

Covid-19 lockdown: A greater impact on women

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ABSTRACT

It is well-documented that during a war, a natural disaster or a pandemic, women bear the worse brunt of the crisis. Worldwide, mental stress, domestic violence and cybercrime against women are widespread and under-reported during Covid-19. Creating boundaries in such situations is extremely important. It is imperative that policy-makers adopt a gender perspective to understand and analyse the effects of the pandemic and the lockdown on the economy, livelihoods and social structures. United Nations has called for urgent action and for governments to put women's safety first as they respond to the pandemic.

Natl Med J India 2021;34:238–9

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 is the most talked about illness and a global health emergency, which every country is grappling with since 2020. Due to its huge impact on all the aspects of human life, humankind is worried and there is panic, helplessness, fear, anxiety, hope and prayers all over the world.¹ Many countries evolved their own strategies to cope with it. The Indian government had, in an attempt to control the pandemic, observed graded lockdown, from 24 March to 31 May 2020.² Life has been oddly suspended by the pandemic as it has frozen us not only in our homes but in the larger typecasts of our caste, class and gender. Governments across the world have implored people to stay home while failing to even acknowledge the increased domestic responsibilities created by the lockdown.

IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN ON WOMEN

The home now includes children who are compelled to be at home all day, aged people and babies that cannot be baby-sat by willing neighbours anymore. Home care for the elderly has also increased as hospitals are overworked. This is possible because this burden has traditionally been borne by the women of the household. Stereotypical ideologies exist—it is the woman's job to cook, clean, wash. It is the man's job to earn. Indian women spend up to 353 minutes a day (nearly 6 hours) on household work, compared to men who spend only 52 minutes per day (less than 1 hour per day).³ Factors responsible are double shifts for working women, absence of house-help and the increased household work without much support from the partner and family members. For working women, the situation is worse. Work from home has doubled their workload.

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[To cite: Jain B, Jain S, Khan A. Covid-19 lockdown: A greater impact on women. *Natl Med J India* 2021;34:238–9.]

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It is not a holiday for her. She needs to cook, clean, wash, feed, teach and also attend to her workplace requirements at the same time. A poll conducted on the E Times Lifestyle Twitter account showed 61% of respondents voted that women are more stressed than men during the lockdown.³ Other common issues faced by women during the lockdown are: ill-health, change in sleep patterns, feeling of frustration, pressure, guilt, fear, stress and anxiety. A study conducted by a Bengaluru-based sleep solutions start-up reported that about 67% of women in India are suffering from sleep deprivation.⁴

The gendered impact of the pandemic is not only restricted to the boundaries of domestic chores. Domestic violence is the shadow pandemic that has thrived in conditions that were created to cure the pandemic. It can be verbal, psychological, financial and sexual. In this context 'Stay home. Stay safe' sounds ironical for women as in lockdown, they are forced to live in close proximity with the perpetrators of violence who are husbands and other family members. South Africa witnessed 90 000 reports of violence against women during lockdown. In Malaysia and China, the distress calls have doubled.⁴ In India, the National Commission for Women (NCW) reported that distress calls have doubled since the pandemic broke out. The cases are high in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Punjab.⁵ From 27 February to 22 March 2020, a total of 396 offences related to women were reported, while from 23 March to 16 April 2020, 587 such complaints were received. Complaints of rape or attempted rape have risen sharply from 2 to 13.⁵ Similarly, complaints relating to the 'right to live with dignity' too have doubled, rising from 35 cases to 77. Simultaneously, there has been an almost 3-fold increase in police apathy towards women's complaints with the NCW receiving 16 complaints on the issue compared to 6 earlier.⁵ The fear of refusing sex or asking one's partner to use a condom compounds physical and sexual violence between partners and makes it harder for women to access contraceptives, pregnancy kits and abortion services.⁴

There has also been an increase in cybercrime against women, especially sextortion. According to the NCW, 54 cybercrime complaints were received online in April 2020 compared to 37 complaints in March and 21 complaints in February 2020. 'We received a total of 412 genuine complaints of cyber abuse from 25 March to 25 April. Out of these, as many as 396 complaints were serious ones from women, (and these) ranged from abuse, indecent exposure, unsolicited obscene pictures, threats, malicious e-mails claiming their phones, laptops and account was hacked, morphed images, ransom demands, blackmail and more,' said the founder of the Akancha Foundation, Akancha Srivastava.⁵

POSSIBLE REASONS

All this violence is because the abusers feel an enormous loss of power and control over their own lives. This arises due to isolation, reactive depression and frustration as these criminals are caged by following mandatory stay-at-home (lockdown) and social distancing rules. Instead of recognizing such issues and seeking help, people become violent and vent their frustration on the women in the house, and there is much anxiety

and uncertainty in people's minds regarding jobs, pay cuts, and hardships in accessing food.⁶ Lack of access to friends, family and support organizations for women has also aggravated the situation.⁴ Some other factors are: constant surveillance and monitoring of phones of victims by abusers, reduced working of courts, inability and fear to travel to counselling centres, risk of contracting the virus, the dependence of women and increased home drinking or forced abstinence from alcohol. The stigma of domestic violence as a couple's 'private matter' makes it hard for women to leave their abusive partners and also reporting against husband means increase in harassment and torture from in-laws.⁴ Furthermore, police and authorities often compel women to reconcile and resolve the conflict. Experts believe that these cases may only be the tip of the iceberg, as many women will not be able to reach out because of restrictions on movement as well as a lack of privacy within homes. In a survey, nearly 75% of those who reported domestic violence did not seek help from anyone.⁴

INITIATIVES BY GOVERNMENTS TO CURB THIS MENACE

Several measures have been adopted by governments worldwide to provide aid to women. The UN Secretary-General has appealed for peace in homes around the world and urged countries to redress violence against women.⁷ Spain and Portugal declared assistance to domestic violence victims an essential service during lockdown. France financed 20 000 hotel bookings for women seeking refuge from domestic abuse, and set up toll booths at groceries and pharmacies so women can contact people away from their abuser.⁶ Argentina, France, Italy, Norway and Spain adopted Mask-19, wherein a woman asking a pharmacist for this type of mask is a code for him to call for help.⁴ In India, the NCW launched a WhatsApp number (7217735372) to report domestic violence during the lockdown. A total of 40 messages were received till the writing of this article.⁶ The Women Entrepreneurs for Transformation Foundation launched a new initiative called 'red dot' under which citizens can identify a domestic violence victim by seeing a red dot on her palm and inform a non-governmental organization or the authorities.⁴ 'Mpower 1 on 1' is a helpline in Mumbai to report domestic abuse.⁸ Bell Bajao campaign urges local residents to take a stand against physical abuse. When residents overhear violence against a woman, they are urged to ring the doorbell and ask a simple question to let the abuser know that others can hear them and will act to interrupt the violence.⁸ Union Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani instructed officials of her ministry to ensure that One-Stop Centres, which provide legal and psychosocial help to survivors of gender-based violence, are linked with local medical teams, police, National Legal Services Authority shelter homes for women (Swadhar Greh, Ujjwala homes), working women's hostels and the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) so that their services are not impacted due to restrictions on movement. She also urged non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to try to ensure that every individual calls at least 10 women every day so that 'women know that they are not alone'.⁹ 'VIOLENCE FREE HOME—A WOMEN'S RIGHT' is a joint programme of the NCW, Delhi Police and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai to work on the issue of violence against women.¹⁰

THE WAY FORWARD

Reaching women in distress needs to be classified as an 'essential service'. The first step for administration and law enforcement agencies is to recognize the gravity of the problem, to believe in women, to sympathize with them and assure that they will be heard. Helplines, psychosocial support, online counselling, shelter services, medical services and legal services should be boosted. Police force and other government agencies should be more responsive. Social media should raise awareness and domestic violence and cybercrime should be declared crime under the Indian Penal Code.⁸ Communities should be educated on the need to support women survivors. Family members should be educated to participate and help in household chores, caring of the elderly and children. Transportation services should be provided to seek security and safety and easy access to courts and lawyers. Women should be advised to remain careful in cyberspace and not to share their personal pictures or details on social media.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic is exposing and exploiting inequalities of all kinds, including gender inequality. The situation is of concern and needs the urgent attention of authorities. Strategies have to be devised for protecting women from being subjected to dehumanizing conditions during times of lockdown. We have to emerge from this pandemic as a 'healthier' society in a holistic sense. We need to cultivate more sustainable interdependent networks of care and responsibility, more rational and humane perspective that respects differences and diversity in gender, caste, ethnicity, language or religion. It is vital for policy-makers to address the needs of women who are playing an indispensable role on the frontline in the war against Covid-19—as health workers, sanitation staff, caregivers, scientists, and as long-suffering housewives.

Conflicts of interest. None declared

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