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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### RISE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ISSUES DURING LOCK-DOWNS DUE TO COVID-19

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#### Abstract

Since December 2019, the world witnessed the rise of a new pandemic viral infection – Covid-19. Although the first case in India was reported in January 2020 (Kerala), it was in late March that India started witnessing the rise of new confirmed cases across multiple Indian cities. It was soon realized that the microdroplets and human-to-human contact were responsible for the spread of infection. After that, the Indian government called for a nationwide lockdown across all Indian states. Social gatherings, transportation, educational institutions, and places of religious significance were closed entirely. From 25th March 2020 onwards, all the service sectors were wholly suspended. Most of the companies have initiated work from home (WFH) to maintain a balance between the company's profit and loss, supplementing their employees with their economic stability, etc. Although work from home has been successful to date in leveraging their profit-loss balance, it leads to a rise in the number of domestic violence occurrences. Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the rising Violence against Women and Children across all regions. Examples include domestic financial and health stresses, loss of woman's livelihood, restricted or no access of women to all the basic amenities, stress and complications related to social isolation, women confinement with violent partners under one roof. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the co-relation between COVID-19 and domestic violence in India and provide suggestive measures to deal with the issue.

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#### Introduction:-

The increasing pressure and stress associated with the shift in the work-life balance due to these WFH initiatives contributed to a surge in both physical and verbal torture against women. While working women find it difficult to cope with domestic work and their professional life, those who are entirely engaged in domestic activities suffer from their husband's physical and verbal pressure.

Before the start of the lockdown phase in India, around 396 domestic violence cases were recorded by the National Commission of Women. However, during lockdown phase 1, i.e., between 25th March 2020 to 16th April 2020, this number increased beyond 500 and continues to grow further.

The domestic maids' unavailability is exerting more pressure on women to cope with domestic work. Many male members, due to their patriarchal upbringing, resist helping their wives or mothers or any other female members

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with domestic chores. Many activists have also noticed the rising incidences of family pressure on the female members for new and tasty food demands every day. Besides, the immediate victims of the domestic food shortage are mothers and daughters in the house. The increase in cooking time is evident as all the family members are now at home. Women have very little or no time to enjoy their personal space. The situation in rural areas is worse where the women have to walk for long distances to gather fuel and water for their daily requirements.

Also, situations are being reported wherein many women have lost their jobs due to the pandemic outbreak. The most important amongst such sections of females are the daily wage earners. With women losing their jobs, their financial income has been adversely affected. They have no money to contribute to their domestic expenditure. This has further contributed to the rise in the incidences of domestic violence.

This loss of financial independence has further contributed to their loss of empowerment and the power to bargain or even stand up for their voice at their homes.

Such pandemic occurrences can lead not only to domestic violence issues. They can even contribute to other forms of violence against women and girls. Violence, too, has been noticed against those women who are battling with the Covid-19 on the front, such as healthcare workers. Xenophobia related violence, physical and mental harassment, sexual exploitation, and other public place violence are few other examples.

#### **Health risks involved with women suffering from domestic violence:**

Domestic violence victims are more prone to the development of several physical and mental issues such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorders, sexual disorders, chronic disorders, and substance abuse. Activists, women's organizations, and the NGOs engaged in establishing and securing women's rights have identified social distancing as one of the root causes of increasing domestic violence issues.

#### **Addressing pandemic influenced domestic violence:**

Domestic violence against women should be tackled at the individual, community, and governmental levels.

#### **Role of immediate society:**

Complete elimination of all the risks associated with domestic violence against women will never be possible. However, the people around her can help her in enhancing her lifestyle and, in turn, her safety. This can be done by assessing all the immediate risks associated with domestic violence, exploring options, and providing resources and forming woman help groups. The society can contribute in the following ways -

1. Earnest interaction with the victim is a pre-requisite to understand her problem.
2. The situations and people exerting unwanted pressures on her should be taken into consideration.
3. Her immediate society can discuss all the existing safety and support strategies that she has already explored. She should be enlightened to avoid visiting all those places or communities she identifies as a moral threat.
4. The best way is to identify the family member or family friend who carries a certain level of comfort to interact with this woman regarding issues related to her sufferings.

#### **How can healthcare staff tackle this issue?**

The health sector is under tremendous stress due to increasing cases of Covid-19 positive patients. This has disturbed the smooth functioning of hospitals in tackling other health issues. In such a scenario where the domestic violence cases against women are rising on a day-to-day basis, healthcare centers can step forward to mitigate all those risks, thereby reducing their effects.

Healthcare professionals should make themselves aware of the concept of power dynamics and norms perpetrating domestic violence against women. While guiding a woman in overcoming the issues related to domestic violence, all the healthcare workers must be careful about not exposing them to unwanted risks and depression through their actions or recommendations. It is essential in these scenarios that the healthcare workers should listen to their patients carefully and develop a sense of belief without judging her on any grounds. Blaming or judging her according to what she says will only disturb her inner peace and confidence in sharing all her sufferings.

Validating or assuring the victims of domestic violence by their healthcare consultants can significantly help generate trustworthiness in their patients. It helps the victim to develop a sense of security in freely expressing themselves giving her the right to lead her life without violence of any form and fear of others.

The healthcare staff should undertake sufficient training programs for their female healthcare staff to offer services related to appropriate medical assistance and referral options. Their prime role is to ensure that the healthcare facilities have sufficient medical supplies available in hand.

While assisting the victim in dealing with their violence related consequences, the female healthcare workers should look after their self-requirements too. There may be a time when female healthcare workers may develop strong emotions or reactions while listening or interacting with the victims. It is common for healthcare providers to develop stress-related health issues themselves. Compassion fatigue, burnout, and vicarious trauma are shared amongst them.

**Can government play a role in coping with domestic violence against women?**

At the public administration level, the government can include essential services such as response plans and equip them with sufficient resources and strategies. Healthcare facilities should identify local support systems in times of such pandemics to refer women to seek such immediate medical assistance. Likewise, it is also essential for all healthcare providers to generate awareness of the risks and consequences of violence against women and girls. This will assist the healthcare workers in ensuring the availability and maintenance of such healthcare services. Appropriate care must be taken concerning the requirements and additional support for the women with a humanitarian crisis, disabled women, older women, and those living in crowded conditions.

The government should immediately prioritize the availability of safe and secure access to telemedicine and mobile healthcare assistance. This is a pre-requisite in remote areas where access to mobile and internet connectivity is limited or disturbed.

After hearing the plea filed by different NGOs, the ‘Women and Child Development’ department under different state governments ensured 24/7 operational women helplines as a part of the emergency response support system. Various other measures were implemented, such as 24/7 operational helpline 181, the emergence of new women institutions, advertisements, and WhatsApp helpline numbers. Additionally, the state governments worked towards strengthening the one-stop centers providing both legal and psycho-social help to the survivors of domestic violence. Initiatives such as instant cash transfers, ration support, etc. were launched to supplement the families' financial requirements. This helped in reducing domestic violence arising out of financial distress. At several places, Aganwadi workers were asked to trace, isolate, and rescue domestic violence victims. They were working in close co-operation with the women at the grass-root levels to facilitate their work.

**Additional psycho-social support:**

Domestic sexual violence and intimate partner violence are among the severe stressors altering the entire course of the victim lifestyle. Psychological distresses following the domestic violence issues are common and may include risks such as sadness, self-blame, fear, nightmares, anger, social isolation, and social withdrawal. Counsellors can play an essential role in helping the victims in dealing with psycho-social issues by identifying and discussing with them. Positive coping strategies can help ease their psycho-social problems through a supportive and non-judgemental manner. Counsellors can:

Help the victims in building both strengths and abilities

1. Ask them to continue with the activities that the victims find engaging or pleasurable
2. Engage in certain activities which facilitate in relieving stress, anxiety, and depression
3. Find time to communicate with friends and families over group video calling etc
4. Ask the victims to perform at least one physical and emotional activity daily
5. Maintain a regular sleeping schedule of your own and avoid over-sleeping habits
6. Refrain from self-medication, illegal drugs, and alcohol consumption

Although Covid 19 lockdown was a necessity, both physical and emotional domestic violence against women witnessed a rise across the globe. This lockdown's straightforward effect proved to increase the physical exertion on the women as cooking two times for the entire family was the need of the hour. This somewhere contributed to women neglecting their professional growth to support their families. Lack of domestic finances, restricted outdoor movements and depleting resources are some of the other factors involved in this increase. This is an alarming signal that society is still not prepared to cope with the pandemic that influenced domestic violence. Society needs to understand women as a part of its developmental process and not as a subject of domestic restrictions. It is the responsibility of every family to raise their children with the morals of gender equality, shared domestic

responsibilities, and the concept of equal pay for equal work. Women counselling can prove to be a boon in this critical hour to get rid of both emotional and psycho-social distress arising out of the Covid-19 lockdown that influenced domestic violence. Aganwadi workers, NGOs, and other women institutions can contribute their share of efforts in this task. Simultaneously, it is essential to adopt healthy relationships at individual, societal, and state front. Family morals and ethics play a very important role in reducing such incidences. Relationship counselling can be a deciding factor in strengthening the bonding between a couple for a happy family life.