

# Understanding the Wave of Domestic Violence Against Women in The Era of COVID-19 Pandemic – A Theoretical Perspectives

SHUBHRA CHANDRA

*Assistant Professor,*

*Department of Geography,*

*Bhatter College, Dantan, Paschim Medinipur.*

## ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the corona virus has left us stranded in precarious condition; exposing us not only to the vagaries of the new epidemic lacking the predetermined medical interventions needed to tackle the situation, but, also to the concurrent and consequent social and economic maladies which are always embedded in the extreme situations that pervade the society. Such social maladies are hard to ignore as, they have lasting impression on the marginalized and weaker sections of the society. One such malady is domestic violence which has taken an ugly turn in the COVID-19 pandemic time. This paper is an attempt to understand the modalities of domestic violence and its perpetuation and the possible ways to control and curb the situation.

**KEYWORDS:** Domestic violence, women, COVID-19, pandemic, lockdown.

## INTRODUCTION

Historian Frank M. Snowden has rightly remarked that – “Epidemics like the corona virus outbreak are a mirror for humanity, reflecting the moral relationships that people have toward one other.” Diseases inflict upon the society and progress affecting the whole society in general and the poor and the marginalized living in the most vulnerable condition in particular. The women who constitute half of the world, are still the most marginalized and vulnerable in the society, and are the worst –affected in any crisis situation, to whichever class of the society they belong. As has been evident from the past disasters, epidemics and pandemics that has hit the world and shattered and reoriented it; the COVID -19 pandemic has made its manifestations and impacts felt to every spheres of the world. It is true, that the disease itself does not make any discrimination on the basis of gender, class, creed but the societal structure so prevailing, modifies and determines its manifestations in the society. UN Women has rightly reiterated that the impacts and implications of the COVID -19 are different for men and women, which in its course may create greater inequalities for people who are in vulnerable positions.

## ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

The role of women in general and those in the house, has been always been challenging, and of late, the global pandemic has only made it more critical. Women don a number of roles in her lifespan which involves both public and private sphere. Women are the primary caretakers of children and elders in every country of the world and contribute to the human resource development and their representation as such is vital to all vital fields. In the traditional society like India, women are engaged in both household and agricultural sectors as unpaid workers. Most of the works done by women are either unpaid or underpaid. According to Manimekalai (2008), “Women are engaged in wide variety of occupations especially in the unorganised sector. In the rural unorganised sector, women care for cattle, sowing, transplanting, harvesting, weaving, working in the handlooms and producing mostly as low paid wage earners or unpaid family workers. In urban informal sector, women are working as petty traders. They are engaged in producing and selling a variety of goods such as vegetables, fruits, flowers, cooked food, groceries etc or

work as domestic workers. In both rural and urban areas they are engaged as construction workers. In addition to this, women spend on an average, seven to ten hours a day in domestic chores.” It is an irony in modern civilization that, in spite of all the achievements and advancements made by the society; the plight of the women has barely changed. Social norms relegates the position of the women to the second position and their needs and deeds are often undervalued if, not ignored totally. Women play a pivotal role in the society in maintaining the balance between the so called private and the public spheres. Women’s tireless work at home is not just for oneself; but, for the whole family, which at times in its course, women are denied their basic needs. Gender discrimination prevails at every stages of life from schooling to feeding to health care seeking behaviour which makes the life of them more critical. The ideological societal norms as to the ideal women’s role about nutrition is eating last and left over (if any), and keeping fast for religious or astrological reasons; about the age old value system that a family is incomplete without a son, and about gender inequality that men are superior to them. In the current societal parlance, the traditional role of the women has been challenged in many instances and the discrimination of opportunities has been questioned. Patel and Gandotra (2007) opined that “women today are entering into a number of professions although the reasons for which they seek employment vary with changing times.” In India the reasons for taking up job is still economic forces as has been revealed by the various researches. Gender discrimination, gender inequality and various challenges in many walks of life has been a part of women’s life and the present pandemic situation arising due to COVID-19 has only worsen the plight of women by aggravating, exaggerating and reinforcing the unjust discrimination in the societal system and communities. Women has been utilised, oppressed and victimised in many areas in the daily life.

## ABOUT THE PAPER

The present paper is an attempt to understand the different forms of oppression that are there in the society and how Covid-19 pandemic have worsen the situation prevailing in the society. This paper is a qualitative analysis of the plight of the women in prevailing pandemic situation.

## VIOLENCE AND THE CURRENT SCENARIO

COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the existing gender inequality, especially the marginalized, who have been greatly impacted due to issues such as livelihood, health and other factors. Although the corona virus is a physical illness affecting both the rich and the poor countries and people, but, it is not just a public health crisis; but, it has transcended to be an economic crisis slowly paving the way for the social crisis. Normal life has been stranded for many months and closure of educational institution and losses of jobs are inevitable, home isolation and work from home have squashed the difference between the public sphere and the private sphere. Women are the worst hit in such situations as their job have intensified and doubled because of the fear of job loss, maintenance of the standard and the quality of work performance, coping up with the economic crisis and maintaining the health standard of all the family member without any assistance from outside. Job losses and curtailment in wages have a compounded effect on the already existing financial difficulties. These together with house confinement, restricted mobility, stress and alcohol consumption has triggered domestic violence against women throughout the world.

The UN has defined violence against women as “any act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether in public or private life”. Violence in any form is detrimental for the physical and mental well-being of the women. Violence in any form is violation of the human rights which are innate for the respectful living of the human beings. Violence against women transcends any class, race, religion and cultural, geographical and ethnic boundaries. Violence is any act that damages and diminishes the physical, mental and the financial preposition of a person. Damania (2020) considers acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation as acts of violence. Rising escalation of domestic violence in the wake of global pandemic has been referred to as “shadow pandemic” by none other than United Nations.

Categorically, we try to relate domestic violence with the immediate male partner or the husband but the purview is not restricted to that; but, also, includes acts of abuse by other family members, parents, brothers, in –laws. Physical assault, beating, coercion are acts of violence perpetuating the mental health of the victim, but the deliberate undermining and refusal to comprehend the whole act, and glorifying and justifying it only makes the thing more grave for the victim. These acts, wears the victim of their mental security, their morale stability and are main causes of mental abuse and emotional abuse.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND WOMEN

Home is the place which provides physical and mental security to any individual but the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has rendered it unsafe to many. There has been an escalation in the number of domestic violence and women are at the receiving end making them very vulnerable. United Nations (2020) has rightly opinionated that women are the front-line responders, health professionals, community volunteers, transport and logistics managers, scientists and are contributing to address the outbreak every day; but, additionally, they are at increased risk of infection and loss of livelihood and existing trends of less access to sexual and reproductive health and rise in domestic violence. Johnston (2020) has rightly remarked events that cause financial insecurity and stress and uncertainty have lead to an increase in aggression at home and previous studies have shown such spikes during the Global Financial Crisis 2008, and when natural disasters such as the Christchurch Earthquake hit. Women are locked with their abusers for 24x7 with increased housework load and child and elderly care responsibilities together with overloaded healthcare systems and disrupted justice services. Women who have to navigate in odd hours and with odd and disrupted transportation services in deserted rural and urban spaces to basic necessities such as water, groceries or any other essentials are at greater risks of violence. In electronic media we have come across incidences where women has been harassed while fetching water for the whole family at the wee hours of the morning or when they went out to use the public toilet at night.

Interesting fact is that pre-pandemic times witnessed domestic violence of any kind and according to NFHS-15-16, about 86% of the women victim never sought help and 77% never even mentioned the incidents to anyone. Of the small 14.3% who seek help, only 7% reached out to relevant authorities such as police, doctors, lawyers, or other organisations. COVID-19 lockdown has seen a sudden spurt in domestic violence complaints recorded by women than in the last 10 years. In 25 days, between 23 March and 16 April, National Commission of Women (NCW) has registered 587 complaints regarding domestic violence, which is double the complaint received earlier. A very curious thing has been noticed that there has been a drop in the number of calls received during the lockdown. The Delhi Commission of Women (DCW) witnessed a decrease in calls for complaints from 808 during March 12 – 25 to 337 during April 7 – 20. National Commission for Women (NCW), Chairperson Rekha Sharma believes that it may be so that in the lockdown situation, women has not been able to reach out to these help-lines, and as most of these reporting being done by the registered government whatsapp number and emails which majority of the Indians do not have easy access. Many activists are of the view that only a certain section of the society having easy access to technology, literate and belonging to upper class. The implementation of strict lockdown order by police has been responsible for simultaneous three-fold rise in the police apathy towards women complaints. Mandatory stay at home prevented the victims from meeting and seeking help, and enabled the perpetrators from obstructing the victims from making calls and seeking help.

## ECONOMY AND WOMEN

Financial difficulties arising due to the pandemic and the eminent lockdown are influential triggering factors for violence against women; be it at home or outside home. The developing and developed world are characterised by dual – earning couples and, someone else taking care, and looking after the children; but, the imposed lockdown has made already strict situation more difficult as normal life has been suspended. In many a cases job losses are inevitable; and, in many instances greater efforts from those who are there in the service are necessary for up-keeping and maintaining the standard of the quality of services they cater. They have to give longer hours for work; as, the same work which they perform in the office takes longer hours to do online, having network issues and other problems. Home has become the work place. Private and public place has been squashed, and they have to deal with the limited space and cramped condition at home. The same work space is utilized by more than one or two persons. Household isolation entails school closures and caring of the children by oneself and not the paid ones as a direct measure to follow social and physical distancing. Most of the times these works falls disproportionately on the women, who are left with no other options but to juggle job, caring of children and household chores at the same time, leaving them no space to unwind. Household chores and caring of children are unpaid work which has very little value of its own. Such unlimited workload and unlimited expectations from women are interfering with the mental health of the women.

Loss of jobs on the part of men, and their return to hometowns jobless, have also made situation crucial for women. Job loss, pay-cut-offs coupled with uncertainty of revert to job have increased the stress among men and they are taking refuge to alcohol consumption, which are also considered triggers for violence at home. Increasing cost of all

essential items, depreciating savings or money which they have brought home with them, endangers men to take refuge to substance abuse and they vent their frustrations on the women folk back home. Women who are already vulnerable coping with limited resource and meagre food to sustain them are double burdened with the tantrums thrown at them by men.

The lasting impact and distorting effect of pandemic can have its manifestations in a varied manner as has been revealed by past studies. Julia Smith of Simon Fraser University has told to The New York Times “Everybody’s income was affected by the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, but men’s income returned to what they had made pre-outbreak faster than women’s income.” This may be the situation to be encountered by women in the near future when the world comes out from the ravages of COVID-19; as the impact of coronavirus is much more vast and global unlike Ebola which was limited to a particular area.

## CONCLUSION

Grim as it may sound, it is true that epidemics in the past as well as in the future has affected and will affect girls and women in a different manner than the men. COVID 19 pandemic is badly responsible for widespread loss of life, sufferings and disruption of socio-economic structure of society which was obvious as the Corona virus spreads from community to community with very limited health care facilities in comparison to large volume of population. Major part of the global health workforce was provided by the working women but they are unprecedented in leadership, grouped in lower paid jobs and lower status jobs, commonly faced harassment during this pandemic situation. Women are very much exposed and vulnerable to the COVID -19 for providing their service in professional and personal sphere along with their risk is exacerbated by mental stress and exhaustion. Women needs a safe and secure working condition in their workplace as well as decent and empathetic living condition at their home. So, it become very vital for the stakeholders to take positive and curative and gender friendly measures to cope up with the problem.

## REFERENCES

- Chandra,J (2020). “NCW records sharp spike in domestic violence amid lockdown”. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ncw-records-sharp-spike-in-domestic-violence-amid-lockdown/article31835105.ece> (Accessed 2 July 2020)
- Chotiner, I(2020). “How Pandemic Change History”. Availableat:<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-pandemic-change-history> (Accessed on 12 June 2020)
- Damania,A.P (2020).” Lockdown and rise in domestic violence: How to tackle situation if locked with an abuser” Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/lockdown-and-rise-in-domestic-violence-how-to-tackle-situation-if-locked-with-an-abuser-national-commission-for-women-6406268>. (Accessed on 2 July 2020)
- Johnston,K (2020). “Covid-19 coronavirus: Domestic violence is the second, silent epidemic amid lockdown”. Availablefrom:[https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid+12324237](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid+12324237) (Accessed on 1 August 2020)
- Joy, S (2020).” Coronavirus Crisis: No Lockdown for domestic violence”. Available at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/insight/coronavirus-crisis-no-lockdown-for-domestic-violence-829941.html> (Accessed on 2 July 2020)
- Lewis, H(2020). “The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism” Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302> (Accessed on 12 June 2020)

Mohan, M(2020). “Coronavirus: Domestic violence ‘increases globally during lockdown’”. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-53014211/coronavirus-domestic-violence-increases-globally-during-lockdown> (Accessed on 2 July 2020)

Radhakrishnan, V; Sen,S & Singaravelu, N (2020). “Domestic violence complaints at a 10-year high during COVID-19 lockdown Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-domestic-violence-complaints-at-a-10-year-high-during-covid-19-lockdown/article31885001.ece> (Accessed on 2 July 2020)

Rani, G.J (2008) Crimes and Violence against Women. In: Ganesamurthy V.S. (ED.) Empowerment of Women in India. New Century Publications, New Delhi, pp 94 – 106

The Economic Times (2020).” India witnesses steep rise in crime against women amid lockdown, 587 complaints received: NCW”. Available at: <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-witnesses-steep-rise-in-crime-against-women-amid-lockdown-587-complaints-received-ncw/articleshow/75201412.cms> (Accessed on 1 August 2020)

UN Women (2020). “Gender Equality Matters in COVID-19 Response”. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response> (Accessed on 1 August 2020)

Wikipedia. “Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic violence”. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact\\_of\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_on\\_domestic\\_violence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_on_domestic_violence) (Accessed on 2 July 2020)

