

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING LOCKDOWN (1)

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The term domestic violence is used in many countries to refer to intimate partner violence, but it also encompasses child and elder abuse, and abuse by any member of a household. While women alone don't face domestic violence, the rates of violence and abuse directed at women are high, particularly from perpetrators known to them. According to the World Health Organization, one in every three women across the globe experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime; and at least 30 percent of all women in relationships have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partners.

Fueled by mandatory stay-at-home rules, physical distancing, economic uncertainties, and anxieties caused by the pandemic, domestic violence has increased globally. Across the world, countries including China, United States, United Kingdom, Brazil, Tunisia, France, Australia, and others have reported cases of increased domestic violence and intimate partner violence. India, infamous for gender-based violence (and ranked the fourth worst country for gender equality, according to public perception), is showing similar trends.

India's National Commission for Women (NCW) on Friday said it registered 587 domestic violence complaints between March 23 and April 16 – a significant surge from 396 complaints received in the previous 25 days between February 27 and March 22. One in six new complaints of domestic violence was made over a relaunched WhatsApp number.

That WhatsApp number had been out of use for some time, an NCW official told Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity, suggesting there could have been more complaints that never got through. The NCW relies on women to report domestic violence on its fixed helpline numbers and through the post, two modes of communication that have been closed since the lockdown. The Commission then publicized the email address of its members and began receiving complaints on social media and through its online portal. This in a country where only one-third of women have access to the internet.

Feminist economist Ashwini Deshpande analyzed NCW data for the months of March and April in 2019 and 2020. She calculated the average complaints per day and found that “there is already a jump in complaints related to domestic violence and the right to live with dignity, and a smaller increase in rape or attempt to rape and sexual assault”, all within the home. Even in normal times, women facing domestic violence in India rarely turn to the police.

One-third of women in India’s 2015-2016 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) said they had experienced domestic violence, but less than 1 percent of them sought help from the police. Their neighborhood or community is also not always a refuge for women facing abuse.

Many women facing abuse want to go to their mothers’ houses, but during the lockdown, they can only be sent to state-run shelter homes, where the risk of overcrowding and poor hygiene runs high. “Why should a woman escaping abuse in the middle of a lockdown be sent to a shelter home where she risks catching coronavirus?” Vrinda Grover, a leading feminist lawyer who is associated with several landmark women’s rights advances in India, said.

“India’s Domestic Violence Act gives the woman a right to shelter. Let her stay home in her house, with her kids, and let the man be sent to a shelter home if he is going to abuse the woman in the middle of a pandemic,”

The first four weeks of lockdown in the UK, 13 women and four children are believed to have been killed by men, most while shut inside their homes – that’s double the (already mind-bending) average of two women a week. At the same time, women’s frontline services are reporting record-breaking cries for help. Calls to domestic violence helplines have increased by 120% while traffic to their websites is tripling. There’s an unprecedented demand for refuge places. Children, too, are more vulnerable than they have ever been. Some social services have reported that before the Easter holidays, the number of “at-risk children” who have been allocated a school place actually turning up to school had

dropped to below 10%. In certain schools, it had fallen to zero. The Delhi High Court has directed the Centre and the AAP government here to hold top-level meeting to deliberate on measures to curb domestic violence and protect the victims during the coronavirus lockdown.

A bench of Justices J R Mirdha and Jyoti Singh further directed that a decision be taken in three days and steps required to protect victims of domestic abuse be immediately implemented. The NGO, All India Council of Human Rights, Liberties and Social Justice (AICHLS), has claimed that there were increasing number of domestic violence incidents since the nation was put under lockdown and sought an urgent intervention by the court.

During the hearing, the Delhi government and Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) had told the court that there are sufficient measures in place to safeguard victims of domestic violence and child abuse amidst the COVID-19 lockdown in the country.

Being trapped in a space with violent or manipulative individuals could lead to increased rates and intensity of threats, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, humiliation, intimidation, and controlling behavior. The ability to isolate a person from family and friends, monitor their movements, and restrict access to financial resources, employment opportunities, education, or medical care is heightened by a lockdown. These behaviors often have lasting effects on people, and can significantly affect mental health and well-being.

We need an aggressive nationwide campaign to promote awareness about domestic violence, and highlight the various modes through which complaints can be filed. National news channels, radio channels, and social media platforms must be strategically used, similar to the way in which the government has deployed campaigns advocating for physical distancing and hand washing to combat COVID-19.

If you or anyone you know is facing domestic violence, reach out to the National Commission for Women's emergency WhatsApp helpline (7217735372) that has been set up for the COVID-19 crisis. Help circulate lists of helplines across India for domestic violence and intimate partner violence. Compilations of helpline numbers can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)

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