



3. The Covid-19 Pandemic and Gender Violence

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic created confusion and uncertainty among people, giving rise to various problems. During lockdowns women and children became the vulnerable population to abuse and violence. The present research article is supported by theoretical data. The article is divided into different sections namely introduction, objectives, methodology, background on gender-based violence, factors contributing to increased incidents of domestic violence during the pandemic, how covid- 19 pandemic aggravated gender-based violence, stigma of reporting violence during pandemic, rates of violence against women in Asia -Pacific, suggestions and recommendations and conclusion. The article discusses about the difficulty in getting data on gender-based violence and navigates the discussion with available data as well as the factors that contributed to gender-based violence and how it exacerbated during pandemic and impacted women and children. The article concludes with suggestions and recommendations to combat crisis situations and protect women and children from gender -based violence.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic, Women, Violence, lockdown, online, caretaking, and schools

Introduction

The Covid-19 laid havoc on the world for three years. People were confused about the survival. Everyday news brought in more uncertainties. Amidst this uncertainty and confusion, lives of the marginalized people became more vulnerable and insecure. Women in the public and private sphere were burdened with responsibilities, without relief. The stories are similar. Women, often women with children, were already living in vulnerable situations with men who abuse them. Then came the pandemic lockdown, and people lost jobs, increasing the stresses and tensions already present in the relationship. Women were forced into ongoing proximity with abusers, unable to leave the home because of lockdown rules. The abuse escalated, often to the point many women thought their abusers were going to kill them. Some left for shelters, even in the midst of the pandemic. Some stayed and continued to suffer abuse.

History tells us that in crises such as pandemics or natural disasters, incidences of gender-based violence increase. We know that gender-based violence is rooted in structural inequalities that make women and children especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown clearly how inequalities disproportionately harm already vulnerable women and children as we have seen incredible increases in reports of gender-based violence. We also know that the risks of gender-based violence increase with “emotional stress, economic strain, and shifting roles and responsibilities among family members” (Landis, 2020).



Objectives

- To understand how the covid-19 pandemic increased the likelihood of gender based violence using theoretical basis.
- To highlight the factors contributing to gender-based violence
- To discuss the impact of pandemic and degree of gender-based violence in Indian context
- To offer solutions so as to combat the gender-based violence

Methodology

The present study is supported by theoretical basis. This theoretical work is supported by various research articles, media reports from regional news sources documenting the pandemic's effects on gender-based violence. Additional research will be necessary based on the ground reality to better understand how the pandemic facilitated the gender-based violence and how much it is important to protect women's safety even during the times of crisis. This paper provides a preliminary understanding of how covid-19 pandemic influences the prevalence of gender-based violence around the world. The structure of the paper is as follows.

The second section provides background on gender-based violence. The third section describes the theoretical basis for why the covid -19 pandemic increase women's risk of violence and what are the factors that contribute to violence against women. The fourth section describes policy response to prevent, reduce and support victims of gender-based violence prior to the pandemic as recommended by international sources.

Background on gender-based violence

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1992 officially acknowledged that Gender Based Violence inhibits gender equality. In 1993, the United Nations' Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women 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 such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life (UN ESCAP, 2021). It also stated that violence against women may be perpetrated by the family or general community or by the state. The covid-19 pandemic intensified two types of gender-based violence. Intimate partner violence prevalent in the form of Violence against women that is relevant during a lockdown when families were required to stay within the home. The pandemic also increased digital violence when the lockdown turned the employment opportunities to remote work with higher internet usage for virtual socialization. The pandemic increased the internet usage by 50-70 percent which facilitated the exposure to incidence of sexual harassment, zoom bombing, stalking, threats and sex trolling (UN ESCAP , 2021).

Gender-based violence is the result of power imbalance occurring within private sphere and makes it difficult to measure. In the 20-year review of Beijing Declaration and platform for Action in Asia and the Pacific, 64 percent of respondent ESCAP member States and associate



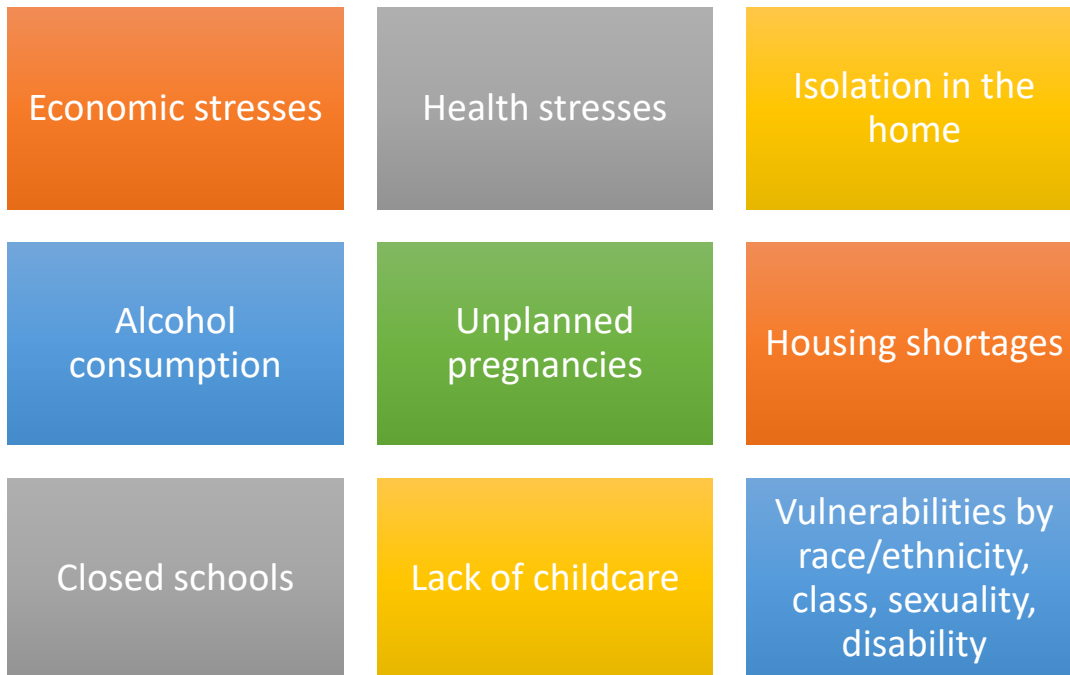
members (25/39 respondents) did not conduct regular surveys on violence experienced by women and girls. The Sustainable Development Goals also emphasized to report the incidence of violence against women, but only 28 countries in Asia-Pacific have ever provided data and no countries provided data in more than one year. These gaps in data complicate any analysis across the years. Without reliable data on VAW, pandemic impact on gender-based will be complicated to understand (UN ESCAP , 2021).

The Executive Director of UN Women called the combination of economic and health stresses and isolation during the lockdown “a perfect storm for controlling, violent behavior behind closed doors” (UN Women 2020). Jacky Mulveen, project manager of Women’s Empowerment and Recovery Educators, an advocacy and support group in Birmingham, England, says, “COVID doesn’t make an abuser. But COVID exacerbates it. It gives them more tools, more chances to control you. The abuser says, ‘You can’t go out; you’re not going anywhere,’ and the government also is saying, ‘You have to stay in’” (Kluger , 2021).

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) reaffirmed their commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action with the Asia-Pacific Declaration on Advancing Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: Beijing +25 review that calls for the elimination of violence against women, “re-emphasizing that sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls in public and private sphere. However, the Covid-19 pandemic threatened the Asia- Pacific’s ability to uphold the declarations promises (UN ESCAP, 2021).

Factors Contributing to Increased Incidents of Domestic Violence During the Pandemic

In the turmoil of Pandemic rising rates of violence against women was common. Amidst of fear of virus, strictly enforces lockdowns, overwhelming health care systems, increased screen time and stressful economic uncertainty violence against women was also embedded in the situation. There were various factors contributing to violence against women. The following are some factors that contributed to violence against women.



Around the world, the “shadow pandemic” (UN Women n.d.) of domestic violence surged during lockdowns. As early as September 2020, a review of literature on gender violence and the pandemic found “an alarming rise” in gender-based violence. That study also found other risk factors for gender-based violence that coincided with lockdown, including economic insecurity and alcohol consumption (Mitaal and Singh, 2020).

How Covid- 19 Pandemic Aggravated Gender-based Violence

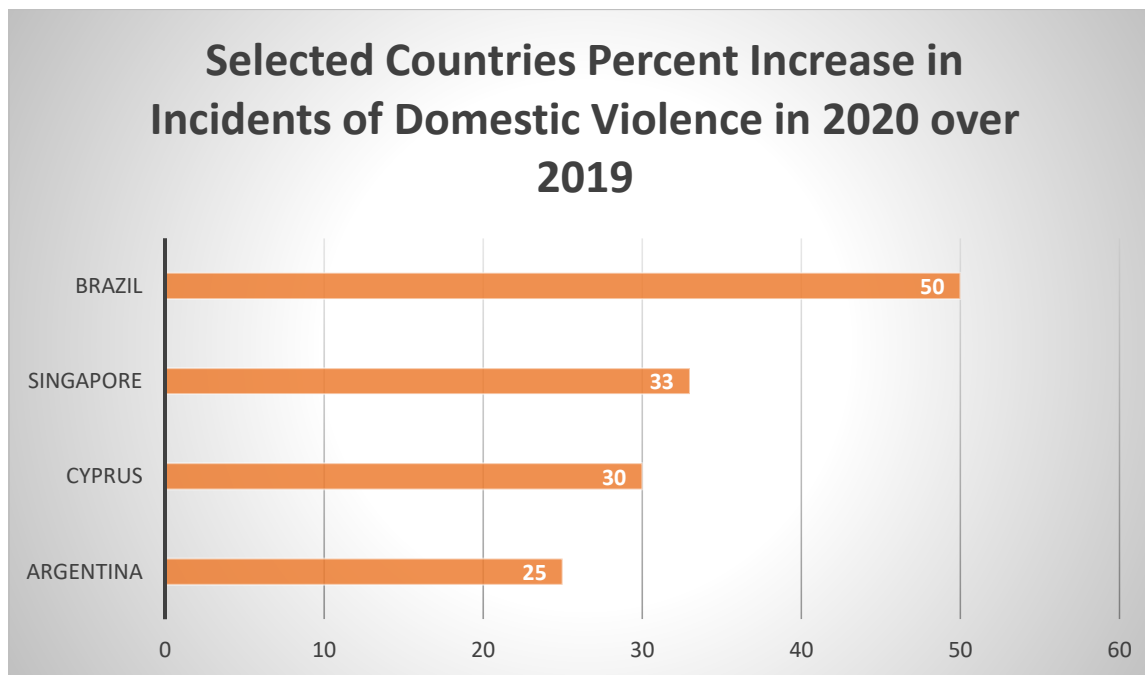
From the outbreak of covid -19, all the emerging data showed that VAW intensified globally. An estimated 243 million girls and women aged 15-49 have been victims of physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. The major reason for increasing violence is increased exposure to perpetrators due to lockdown orders and care responsibilities, triggering stressful environment for perpetrators and reduced support services. Covid-19 pandemic increased women’s exposure to perpetrators through lockdowns limiting their ability to leave home, long term effects of school closures on child marriage, their disproportionate burden of care work and more time spent online. Unquestionable, the covid-19 pandemic left many people unemployed which increased that economic instability of the families creating insecurity in families (UN (ESCAP, 2021). Digital divide in access and use of ICT services also lead to gender-based violence. For example, women came online during pandemic out of necessity where schools, workplaces, and social lives are transitioned to the digital world experienced digital violence. In In Asia-Pacific region, men using the internet are 54.6 percent and while the percentage of women is just 41.3 percent. This gap creates two types of violence. One, the digital divide may shield some women from digital violence or it may also put women at greater risk when they come online during pandemic. The gender gap in using ICT service makes women more vulnerable to harassment. Bringing more women online and reducing the gender gap in the



access to internet services is potentially the positive result of Covid-19 pandemic, but measures to protect women from harmful environment must be put in place (ESCAP ,2021).

Stigma of Reporting Violence during Pandemic

Reporting of violence is limited because of the stigma associated with having experienced sexual violence. Women and girls who experience violence at the hands of caregiver might not report it as it can result in withdrawal of support or even abuse that potentially could lead to death. Women are unlikely to report incidents of violence as there are so many barriers standing in the way of women in reporting violence during the pandemic. With the delay in opportunities to seek support, cultural and societal norms surrounding violence against women may stop women from ever reporting pandemic violence, leading to long term effects on women's economic empowerment (UN ESCAP, 2021). In spite of the barriers in getting data on gender-based violence, the available data on the incidence of violence against women in shadow pandemic is based on preliminary data collection done by UN women and volume of calls to helplines or anecdotal evidence report by media. This section covers the evidence surfaced in various research articles, media and news articles to demonstrate the experiences of gender-based violence during the pandemic.



Source: <https://time.com/5928539/domestic-violence-covid-19/>

The United Nations estimates that worldwide domestic incidents of violence increased by 20%. In Ireland, Women's Aid reported a 43% increase in contacts from women reporting abuse. In Lebanon and Malaysia, the number of calls to domestic violence hotlines doubled over the previous year. In China, they tripled. Incidents of domestic violence increased by 25% in Argentina, 33% in Singapore, and 50% in Brazil. Interestingly enough, shortly after lockdown in



the United States, calls to domestic violence hotlines dropped dramatically because women were not able to call safely, despite the fact that the US saw over an 8% increase in domestic violence incidents during lockdown. Erika Sussman, executive director of the Center for Survivor Advocacy and Justice (CSAJ), a support and research organization in the U.S. says, “While one in three white women report having experienced domestic violence [during the pandemic], the rates of abuse increased dramatically to about 50% and higher for those marginalized by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, and cognitive physical ability” (Kluger, 2021).

Cyberstalking and technology-facilitated gender-based violence have also been on the increase during the pandemic. Even before Covid, around three-quarters of girls and women experienced cyber or technology-facilitated violence, and tech-facilitated violence is the most common type of intimate partner violence (Marganski and Melander, 2020). Cyber abusers have had more time to victimize, and working at home and spending more time online has made many women more vulnerable to cyber violence (Bracewell, Hargreaves, and Stanley 2020). In India, researchers found that during the pandemic, increased time on social media, especially Instagram, and online gaming created greater susceptibility to cyberbullying (Jain et al, 2020).

The situation has been so bad that the head of the United Nations called for a ceasefire of domestic violence. “Peace is not just the absence of war,” he tweeted. “Many women under lockdown for #COVID19 face violence where they should be safest: in their own homes. Today I appeal for peace in homes around the world. I urge all governments to put women’s safety first as they respond to the pandemic” (Guterres, 2020).

Of course, we know that, while domestic violence occurs in all communities, it has a disproportionate effect on already marginalized people who have access to fewer resources to cope with upheaval, disaster, and abusive situations. Often women who experience domestic violence are financially entangled with their abusers and do not have alternative resources for economic support. During the pandemic, this vulnerability has been exacerbated by job loss and long-term unemployment. Moreover, precautions enacted during the pandemic have created greater housing shortages, and shelters and hotels have had to limit capacity to meet distancing guidelines.

Furthermore, women with children faced additional stresses as schools closed and learning moved online. Many families lack computers or reliable internet access, and many children fell behind academically as they were unable, for a variety of reasons, to keep up with schoolwork. Additionally, many parents were considered essential workers and had to continue working despite the pandemic and needing to find childcare. All of these stresses led to a rise in child abuse.

Particularly in low- and middle-income countries, the pandemic exacerbated economic insecurity. One study found that the median share of households that reported a decrease in income was 70% (Karlan, Udry, et al ,2021), and 45% of households reported food insecurity.



Already marginalized women and children have also been at increased risk for labor and sex trafficking during the pandemic. Economic insecurity and loss of housing make women and children vulnerable to trafficking. Additionally, many children worldwide have spent more time online where they have had greater exposure to online predators who groom and exploit them. For example, in the United States, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children had a 97.5% increase in reports of online enticement of children in 2020 compared to 2019 (Perdue, 2021). The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline had 40% more cases in the month following lockdown than in the previous month. Agencies also saw increased reports of parents and family members trafficking children. Increased international aid in response to the pandemic also increased vulnerability, given the history of sexual exploitation by aid workers in exchange for food and other kinds of assistance. Many women and girls also resorted to survival and transactional sex, which carries a high risk for violence.

Rates of Violence against women in Asia -Pacific

The statistics based on the most recent data available from 28 ESCAP member states and associate members show that the percentage of women having experienced intimate partner violence in their life time range from a low of 14.8 percentage to a high of 64.1percentage. In addition to these statistics on the percentage of women who experienced intimate partner violence in last two months ranged from 4.9 percent to 47.6 percent.

Already in India, almost a third of women between 15- and 49-years old experience spousal violence (IIPS 2017), although only 14% of these women seek help. After the 2020 lockdown in India, complaints of domestic violence doubled (Vora et al. 2020). Often, however, police officers to investigate domestic violence were in short supply, and many women could not reach out to domestic violence support services because of the presence of their abusers (Krishnakumar 2021). Researchers found that the stricter the lockdown, the greater the increase in domestic violence complaints in various districts throughout India (Miltimore, 2020).

In India, rural women and women who are part of marginalized communities faced additional gender-based, Covid-related struggles (Salim 2021). Families lost income as men migrated back to villages from urban areas. With markets closed, women who did home-based work like sewing no longer had that source of income. Forced marriages and child marriages rose, and many women experienced unwanted pregnancies. Indian Muslim women also faced a rise in Islamophobia as a false rumor spread suggesting Muslims were purposefully spreading the virus to non-Muslims. Some Muslim women were denied services at hospitals.

Suggestions and recommendations

Research suggests that we must begin by recognizing that gender-based violence will increase during pandemics and other crises, and so we must be prepared. What can we do?

- a. Incorporate a gender lens into all pandemic preparedness planning and include women and local women's organizations in leadership.



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- b. Integrate gender-based violence into all national and local response plans.
- c. Be ready to increase staffing for first responders and hotlines and bolster communication and information-sharing.
- d. Make sure first responders and healthcare professionals are equipped to address domestic violence, including identifying women who may be at risk of violence.
- e. Have plans in place to expand social services rapidly, including paid sick leave, unemployment insurance, direct cash or food voucher payments and/or tax relief.
- f. Plan for surge housing for women and children who may need to leave abusive situations.
- g. Facilitate informal social networks where women may be more likely to disclose violence, such as family, friends, and coworkers. In particular, scale up virtual platforms for support networks that may provide opportunities for women unable to leave home.
- h. Try to mitigate mental health stress with clear information and emphasis on positive advances, community, and public benefits. Also, provide additional support for mental health services ((Peterman et all 2020).
- i. Provide bystander intervention training for communities so neighbors know how to intervene and support, and encourage reporting.
- j. Provide safe and accessible healthcare for gender-based violence.
- k. Take an intersectional approach, recognizing that some groups of people are more vulnerable than others, and diverse people call for diverse responses that are appropriate for specific groups.
- l. Work on creating gender equality in all areas of life (Sharma and Borah, 2020).

In India, Jugnu Clubs are created by women tea-pickers and factory workers on tea estates in Assam. These clubs focus on safety and equality for women and girl agricultural workers. During the pandemic, the clubs have expanded their work to respond to the needs of women and girls, including those experiencing gender-based violence. Across India, women's self-help groups are having a positive impact on women's lives. These groups have produced 19 million masks during the pandemic and have set up community kitchens all over the country to feed hungry people. Other women's groups mobilized their communities to respond to the pandemic and raised awareness about Covid and how to keep safe. The feminist movement in India has advocated with the government for attention to women's issues. The movement has also worked to meet women's immediate needs. For example, they made sure relief packages had sanitary products in them. One group of Indian feminists took the government to court to require it to provide ambulances for pregnant women when all the ambulances were designated for Covid patients.

Conclusion



While the issue of gender-based violence during Covid is tremendous, we are not without hope. WHO provides guidance in preventing gender-based violence. The guidance like reducing childhood exposure to violence, teaching safe and healthy relationship skills, strengthening economic support to families, challenging social norms that promote male authority over women, offering bystander empowerment and education, creating protective environments and patient-centered medical care, therapeutic interventions, housing programs and legal services are few highlights and encourage other agencies to follow it (UN ESCAP, 2021). People have organized to support survivors and try to prevent further violence. We can also use lessons learned from this pandemic to ready ourselves for the next crisis so women and other vulnerable populations are not so at risk. The story does not have to be the same, and each of us can play a part in creating positive change.

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