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Increase in Domestic Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Domestic violence, also called domestic abuse, may be defined as a sequence of conduct in any relationship that is made use of to get or retain power and control over a spouse or close partner.

At present, the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced, and it has become endemic in most countries. However, at its peak, the pandemic unleashed mayhem and ravaged cities and populations worldwide. The fear of contracting the virus superseded every consideration and the governments hastily enforced strict lockdowns to curb the spread of the contagion. Social distancing, isolation, quarantine, a new normal became part of the lexicon of day-to-day life. What governments failed to contemplate was the shadow pandemic, which was surreptitiously gaining ground, faster even than the spread of the Coronavirus.

There are various reasons why newspapers around the globe have been reporting an uptick in cases. The treacherous affliction of domestic violence has been prevalent in every society around the world for a very long time. In traditional and patriarchal countries, existence is observed all the more. What is disquieting is that domestic violence is perceived as



something to be tolerated and accepted in silence by women, in particular when it is abuse meted out by the husband.

In ancient times, domestic violence meant a husband thrashing his wife. In the present, the purview of the phrase has been increased greatly. It comprises any type of violence -physical, mental, sexual, and financial. It also includes violence done to children and this is called family violence.

The shame of a wife accusing the husband of committing domestic violence is frequently what thwarts the woman from informing about it. The anxiety about the social customs and traditions and worries about her children are what fetter her to a life of recurring beatings and agony. Financial reliance on the husband and absence of assistance from parents are what keep her tolerating in silence, the brutality that is inflicted on her on a daily basis.

In addition to the physical violence, frequently the emotional anguish of her husband's barbs, insults and gibes are sufficient to destroy her self-confidence, and these leave her shattered and vulnerable, unable to protect herself or take the help of legal aid.

Therefore, in such a situation, the malaise of domestic violence has grown and prospered with impunity. It is only of late that many countries have designed legislations and developed organizations to intercede and assist women who are viciously beaten and maimed by their alleged custodians.

Though women have been suffering mutely against this violence in their homes, their plight grew worse when governments worldwide declared lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. When the COVID-19 pandemic was ravaging the world with savagery, this affliction assumed menacing implications for millions of women the world over. Fittingly called 'the shadow pandemic', stay at home orders had only expedited the spike of these heinous incidents. 'Stay home, stay safe' was the battle cry of every government and it had become a hackneyed phrase in these times of chaos. Aside from the obvious fact that one could vanquish COVID-19 by staying confined at home, what was neglected optimistically was the fact that many women ended up being incarcerated in their



homes with the wrongdoer. They had no means of escape and nowhere to go during the days of lockdowns.

To add to their troubles, they were withdrawn from the general method of communication with their extended family members. Continuous 24x7 monitoring by their partners guaranteed that they could get no private space to make that urgent phone call to contact their support systems for assistance. Often women had no phones to call the helplines and travelling to their parents' homes became impossible due to curfews and travel restrictions. Being isolated from all help, these vulnerable women and their children were made to suffer the humiliation of recurrent domestic abuse without any remedy of help or intercession.

Due to the exceptional circumstances, we ended up with a new "normal", a modified way of life and non-literary writing chronicled the consequences. Infectious diseases remind us emphatically that the social and cultural borders we use to structure society are delicate and permeable rather than secure, and impenetrable. Although many people had halted their newspaper subscriptions during the lockdowns, the electronic versions kept everyone acquainted with the advancement of the pandemic and the breakthroughs and progress made in the vaccine development endeavours.

Alongside all this, a startling fact emerged through these newspaper and other articles, and that was the spike in the number of cases of domestic violence during this same period. Women in India lodged more domestic violence complaints during the first four phases of the lockdown in India as compared to a similar period during the previous ten years.

Some stories were revealed, others were concealed but finally it became an acknowledged fact that this scourge was assuming sinister proportions as each lockdown was extended.

These writings give us the chance to bring into the public domain and deliberate upon this critical, though often unexposed issue of domestic violence. It also sets out ideas about how we might structure our societies more fairly in the aftermath of a pandemic. Without initiating a dialogue on these abominable crimes, these odious acts would persist freely without fear. The shame and socio-cultural conventions create an unwillingness in putting the family and its confidential relationships to public scrutiny. Therefore, building awareness



around domestic violence is crucial, including conceivable deterrent and alleviation measures.

According to numerous newspaper articles published in the Indian Express, there was a huge rise in the number of complaints about domestic violence during the lockdown. In just four months from March to July 2020, the number of domestic violence cases lodged was more than 25% of the total complaints registered in the last three years. There were many hardships experienced by women when it came to filing such cases in the throes of a pandemic. Women were being stopped from venturing outside their homes, many did not have access to phones or internet, they lacked the reinforcement of their extended or native families. All this ironically resulted in a decrease in the reporting of cases whereas the situation was the opposite.

CAUSES

One of the most compelling reasons for the rise in cases was because of financial difficulties, loss of employment and the climate of unpredictability that was rampant during the lockdown period. The pandemic spelt doom to many people as they lost their jobs and were confronted with a desolate future filled with uncertainty and worry. In addition, women were the first ones to be laid off and when they were unable to pitch in towards the household expenses or supply their husbands with money, they instantly became victims of domestic abuse. As a result, this made many hard-core alcoholics imbibe excessively at home during the lockdowns. When the shops selling liquor were closed it aggravated the overall feeling of vexation which culminated in violent attacks on their spouses. Children also had to endure their anger. During the lockdowns, the conventional aid workers from NGOs working in this field were also inaccessible. Seclusion and social distancing resulted in the curtailment of visits to the home and dearth of personal contact. Migrant labourers lost their jobs and their wives had to bear the brunt of their violence consequently. They released their frustration at being unable to provide for their families, by thrashing their wives and abusing them. Because of schools closing down and adverse economic ramifications, young girls had an extra danger of being married off while they were still minors. It was apparent that during an emergency when women and



children are cornered inside their homes, they become more vulnerable to domestic violence. Generally, the difference of opinion resulting in disputes was-either who will perform the household chores, or whether one spouse is spending more than what is necessary. In order to eliminate this pestilence of domestic violence, the Legislature must make the requisite amendments in The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 by affording protection to women and children.

REMEDIES

A vital yardstick for development is transforming the entire attitude of society towards women. More awareness on how to treat women as equals is required, along with counselling. Professional counsellors, experienced mediators, trained lawyers, psychiatrists, must volunteer to help those in need. This can be achieved through phone, WhatsApp, videoconferencing or even via mass media.

Celebrities who command considerable influence over the common people must be roped in to communicate a powerful message for the protection of women and children who are incarcerated at home with their abusers. Pharmacies can be capitalized on to provide some relief. When women go there, they can use furtive signs or secret code words to transmit the message that they are suffering abuse at home. Neighbours too play an important role in suppressing such violent incidents. The 'Bell Bajao Andolan' in India summons neighbours to bang on doors, ring the doorbell and make some noise to let the abuser become aware that he is being observed. Witnesses can be galvanized to report the episodes of domestic violence by guaranteeing that their complaints remain anonymous.

Legal aid, advice, and shelter must be given to women facing violence. Supplying them with food, medicine, medical aid as well a safe refuge to stay in case they cannot return home to their families is essential.

CONCLUSION

It may therefore be concluded that there is an urgent need for an extensive and unified response pattern to deal with the issues of gender-based violence during the present as well as



possible future pandemics. Wellness professionals, the media, and community efforts must be amalgamated to effectively resolve this issue. Moreover, continuous, and relentless efforts are required to terminate the stigma and shame associated with it. The availability of 24/7 prompt counselling, and availability of mental health services in the safe shelters should be designated as essential services. In a similar fashion to the national campaigns on COVID-19, the government could make use of various mass media platforms to disseminate information about the resources that the victims of domestic violence can access.

Linking the present emergency-reporting phone services with Short Message Service or WhatsApp might make it easier for the victims to lodge their complaints in case they are frightened that their phone call might be overheard. Advertising campaigns can be run that repeat the vital issue regarding sharing household work, as well as creating awareness about the repercussions of domestic violence on the abuser.

Although the police should be intimated only as the final recourse, the police personnel, who are often the first responders to help women in distress, also need to be trained to make certain that the abusers are not just released with a word of warning and that women's domestic violence complaints are taken care of with maximum concern.

Most importantly, there is an acute urgency to recognize domestic violence as a silent pandemic by the governments of all countries.



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