

FIGHTING WITH THE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AMID THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the highlights of the year 2020, creating ripples of strife and tribulation across sectors and society. It is not just a global health challenge. However, it has since caused nations to go into recession, thereby disrupting lives across the globe. Although everyone, big and small, feels the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, women are the most affected. Everywhere, cases of domestic violence are radically increasing. The present paper aims to explore a vast range of literature concerning historical pandemics to observe methodologies for combating those pandemics while uncovering patterns of impacts created by the pandemics, especially in increasing diverse violent incidents. The articles used for the present study were carefully analyzed violence against women during pandemics directly and indirectly. Through evidence collected from the study, recommendations were created to help civil society organizations, community-based agencies, international donor facilities, and governments. This will provide appropriate measures and interventions, especially for women and children, to combat gender-based violence adequately alongside preparing for possible future pandemics adequately.

Key words: Violence against women, pandemics, intimate partner violence, COVID-19

JEL Code: J16, J12, D1

1. Introduction

In today's world, gender-based violence is strongly influenced by societal norms and gender inequality. Subsequently, gender-based violence increases during periods of civil disturbances, catastrophes, and economic collapse. Therefore, as the coronavirus pandemic emerged globally, violence has become the order of the

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day. Currently, estimates suggest that 1 in 3 women among 243 million women between the ages of 15 to 49 years have had been sexually or physically violated by their intimate partner in their lifetime. However, these estimates are rising higher, as over half of the world's population remains under strict "stay at home" or "shelter in place" orders. In countries like Ireland, the United States, the United Kingdom, and China, statistics suggest that the Covid-19 outbreak has exacerbated domestic violence incidents. However, the evidence is still in its early states (Godin 2020).

Furthermore, these statistics suggest that the coronavirus-initiated lockdown is connected with the lack of essential services responsible for the increased numbers of Gender-based violent incidents. Even worse, most women worldwide work within the informal sectors characterized by employment insecurities, which is another factor causing higher violent incidents. By comparing Gender-based violence in February 2020 to February 2019, the police in Jinzhou, Hubei province, discovered that the numbers have increased threefold (Vanderklippe, 2020).

This report helps further sheds insights that societal norms have a role in the treatment and positions of women in society. Nevertheless, countries are implementing enormous measures to combat COVID-19 pandemic across the world. One most prominent measure against the virus is movement restrictions to reduce the spread of the infectious virus. Although these measures seem to provide positive results in alleviating the volume of virus-related cases, other concerns are equally creating. For instance, women in many parts of the world are forced to live in homes with their abusers. The effects of the lockdown have created avenues for violence by their abusers. Across the United States, France, Italy, Spain, and Australia, sexual exploitation, sexual violence, and other domestic violence forms have been reported within their households (German Press Agency (DPA), March 27, 2020).

Further reports shown by the increased number of police intervention reports on violence cases further raise concerns about the lockdown's consequences. However, even as the lockdown measures are highly necessary, Marcelline Naudi, President of the Council of Europe Group of Experts Violence (GREVIO), postulated that nations should not just implement lockdown measures but take steps to implement the guidelines for tackling violence against women. These guidelines were developed at the Istanbul Convention by the Council of Europe Convention on Prevention and combating violence against women. Furthermore, Naudi raised the need to provide support services and welfare facilities that will help and support women and young girls facing higher violence risks. However, the COVID-19 crisis has created enormous barriers stopping reputable welfare agencies from providing adequate support services for these women's and kids. This is because of the stringent measures for combating the coronavirus, such as social distancing in opposition to the measures for combating gender-based violence.

Before, now these organizations faced many barriers in providing support services for victims of gender-based violence. However, the current situation further pressures, making an already difficult situation worse. Nevertheless, many

nations, including France, Spain, and Italy, have enacted policies to ensure that they are helping women at risk of violent situations, and further tackling human-rights related issues. Before the pandemic, records show that over 35% of women have suffered sexual or physical violence by their family members or marital partners (UN Women). In addition, the lockdown, forcing these women to remain indoors, is further worsening their situations. For example, in China, last month's reports show that the police received at least three calls more than they received the previous year on matters of gender-based violence (Bettinger-Lopez and Bro 2020). Such situations, alongside the evident lack of adequate resources, including case officers, outreach programs, and shelters for victims, have caused priorities to shift. It is most alarming to note that although women are known for lending their voice to promoting peace and cohesion, they become ready targets in the face of a crisis. By critically evaluating literature works, five prominent direct and indirect connections between violence against women and pandemics are discovered like information centers and active helplines, housing and shelter provisions, care work and economic inequality, quarantines and social isolation, virus-specific sources of violence. With this thorough analysis, we believe that policymakers, researchers, and relevant practitioners can gather insights to develop relevant policies to deal with such issues.

2. Rise of Gender-Based Violence in The Face of Global Lockdown

Anecdotal evidence shows that quarantine and isolation have increased intimate partner, women, and children violence across nations such as Brazil, China, Australia, and the US (Campbell, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020). Further estimates postulate that the numbers may be more, as violent events occurring within rural communities may go undocumented. Many of these areas lack facilities, and the lockdown measures further restrict their movements.

Nevertheless, history links global pandemic outbreaks to mental disorders such as suicidal tendencies, aggressive behaviour, and depression. Therefore, there is no doubt that the present movement restrictions are further causing a great deal of stress and mental health degradation. Reports in France confirmatory evidence because, just after implementing self-isolation and quarantine regulations, the country witnessed domestic abuse complaints rising from 32% to 36% (Reuters News Agency 2020). Within this country, measures such as commissioning hotels to serve as temporary homes for these victims have been developed. France is not the only one in this direction, as the Italian government is already commissioning hotels to serve as shelters during this trying period (Davies and Batha 2020). In the US, Wagers (2020) documents a rise in family violence and homicide from 21% to 35% within the first quarter of the year (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020). In the UK, the National Domestic Hotline witnessed over 25% increment in domestic abuse-related calls when the stay at home directive became law (Kelly and Morgan 2020). There are also records of over eight family violence-related deaths (Knowels 2020). Therefore, as the virus continues to rage across the world, more women are

left within desolate conditions, living with their abusers and seeing untold violent prevalence. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic is causing many problems for women around the world.

Beyond the higher prevalence of violence, the COVID-19 has caused financial hardship, security issues, money worries, and lots more, further increasing tensions around homes. It should be noted that confined spaces during the lockdown may also be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the situation is getting worse as the months go by, and the COVID-19 pandemic further wreaking havoc in the world. By March, over half the world's population was affected by the lockdown. Although we have earlier stated that there must be connections between the COVID-19 pandemic and IPV cases, Wan Fei, the founder of a Non-profit, confirms this theory stating that over 90% of currently reported cases stemmed from the effects of the viral outbreak (Mahdawi 2020). The lockdown equally stopped many women in precarious situations from seeking and getting the help they need. According to studies in Italy, the country saw over 55% decrease in calls received relating to domestic violence within the first two weeks. Nevertheless, another report France equally sheds insights on the decrease (Euro news 2020). Accordingly, in challenging situations, and without support to manage their situation, these women are discouraged from searching for a way out. Already, there are hundreds of institutions, organizations, networks, community development officers, and lots more willing to help. However, these young girls and women cannot reach them at the time. It is even worse that even as internet-enabled devices, mobile phones, and computers are helping bridge the gap, many discriminated girls and women do not have access to such resources. Even when they do, their abusers keep a careful watch over their devices.

It is essential to realize that before the COVID-19, domestic violence was already rampaging lives across the country. No doubt, domestic violence takes the leading stance in the number of human rights violations witnessed daily. As the pandemic rages on, there are estimates that sexual and physical violence will likely increase, thereby causing tremendous impacts on sexual, reproductive, and mental health. In women, it may equally affect their well-being and limit their abilities to function correctly in the economy and society.

3. Coronavirus and Gender-Based Violence

The coronavirus has led to higher "exposure time" because of the lockdown restrictions. This exposure time is a term that describes the fact that women and children are spending more time, and they regularly would with their abusers. Even so, many women will prefer to remain with their abusive partners and endure the hardships because they fear for their safety, the safety of their offspring, and emotional connections with their abusers. Others do not leave these abusive relationships because they are psychologically and financially dependent on their abusers. This has further made dealing with the situation challenging as many of such abuse cases will go unreported. Tension and instability have been proven over time to boost aggressive behaviour in partners. When these people have histories of

substance abuse and alcohol, they may exhibit higher aggressive behaviour than usual.

Furthermore, when the situation such as the present crisis threatens the informal and formal sector, it places adolescent girls in particularly sexually compromising place, which further increases abuse rates. Still, there is no stopping the increasing prevalence of domestic violence around the world. In Spain, homicides connected with domestic violence have become regular occurrences. They are likely to increase in the future as long as the future remains uncertain (UN 2020). Of particular importance is that reports in the US suggest some abusers are further turning the situation into weapons. They are doing this by carrying out actions such as threatening to leave their victims to the COVID-19 pandemic clutches, banning hygienic measures, and threatening to ban the victim from accessing health care resources if they get the virus (UN, 2020).

Currently, there is no conclusive evidence for the actual estimates of women that have been violated owing to the "shelter-in-place" restrictions worldwide. However, scarce evidence shows that many women affected by the "shelter-in-place" restrictions can no longer communicate with the outside world. As these women do not have the necessary resources to leave their abusive relationships, they face tough times. Already, the presence of teachers, health workers, community development officers, women's right networks, and workers is not enough. The problems these women face originates for, inability to find and reach these organizations when they need them. Therefore, even as internet-enabled devices, smartphones, and computers dominate the world today, these girls and women in precarious states may not have access to these resources. On occasions when they do, their abusers are usually extremely careful and vigilant about using their devices.

4. Going Forward

Although the home is supposed to be a place of solace, it has become a place of torment for millions of women worldwide. Everywhere, isolation and COVID-19 are causing a higher number of domestic violence. Before now, abusers mainly used isolation on their victims, now the environment merely provides these avenues in huge platters. Therefore, many victims cannot run to their friends or family for help because they are typically trapped in that place. Social distancing and COVID-19 measures are equally causing ripples of consequences in the already overburdened system. One of the best ways to help these women begins from their knowledge that awareness and support are vital avenues of combating these problems. Evidence already shows that the upsurge of domestic violence risks suggests the home poses a higher risk for victims than anywhere else. Even more, the victims can only have low protective measures for their family, friends, and co-workers.

The U.S, France, Spain, India, China, Brazil, and Cyprus all have their frontline responders' lists. Therefore, even as the COVID-19 is causing an untold number of consequences, there is a need to redirect our steps. Frontline responders have in many parts of the world seen a higher number of domestic violence calls. Although there are no appropriate population-based estimates on the number of calls, existing reports are still seen as invaluable before and after the lockdown (Ravelo, and Jerving 2020).

As the COVID-19 outbreak places enormous burdens on the authorities, there is needed to enact specific policies to curb the rise of Gender-based violence. These measures are focused on health care facilities, non-governmental, and governmental organizations worldwide. One such measure that could be used is the distribution of "dignity kits," which will contain whistles, soaps, flashlights, sanitary kit, and everything they need at county levels. Some other ways to actively combat the impacts of the COVID-19 is by providing cash vouchers or transfers to these women. These can help them leave abusive relationships without putting them at risk of infection.

It is equally vital that governments provide services that can help enhance women's mental and psychosocial health worldwide. This can be done via online counselling services and establishing safe spaces. Nevertheless, it is equally vital that the appropriate health care providers be duly trained and provided equipment to deal with victims of abuse and their families. Members of communities should also receive adequate sensitization about looking out for one another. With these provisions, identifying and supporting victims within communities will be more effective.

5. Government and Gender-Induced Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Information Centers and Active Helplines

Governments must create hotlines that can provide immediate help during occasions of violence against children and women during the coronavirus lockdowns. Also, make available the numbers and addresses of local care-givers so these abused women can access them, easily and locally. For example, Italy uses some of these methods by aggressively advertising to 1522 helpline for violence-related scenarios to avert "emergencies" within "emergencies". In other countries such as the UK, Australia, and France, care lines provisions have been made to improve the lives of Gender-based violence victims.

Housing and Shelter Provisions

When abused women and children have an alternative space to place their heads, it will help drive them to seek shelter away from their abusers. In Trento, Italy, rules enacted state that abusers must leave the family's home instead of the victim walking away. Germany and Austria have equally implemented similar rules. However, this system makes it more difficult to protect those women since

their abusers know their exact location. Furthermore, Canada made provisions of over \$50 million to deal with the development of sexual assault centres and women shelters as a part of their relief package. France has also witnessed boosts in funding (about €1.1 million) for 20,000 hotel nights, for victims to escape their perpetrators.

Boost Access to Services for Victims

Because of quarantine restrictions, many countries are equally looking at alternative ways to improve their violence-related services. In France, "pop-up centres are being created within grocery stores to provide services to women. Furthermore, countries such as Spain, Italy, and France, pharmacies now have code words to report suspected cases to the relevant authorities. The UK and Italy follow a different method, by using concealed apps, which will send signals when they are too close to their abusers. However, it is crucial to make many of these protection services fall under "essential" during the COVID-19 pandemic to avoid issues as they arise in real-time.

Reducing Risks

It is also crucial to reduce risks associated with violent behaviour. For Instance, South Africa banned the sales of alcohol [March 26]. In Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, similar steps have been taken to reduce these risks. These measures follow the limited evidence that alcohol abuse may be related to violent actions. However, policies that boost awareness about the vitality of mental and psychological health is critical.

Changing Judicial Policies

The coronavirus pandemic has equally disrupted the activities of the judiciary. However, some countries, such as the Australian government, made modifications to the family law, which placed the country in a better position to handle its effects. Some of these modifications include using electronic monitoring requirements for bail and conditional suspension of imprisonment orders. Secondly, the Australian government even provided online portals for filing restraining orders and creating new offenses and higher fines for restraining orders with added time. On the other hand, countries like Columbia has implemented robust virtual services to target women and children suffering gender-based violence (Guedes et al. 2020).

6. When the Covid-19 Pandemic is to Blame For Higher Gender-Based Violence Incidents?

As noted earlier, natural disasters and disease outbreaks are characterized by a higher incidence of Gender-based violence. However, it is equally vital to dive deeper into the matter. Many reports are already placing blames at the pandemic, but in reality, the blame lies elsewhere. Therefore, when accusing fingers are

pointed in the wrong direction, inadequate measures may be put in place that will not solve those issues. The present pandemic is causing havoc on families, relationships, and further exposing females' looming vulnerabilities and societal gender inequalities. Therefore, as the world continues battling one pandemic after another, women with more financial dependency face tragic circumstances as they soon become abuse victims with no means to fend for themselves. It is even worse because policies and measures enacted to fight the COVID-19 pandemic do not consider members of these vulnerable populations. Therefore, there is a need to focus more on protecting the vulnerable in society by establishing policies that accommodate them. Without an adequate focus on these vulnerable women, abusive behaviour by their perpetrators will only increase. It is even worse by the economic and financial collapse of the crisis response to the pandemic outbreak. Therefore, gender-based support groups, and security personnel, lack the funds and resources to effectively deal with gender-related violence within this pandemic due to the meltdown.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 situation equally brings about opportunities leading many women to take on leadership positions worldwide and help deal with the crisis. However, the pandemic's effects are still very much felt in higher consequences in the female gender. It should be posited that three factors contribute to violence susceptibility; "poverty, low educational levels and age." With these factors in mind, it is clear that the government must deal with the pandemic by first considering how it affects the female population. The government must effectively implement policies that will curb domestic violence alongside ensuring that it does not spread. When policies are established by looking at the bigger picture, it provides a robust outlook on what happens in a future disaster. Although there are already apparent suggestions, the government must work with gender experts to develop a robust framework that alleviates women's issues during a crisis. The government should also consider developing a framework that diversifies the economy bringing in investments in sectors that can empower women. It is also vital that the government consider creating safeguards or financial lifebelts for women in crisis. That way, the government can be better prepared to assist women at risk of domestic issues. Another avenue the government should look at is to alleviate the specific triggers responsible for domestic violence. For example, some governments are limiting sales of alcohol to reduce abusive situations influenced by alcohol. According to the theories backing such interventions, when alcoholics consume little or no alcohol, they are less likely to abuse their family members. Finally, the government should establish support facilities, including shelters and remote helplines. With these measures, women can quickly escape abusive events, whenever and however, it happens. Such support systems should also provide adequate legal safeguards and shelter facilities.

7. Conclusion and Suggestions

Everywhere in the world, women make a more significant part of informal, unskilled, and pastime workers. Therefore, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact adversely on these women's lives, there is a need to prioritize their health and safety. However, it is also essential to bear in mind that some women are

equally left financially dependent on the abusers. The lockdown has made them lose their jobs temporarily and are forced into unpaid domestic work in their homes. Therefore, these women must be provided excellent working environments with better salaries to encourage them to leave their homes.

Furthermore, as some women are making out time to perform acts of charity, particularly in producing essentials like facemasks, such avenues could provide income to those women and further improve their financial positions during the pandemic period. These kinds of programs focused on enhancing these women's financial positions will go a long way in alleviating the impacts of the pandemic on their lives and further limit the rise of gender-based violence (Willmer, 2020). There is also a need to implement community programs, especially for providing psychological support and shelter, especially for abuse victims. Nevertheless, even as the world is chaotic today, we must reinvent the wheel by effectively implementing strategies that can combat the present crisis. That way, we can deal with the present situation, make excellent headway in tackling gender-based violence, and prepare for another pandemic's possibilities in the future.

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