gender Equality.

INTRODUCTION

World Health Organization (WHO) General Director announced the coronavirus COVID-19 infection to be a pandemic. The lack of definitive treatment forced many countries to impose national lockdowns to protect against the virus's spread. Although home confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic was necessary to protect against the virus's spread, it induced social, psychological, and economic consequences. Women experienced greater job losses as workers in industries most affected by business closures and government-mandated lockdowns. With schools and early childhood education centres closed for weeks or months, women also shouldered a larger burden of unpaid domestic duties at home and experienced a greater risk of domestic violence (Boxall *et al.*, 2020; Cooper and Mosseri, 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Foley and Williamson, 2021; Hill, 2020). Reports of domestic abuse and family violence have increased around the world since social isolation and quarantine measures came into force as it was associated with a range of factors including economic stress, disaster-related instability, increased exposure to exploitative relationships, and reduced options for support (Peterman *et al.*, 2020). Domestic violence (or domestic abuse) includes various acts of violence physical, sexual, and emotional and, although it is usually referred to as intimate partner violence, mostly between a male and a female partner, it can also include child, elderly, or sibling abuse (Hegarty *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, domestic violence is a form of gender-based discrimination, as it is rooted in patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes concerning women's roles within homes, and it affects women disproportionately, being committed against them in greater numbers than against men. Progressive scientific knowledge has shown that domestic violence is a gendered phenomenon,

with differences in the magnitude, dynamics, and contexts underpinning domestic violence against women and men. Especially for children, domestic abuse can include not only direct violence toward them but also witnessing violence against other family members (e.g., their mothers or siblings). It can also lead to forming violent intimate partner relationships in adulthood (Wood & Sommers, 2011). Since the outbreak of Covid-19, domestic violence has been breeding continuously like a "silent pandemic" or "shadow pandemic" and persevered worldwide. "The pandemic exposes underlying inequalities in socioeconomic and health systems," gender-based violence is often increased (John, Neetu, 2020). Documenting the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic violence has been challenging due to under-reported cases and the under-utilization of social services by victims (Kaukinen, 2020). There is a growing and immediate need to understand the occurrence of domestic violence during this pandemic. Violence against women and girls has a multi-dimensional effect on the measures of gender equality both in the short term and long term. Such evidence is key to helping develop effective strategies to prevent violence and assist victims.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In times of crises globally, including humanitarian, natural disasters and pandemics, an increase in violence against women and girls has been consistently documented. Studies that explore the impact of natural disasters on crime and violence report that while property crimes and other forms of violent crime may or may not be impacted, domestic violence reports often substantially increase after the catastrophic event (Parkinson, 2019). Domestic violence reports increased by 46 % in Othello, Washington after the eruption of Mount St. Helens, along with increases in reported alcohol abuse, family stress, and aggression [Adams and Adams, 1984]. After Hurricane Katrina, reports of psychological abuse among

women by their partners increased by 35 % while reports of partner physical abuse nearly doubled in the southernmost Mississippi counties (Schumacher, Coffey, Norris, Tracy, Clements, Galea, 2010). Similar significant increases in domestic violence have been reported following earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and many other catastrophic events around the world, including the 2009 “Black Saturday” bushfires in Australia and 2010, 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti (A. Weitzman, J. Behrman, 2016). Based on research relating to domestic violence during other extreme events, the Covid-19 pandemic context brought increased reported cases of domestic violence worldwide (Graham-Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Kumar, 2020). In China, it has been reported that occurrences of domestic violence incidents have nearly doubled in the city of Jingzhou, southern Hubei province (Zhang, 2020).

According to data from the “180 Hotline” provided by the Ministry for Women, Family, and Human Rights in Brazil, there was a 17% increase in domestic violence-related calls during March 2020, the month that social distancing was recommended (Marques *et al.*, 2020). To date, most of the data related to domestic violence are collected from developed nations. Hubei in China, which formed the epicentre of Covid-19, reported a tripling of domestic violence in February 2020 as compared with that of last year, based on police reports (Fraser, 2020). After the first month of the stay-at-home orders, a 20–30% increase in domestic violence calls was reported in the nine United States (US) metropolitan cities (Tolan, 2020). However, subsequent data from the IPV helplines were mixed, and it can be possible that fear, physical proximity to the abusive partners, and travel restrictions impacted the reporting. The US has mentioned domestic violence or intimate partner violence as a “hidden pandemic” in the background of Covid-19, and domestic violence calls for service to the police increased by 7.5% from March to May 2020, at the initiation of lockdown (Leslie, Wilson, 2020). This increase was at a maximum (9.7%) in the first few weeks when social distancing measures started. Households with a preexisting history of discord, substance abuse, domestic violence, and litigations related to the same showed a significant increase. Initial reports from the National Domestic Abuse helpline (UK support services) showed an increase in service use, which was consistent with similar patterns in Spain, France, and China (Taub, 2020). Toward the end of the last year, Boserup *et al.*, (Boserup, McKenney, Elkbuli, 2020) highlighted “alarming trends in US domestic violence” during the pandemic crisis in various areas of Portland, San Antonio, and Jefferson County, Alabama. The increase in police reports ranged from 10 to 27%. The UN Women reported an increase of 30% in domestic violence documentation in France since the initiation of lockdown. In one of the largest studies, an online survey of 15,000 women from Australia conducted in May 2020 revealed that 4.6% of the participants experienced sexual or physical violence from their partner. Whereas 5.8% experienced coercion and control, 11.6% reported facing at least one form of harassment, controlling, or emotionally abusive behaviour (Boxall, Morgan, Brown, 2020). The East African Community (EAC) Partner States have reported a sharp increase in the number of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) cases. Ministries responsible for Gender across the region have reported a 48% increase in the Gender-Based Violence cases reported to the Police or through the GBV Toll-Free lines. Globally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, reporting of domestic abuse has increased with the implementation of

lockdown measures (Graham-Harrison2020; Kadi 2020; Lewis 2020a; Wanqing 2020).

Research questions: Our study is focused on answering the following questions:

1. What contributes to surges in domestic violence incidents occurring globally since the emergence of Covid-19?
2. What should communities, victims, and governments do to reduce the number of incidents and mitigate the negative effects of violence on society, the economy, and gender-equality?

METHODS

This systematic review was performed under the recommended reference framework of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Liberati *et al.*, 2020). A systematic review extracts and interprets data from published studies on the topic, then analyzes, describes, and summarizes interpretations into a refined conclusion. Different online databases were used. For instance, Web of Science, Cochrane Review, HINARI, EMBASE, Scopus, PubMed, and Wiley Online Library were used. Furthermore, Gray Literature and Google Scholar were used to search the articles. All articles that examined violence within domestic settings during the Covid-19 outbreak (started from December 2019 and continues until the time of drafting this article June 2022) were considered eligible for this systematic review.

Analysis: Reasons behind domestic violence during Covid-19

Across several social, economic, and political dimensions, women and girls are disproportionately affected by the crisis simply because of their sex. While improving education opportunities for girls is an important step in the longer term. The immediate effects of Covid-19 on gender inequality are already showing themselves in health and education, on the burden of unpaid care work and gender-based violence. While the Covid-19 crisis affects everyone, women and girls face specific and often disproportionate economic, health, and social risks due to deeply entrenched inequalities, social norms, and unequal power relations. The evidence of gender discrimination is rooted in history, tradition, and culture.

Gender inequality, gender role beliefs and expectations

Reducing the gender education gap gives women more economic freedom and less able to be influenced and controlled by men. The Covid-19 crisis affects everyone, women and girls face specific and often disproportionate economic, health, and social risks due to deeply entrenched inequalities, social norms, and unequal power relations. The evidence of gender discrimination is rooted in history, tradition, and culture. Gender inequality is a highly debilitating stigma and leads to detriments to women’s psychology of their worth and dignity to themselves and society (By Nake M. Kamrany, Catherine Robinson 2010). Patriarchy, as a discriminatory force, has a long history that sweeps across national and cultural boundaries and is a system that constrains women through male dominance (Maseno & Kilonzo 2011:45). It is a system in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Patriarchy is interpreted to be anti-women and

oppressive, and it upholds male dominance and male power. It often results in the right of men to dominate and control. Family members are dependent on, and submissive to, the male head of the household (Laurien 2004). Across several social, economic, and political dimensions, women and girls are disproportionately affected by the crisis simply because of their sex. The immediate effects of Covid-19 on gender inequality are already showing themselves in health and education, on the burden of unpaid care work and gender-based violence. While the Covid-19 crisis affects everyone, women and girls face specific and often disproportionate economic, health, and social risks due to deeply entrenched inequalities, social norms, and unequal power relations. The evidence of gender discrimination is rooted in history, tradition, and culture.

Family, considered the primary support system, became the primary site of abuse and brutality during the pandemic. Conventional feminine gender roles prescribe women to be highly communal, displaying traits such as warmth and concern for others, taking the role of the caregiver within the home and lower status roles in society (Eagly and Wood, 1999). In contrast, conventional masculine gender roles prescribe men to be highly agentic, displaying traits such as stoicism and strength, and taking the role of provider outside the home and higher status roles in society. While men's roles have remained aligned with expectations over time, women's roles have rapidly expanded beyond the home, with more women working outside the home than ever before (United Nations, 2020). Sociologically, role allocation being chauvinist has brought about the division of household work as "women's work." The change in the daily home routine and structure due to the increased amount of time spent by different individuals altogether increases the role strain and affects the ambience of the house. Despite this, gendered expectations remain the same. Women are still expected to perform most of the domestic and care work. Women had more workload during the lockdown as compared to men. Mothers were more likely to be solely responsible for educating their children (Carlson *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, with the closure of many professional childcare services during Covid-19, employed women are not only expected to be the primary caregivers within their families but to also remain productive at work. Moreover, theories of precarious masculinity (Vandello and Bosson, 2013) and masculine gender role stress (Eisler and Skidmore, 1987) suggest that job loss and financial instability could increase violence. Here, men who are concerned about failing to appear masculine, such as those who have recently lost their family provider role, have a greater tendency to engage in verbal and physical aggression toward their partners (Vandello and Bosson, 2013).

Financial vulnerability

Economic vulnerability during pandemics causes livelihood issues such as job losses, prolonged unemployment, reduced income, debts, and food insecurity. Scholars have suggested that low income is related to increases in domestic violence (Peprah and Koomson, 2017). Women are also expected to bear the household responsibility in some cultures so they might have to sacrifice their jobs to bear that extra responsibility during those times (Women's Budget Group 2020). Lockdown measures to address Covid-19 had a major impact on women's livelihoods and income. The 'informal sector', where women represent a significant proportion of

workers, is the most vulnerable. People often rely on daily income with little or no savings available to help buy increasingly costly food supplies. Being unemployed will make the female more financially dependent and will make her more susceptible to domestic violence and intimate partner violence (Bhalotra *et al.*, 2019; Buller *et al.*, 2018; Harman 2016; Wenham *et al.*, 2020; Women's Budget Group 2020). Gender inequality, which is the main cause of domestic violence directly prevents women's labour force participation and economic rights. For instance, India has slipped 28 places to rank 140th among 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021, becoming the third-worst performer in South Asia. India has closed 62.5 per cent of its gender gap to date. The country had ranked 112th among 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2020. According to the report, a decrease in women's labour force participation rate fell from 24.8 per cent to 22.3 per cent. In addition, the share of women in professional and technical roles declined further to 29.2 per cent. The share of women in senior and managerial positions also remains low: only 14.6 per cent of these positions are held by women and there are only 8.9 per cent firms with female top managers. It shows the loss in potential human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in the three dimensions including reproductive health, empowerment, and the labour market. If women's employment and work continue to fall post the pandemic, it will lead to severe implications for their position within the family and society. Global evidence and local experiences confirm that being economically empowered provides women with greater security and choices for living a life free of violence and realizing their full potential - as they have 'bargaining power'. The socio-economic consequences of Covid-19 are stacking the deck against women. These effects are clearest in developing countries like India, where gender inequality is a persistent challenge.

In addition, male unemployment has been found to increase domestic violence or intimate partner violence, especially physical abuse due to financial and psychological stressors in countries where women have unequal access to divorce than men (Bhalotra *et al.*, 2019). In patriarchal societies where the male is expected to be the provider of the household, financial and psychological stressors are thought to increase intimate partner violence by threatening the male's authority at home making him more aggressive to regain his authority (Bhalotra *et al.*, 2019; Buller *et al.*, 2018).

Social cut-off/ movement restrictions:

Movement restrictions and being locked at home with the perpetrator during quarantine are making it hard for survivors to escape, report domestic abuse, and seek help (Godin; Gupta; Jeltsen; Taub, 2020). During lockdowns, the social infrastructure was disrupted, travel restrictions were applied, and access to technology was limited. This led to separation from family members or decreased contact with neighbours. The increased time that women and their partners have been required to spend together at home is a direct consequence of social distancing requirements and the closure of non-essential services, schools, and businesses. In some countries, only one member was allowed to go out to buy groceries during the lockdown. As a result, women and children who were exposed to violence had lesser opportunities to go out and seek help. This could be due to the limited access to help and social services due to movement restrictions, lack of privacy and fear

to report, and lack of access to a phone or phone credits (UN Women *et al.*, 2020). Isolation has always been one of the most powerful weapons in the abuser's arsenal. Lockdown was no less than a trap where women were fearlessly abused by their male counterparts at home. According to the Stalking and Harassment and Honour Based Violence Risk Identification and Assessment and Management Model (Richards, 2009), economic strain, substance abuse, and isolation tend to increase domestic violence risk. Evidence from past crises and natural disasters suggests that confinement measures often lead to increased or first-time violence against women and children. For example, evidence from the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014-15 shows that women and girls experienced higher rates of sexual violence and abuse during the outbreak than in the preceding years (UNDP, 2015). The rapidly increasing reliance on digital technology during confinement also has implications for gender-based violence, too. Digital tools represent one way for women to escape violence, but also give abusers the possibility to increase their control. On the one hand, women may be able to find help online and share information that may help them access support services. At the same time, however, forced confinement may make aggressors better able to control their victims and alienate them from the external world, by controlling their digital tools, such as mobile phones and computers.

Stress

The prolonged course of pandemics can lead to chronic stress, thus the drastically changed circumstances arising out of the pandemic could trigger or worsen the existing conflicts in the house. Evidence indicates that economic, domestic and health stresses increase domestic harassment and other types of gender-based violence during the lockdown. Before the pandemic, women and children might have already faced extensive barriers, challenges, and complex decisions that might have prevented them from escaping the perpetrators safely. Such challenges to escape are amplified during a pandemic because their mobility is constrained, especially due to the social-distancing measures, economic insecurities, and disrupted routines. Economic stress has been widely shown to be a risk factor for domestic violence (Pattavina, Socia and Zuber 2015; Smith and Weatherburn 2013), with physical forms of violence concentrated in areas of higher socioeconomic disadvantage (Hulme, Morgan and Boxall 2019), and repeat victimization linked to the presence of offender money problems (Dowling and Morgan 2019). Emotional and physical stress due to home confinement and social isolation can cause stress in relationships within as well as outside one's family, it leads to changes in one's physical and mental health and in the case of already strained and vulnerable relationships, it can cause more stress and strain. Emotional and physical discomfort can turn some relationships into abusive ones as well thus resulting in domestic violence. A study by Carroll *et al.*, 2020 shows how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the health, financial security, food security and stress among families in Canada. The study was conducted on families within the income range of middle to high-income groups. Key factors which were identified in the study which led to increased stress within the families were balancing work with childcare, homeschooling, increased financial instability and increased amount of time spent on household chores. The study shows how the stress and increased responsibilities have led to unhealthy behaviours and maladaptive coping strategies.

Ways of reducing domestic violence during pandemic circumstances: Based on the research outcome there can be many steps taken to reduce the impact of domestic violence during drastic situations.

Focus on gender equality

First and foremost, gender equality must be made an integral part of the overall response. The choices we make today related to how we choose to allocate our resources and who we choose to lead us forward will have long-term implications not just for women and other vulnerable populations but for our overall healthy society and our survival as a species. This means understanding how gender identity interacts with other factors to impact an individual's experiences of the crisis and their vulnerabilities. This helps overcome the risk of the most vulnerable being sidelined from the response as well as safeguarding against exacerbating existing gender dynamics that can lead to conflict. Gender inequality can be reduced by giving equal opportunities. The thought of the old generation, that a boy is the only one who can make them proud, should be destroyed from its roots, to encourage women's education, to eradicate the thought that men can only bring our country to the top. To effectively undertake and apply such analysis, response teams must be gender balanced, including at the leadership level. As part of its response to Covid-19, global leaders and civil society must reinvigorate their commitment to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and gender equality more broadly. By doing so, interventions can better respond to the pandemic's impact on women and other vulnerable groups while avoiding deepening inequalities that contribute to unequal societies and violent conflict. Increase enforcement of existing laws against gender-based employment discrimination and sexual harassment.

Increasing awareness

Information–education–communication materials can be prepared to ensure the understanding of the people about domestic violence and help-seeking behaviour through helplines. Socio culturally appropriate and multilingual infographics can be simple aids to put out the message to the masses. Digital literacy needs to involve women of various socioeconomic and ethnic groups for greater community outreach and education. Both early identification and reporting of abuse should be encouraged among all individuals. Awareness-raising and sensitization programmes with young people to reduce gender inequality, raise awareness about different gender identities and reduce gender-based violence. Improving educational opportunities is an important step in the longer term. Reducing the gender education gap gives women more economic freedom and less ability to be dominated and controlled by men.

Community outreach

The Domestic Violence Outreach Program is a service for victims of domestic violence who need support and information on dealing with their situations. An important part of the work of the Domestic Violence Service Center is our outreach to the local community to raise awareness about domestic violence and the support services available for victims and their families. Domestic violence programs provide prevention services such as anti-violence programs in schools, professional training to health care professionals and

law enforcement and media outreach/campaigns. Local, state and national governments could be provided with sensitive and comprehensive messages in the form of audio, video, and written methods such that maximum messages can be circulated and processed for the beneficiary. Tele-sessions can be immensely helpful for a wider outreach with the integration of all levels of healthcare.

Framing policies to combat gender inequality

Progress towards achieving greater equality between women and men will require changes at many levels, including changes in attitudes and relationships, changes in institutions and legal frameworks, changes in economic institutions, and changes in political decision-making structures. More fundamentally, all these economic and social policy measures must be embedded in broader efforts to mainstream gender in governments' responses to the crisis. In the short run, it means, wherever possible, applying a gender lens to emergency policy measures. In the longer run, it means governments having in place a well-functioning system of gender mainstreaming, relying on ready access to gender-disaggregated evidence in all sectors and capacities. Governments must ensure that all policy and structural adjustments aimed at recovery go through robust gender and intersectional analysis, so that differential effects on women and men can be assessed – and planned for.

Implications

The article highlights the rise of domestic violence during the pandemic and the reasons directly or indirectly cause its spike. It is evident that this crisis has disproportionately impacted women and it is exacerbating existing gender inequality. Gender inequality, patriarchy, financial insecurity, and lack of family support play a pivotal role in promoting domestic violence. The fragile set-up of our society falls apart during catastrophic circumstances and becomes a breeding ground for many social evils. One thing that has been apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic, is that conventional gender roles and divisions of labour are not only unsustainable but also harmful. Thus, greater flexibility in gender roles is to everyone's benefit. The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted the need for a gender lens that should be incorporated in process of designing and implementing emergency policy responses. To do so, governments benefit from having in place a well-functioning system of gender budgeting and gender impact assessments, ready access to quality sex-disaggregated data and gender indicators in all sectors, and skills and expertise on how to provide a swift response. However, this is often not the case in many countries, and in its absence, emergency responses to the Covid-19 outbreak can inadvertently exacerbate existing systemic gender inequalities. Without a comprehensive action plan to reduce the gender gap, this pandemic could catalyze a significant reversal in the rigid progress made on women's rights and gender equality. Rethinking and replanning the strategy to protect women and other vulnerable populations from domestic violence will be crucial to building global resilience and preventing a repeat of domestic violence in future pandemic times.

Recommendations

Covid-19 has uncovered the existing inequalities in families and society and exacerbated the structural factors that contribute to domestic and intimate partner violence. Thus,

future research should investigate how to support individuals, couples, and societies to break free from their gendered roles, and investigate the role that context specifically global crisis and prolonged uncertainty plays in both buttressing and dismantling existing gender roles and inequalities. Efforts should be made on a national and a global level to respond to violence against women in this challenging unprecedented time especially when the community's collective safety is at risk.

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