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The Gendered Face of COVID-19: A Research Call to Action

COVID-19'un Cinsiyetçi Yüzü? Harekete Geçirici Bir Eylem Çağrısı

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ÖZ

Kadına yönelik şiddet, dünya çapında her 3 kadından 1'inin hayatının bir noktasında yakın bir partneri veya partneri olmayan kişinin uyguladığı fiziksel, duygusal veya cinsel şiddete maruz kalması durumunda alarm veren yaygın bir sorun haline gelmiştir. COVID-19 salgını yalnızca kadına yönelik şiddeti artırmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda kadınların şiddete maruz kaldığı oranı da artırmıştır. Bugün dünyamızdaki cinsiyet eşitsizliği ve sosyo-kültürel normlar, Cinsiyet Temelli Şiddetin (GBV) artmasında kilit bir rol oynamaktadır. Yaşanan sıkıntılı durumlar, sivil karışıklıklar ve ekonomik çöküş zamanlarında, kadınlara yönelik şiddet vakalarında her zaman dikkate değer bir artış yaşanmaktadır. COVID-19 salgını nedeniyle dünya kaosa sürüklenirken, kadınlara yönelik şiddete yaşanan artış bir kez daha artmaya başladı. Dünya genelinde, 15 ila 49 yaşları arasındaki 243 milyon kadın olmak üzere her 3 kadından 1'inin yaşamaları boyunca yakın bir partner tarafından fiziksel ve / veya cinsel şiddete maruz kaldığı tahmin edilmektedir. Topluluk için verilen eylem çağrısı açıktır. COVID-19'un ve kısıtlamaların şiddet üzerindeki etkileri ölçülmelidir. Etik ve güvenliğe özel dikkat gösterilmelidir. Bu nedenle, salgın sırasında karantina nedeniyle aile içi şiddet mağdurlarını destekleyen politikalar ve programlar daha etkili olabilir.

ABSTRACT

Violence against women becomes a widespread problem giving alarm where 1 in 3 women worldwide having experienced physical, emotional or sexual violence inflicted by an intimate partner or non-partner at some point in their life. Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only intensified VAW, but also increased the ratio women exposed to. Gender inequality and socio-cultural norms in our world today has played a key role in the exacerbation of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). In times of mass distress, civil disturbances and economic meltdown, there is always a notable increase in cases of violence against women. As the world is plunged into chaos due to the coronavirus pandemic, this rise in violence has once more began to rear its ugly head in our society. Across the world, it is estimated that about 1 in 3 women- 243 million women aged 15 to 49 years- has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. The call to action for the community is clear. The effects of COVID-19 and movement related restrictions on violence should be measured. Special attention must be given to ethics and safety. Therefore, targeted programs supporting victims of domestic violence because of lockdown during outbreak may be more effective.

1. Introduction

With approximately half of the world population on lockdown, the incidence of violence against women has been on the rise. Countries like China, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Ireland suggest an increase in domestic violence cases since the Covid-19 outbreak

although sufficient data to substantiate the claim is scarce (Godin, 2020). This increase in the cases of GBV has been linked to the shutdown of essential services during the coronavirus induced lockdown. The fact that most women work in an informal and less secure employment setting may also be to blame for this uncanny rise in violence. A police report from Jinzhou, Hubei province indicate a three-fold

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increase in the GBV report in February 2020 when compared to February 2019 (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020). This may indicate that social norms affect the place and treatment of women in society.

As the COVID-19 crisis continues, its impact on the world is greater for women than for men. As in previous pandemics, women endure many of the worst-case scenarios for human rights, safety and health issues. For example, women in certain countries are forced to share closed spaces with their abusers and are kept away from the basic subsistence services they need (Nesbitt-Ahmed and Subrahmanian, 2020). Beyond that, the new coronavirus has had tremendous effects on the global economy and has done more harm to women's jobs than men, especially those who are already financially disadvantaged. In developing countries, 70% of women's jobs are in the informal sector of the economy without provisions on social services (UN, 2020). Due to the crisis, more women are victims of violence (one in five) and are stuck in the same environment with the perpetrators. They find it difficult to access food services that are already severely restricted (Lennard, 2020). Thus, the crisis further expands the gender inequality gap, revealing the diseases of current socio-economic and political structures and increasing the impact of the epidemic (Godin, 2020). The situation is likewise apocalyptic for women in rural societies, where historically there are more victims of domestic violence (Godin, 2020). The measures taken to contain the pandemic have thus placed victims of abuse in a disturbing situation with their abusive partners, and given the lockdown situation, they can no longer find help (Alon et al., 2020).

Still, domestic violence cases are increasing globally. Countries such as Brazil, China, France, Italy and the USA reported unprecedented increases in domestic violence reports. For example, there is an increase of over 30% in domestic violence incidents in France. China witnessed three times the typical rates for domestic violence (UN, 2020). While estimates in Italy show higher events, Brazil's reports are currently in the range of 40-50%. In Spain, a horrific murder trend associated with domestic violence is currently an ongoing struggle and will likely rise as the future remains uncertain (UN, 2020). Especially in the US, reports show that local violators are arming the virus by instilling fear in their victims. Therefore, they abuse their victims not only physically but also emotionally. For example, they ban hygienic measures and threaten (victims) to ban healthcare if they come into contact with the virus (UN, 2020). These reports are uncertain about the true number of women violated because housing policies are still in place around the world. This also shows that most women lock onto their attackers and cannot communicate with the outside world.

These are tough times for women who cannot access the necessary resources to help them manage their situation or escape from abusers. Many networks, organizations and institutions such as women's rights networks, faith-based

organizations, teachers, healthcare professionals and community development officials are ready to appeal to women who are subjected to all forms of abuse. The problem now lies in the inability of women or girls to reach these persons or organizations. Cell phones, computers or other internet-connected devices could be an alternative for getting rid of it. However, many women / girls who face discrimination in many countries may not be able to access these resources. Where they do, abusers can watch these devices closely.

Even before COVID-19 disrupted our lives, domestic violence was one of the major human rights violations. 2019 recorded approximately 243 million women and girls worldwide aged 15-49 who may have been subjected to sexual or physical violence by a close partner (World Health Organization (WHO), 2019). As the pandemic intensifies, we are likely to see an increase in this number and this could have devastating effects on the mental, sexual, reproductive health and general well-being of these women. This can seriously hinder their ability to participate in the rebuilding of the economy and society.

This paper explains the increase in gender-based violence amid COVID-19. It states that the rise in gender-based violence is because of both psychological and social issues. Therefore, this paper reviews the literature of gender-based violence in the current pandemic. It also reviews both published reports and media literatures during lockdown.

2. The Global Lockdown and The Rise in Violence Against Women

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).

Based on anecdotal evidence from recent reports countries such as the US, China, Brazil and Australia have seen increases in an intimate partner, women and children violence which may be as a result of the isolation and quarantine (Campbell, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020; van Gelder et al., 2020). As the effects of the social distancing measures set in, rural areas have also encountered abuse against women and children although most go undocumented due to lack of facilities.

Global disease outbreaks have been linked to a rise in mental disorders such as depression, excessive aggression, suicidal tendencies etc. The restriction on movement and freedom leads to stress and hence degradation of mental health. In France, a 32% - 36% increase in domestic abuse complaints has been reported following the implementation of self-isolation and quarantine measures (Reuters News Agency, 2020). This has led to the commissioning of hotels for victims of abuse. In the same vein, the Italian government also began commissioning hotels to provide shelters for those escaping abuse (Davies and Batha, 2020).

According to Wagers (2020), the US has an increase of 21%-35% across its states while the UK has encountered an increase in family violence and homicide (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; Reuters News Agency, 2020). With a record of about eight family violence-related deaths (Knowles 2020), the National Domestic Abuse Hotline in the UK saw a 25% increase in calls since the implementation of the stay at home directive (Kelly and Morgan 2020).

Due to a displacement in normal structures in most families due to the quarantine, the more vulnerable in society (women) are forced to stay for longer periods with their abusers. This means that as the virus intensifies in its spread, more women are forced to be exposed to their abusers during this lockdown, increasing the incidence of abuse and violence.

3. How Do the Coronavirus and Lockdown Intensify Gender-Based Violence?

Due to the social distancing rules put in place by the government and health officials, there is an increase in 'exposure time', meaning that women and children have to spend more time with their abusers than they normally would. Most women also tend to endure and stay with abusive partners during periods of disaster for reasons such as for psychological and financial dependence, fear of personal safety, fear of offspring safety and emotional attachment to perpetrators. This makes the handling of the situation difficult as they remain unreported.

The presence of rising tensions and instability in the home will tend to make partners who are under stress to exhibit aggressive behaviour. This is made worse in people with a history of alcohol and substance abuse. Furthermore, the threatening of both the informal and formal social structures tend to place women especially adolescents in rather sexually compromising situations, escalating the rate of abuse. This, however, is not only limited to sexual abuse but also physical, mental and emotional abuse. With little to no help from outsiders, this can escalate over time.

Overcrowded housing, sometimes without the minimum of living comfort (drinking water, sanitary facilities), a loss of the usual household routines, difficulties concentrating while working from home, idleness of children, difficulties in home-schooling children, adults reduced to unemployment with a worrying financial impact, increase in general stress and anxiety due to health concern. These are a few examples of the multiple causes of increased household violence.

4. Domestic Violence During the COVID-19

It is pertinent to note that there is an associated increase in Gender-Based Violence in cases of disease outbreak and natural disasters. However, it is essential to determine the crux of the matter. Most reports tend to point an accusing finger on the pandemic- in this case the coronavirus. This results in improper handling of gender-based issues whenever they arise. It is therefore worthy of note that the economic and financial stress associated with the onset of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown puts a strain on most families and relationships. This produces fear and uncertainty thereby exposing the underlying societal gender inequalities and female child vulnerabilities. This means that as the world battles to handle such disasters, the women who are more financially dependent end up with no way to fend for themselves and thus may become victims of abuse.

There is a notable breakdown in government policies and financial activities during pandemics. This disorganization in structure leads to a shift in focus from the vulnerable in the society since few measures put in place can accommodate them, a fact made visible once again by the Covid-19 outbreak. Thus, an increase in abusive behaviour largely perpetrated by men against women is expected to skyrocket. The economic and financial meltdown which follows crisis response in disease outbreaks also has a crippling effect on gender-based support groups, the health sector and security outfits since funds to facilitate their activities have become limited.

Studies have shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence cases increased in countries. This increase can be traced to the restrictions which were adopted to ensure the virus didn't spread. A typical example was the report presented by frontline practitioners in Australia who were committed towards supporting domestic violence victims. It claimed that during such period, more women in Australia became victims of domestic violence (Fitz-Gibbon

et al. 2020). Also, the violence started taking another shape. As reported by Australian practitioners, there was an increase in the number of cases related to first-time family violence (Fitz-Gibbon et al. 2020). According to Mahase (2020), the emergency calls received from women who were victims of domestic violence in Europe increased by around 60%. In the same vein, Agüero (2020) pointed out that helpline calls for domestic violence increased by over 50% in Peru. In the process of analyzing tweets/comments on domestic violence, it was discovered that people mentioned “domestic violence” during the lockdown more as compared to other periods (Xue et al. 2020).

There were few empirical studies available which looked at domestic violence amid the pandemic. Research was carried out on Ethiopian women. It was discovered that during the pandemic, 1 out of 4 women was a victim of domestic violence. Housewives who were within the age range of 30 years seemed to be the victims in most cases (Gebrewahd et al. 2020). The relationship existing between domestic violence and orders which restricted people to stay at home in Dallas was investigated by Piquero et al. (2020). Data generated by Dallas police department was used. It was eventually discovered that 14 days (2 weeks) after the lockdown commenced, domestic violence increased as explained by Piquero et al. (2020). In Turkey, Sediri et al. (2020) pointed out that women also experienced similar problem during the lockdown period. This was linked to some problems like stress, anxiety, and depression. With studies like these, it can be said that there is a basis to understand why domestic violence increased during the pandemic.

Individual behaviour can be sharpened by factors like social and cultural norms. Sometimes, violence can be prevented from happening via norms. However, there are times when norms have been the major cause. For instance, there are cultural practices that encourage violence. They see such behavior as normal. Children are being trained through violent means. When they grow up, they believe that such is the only way through which problems can be resolved. Some societies directly or indirectly support violence without knowing.

Studies have shown that in a period of crisis, gender-based violence is likely to increase. 2020 was a year when such behaviour affected countries around the world. It is very important girls and women have rights that are 100% guaranteed regardless of the circumstances. However, it can be said that women have been largely affected by different forms of domestic violence. This affected them in various ways like suffering from health conditions, fear of insecurity and others. It is a problem which has greatly limited their roles towards building a better society.

The truth is that VAWG (violence against women gender) isn't a problem that has been caused by only lockdown or health crisis. Instead, it is the consequence of complicated economic, cultural and social factors. The pandemic has only succeeded in making the situation worse. Having an in-

depth understanding of these patterns implies knowing that long term implications of COVID-19 on citizen-state-trust, employment and other variables will not bring things back to how they were before the pandemic.

There are areas where VAWG may remain higher not just presently but also in the future. This means that even when the pandemic is no longer in our midst, such practices will still be existing amongst us. Here is a comprehensive summary of the above.

- GBV (gender-based violence) hasn't been triggered by the pandemic. It has only increased cultural, political and economic pressures which are known to cause GBV. Generally speaking, economic vulnerability and increased unemployment, practice of strict norms, gender expectations, increase in the rate of worsening mental health conditions, pressure of attaining masculine roles and many more have played their part. Many can't seem to meet the expectations about what people define as “a real man” amid the pandemic. This is due to the increased unemployment as well as feelings of insecurity. In a bid to reclaim honour, most men may resort to violence against their wives. Simply put, most men believe they are in charge. In a situation when they are not feeling as such, their wives will be at the receiving end.
- When the virus has been contained and its effects completely neutralized, these problems are still going to continue. Communities that have been affected by conflict will be the most impacted. The pandemic has only succeeded in increasing the problem. However, it is not the root cause.
- For the major causes of GBV to be ascertained, solutions that are effective and sustainable will have to be adopted. This is to ensure that vulnerable girls, men, boys and women are protected. It is important for the expectations of men, women, girls and boys to be understood. This is one of the most effective ways to have an understanding about elements which bring about violence. An approach such as this is not only going to help curb GBV-related violence. Also, it will help to address any future problem that may want to arise.

Most organizations and governments tend to be struggling when it comes to coping with COVID-19 and its resulting effects. Addressing the increased rate of GBV (gender-based violence) is not just important from an ethical perspective. Also, it is a proof that its major causes have been properly understood. Thinking of COVID-19, its economic impact on countries around the world, the increase in food insecurity, and reduced standard of living for families, effective solutions can be offered by Living in Dignity approach. This will bridge the gap between development and peacebuilding sectors. Both of these factors can bring about reduced rate of gender-based violence and economic empowerment.

5. The Impact of COVID-19 on Feminism

Overlapping developments of the COVID-19 situation show that women are taking leadership roles around the world to help combat the crisis and mitigate harm to people of their gender. The cost of the pandemic on the female sex has been discussed earlier in this study. Three factors are assumed to contribute to women's sensitivity to violence; age, poverty, ignorance or low levels of education. Globally, governments must react to this epidemic as it affects the female population. At this time, their fight against violence against women and policies to prevent domestic violence should be seen as important as fighting the spread of the virus. This will step back against the impact of the virus and create a framework for dealing with gender-based events should a disaster occur in the future. Therefore, there are a few recommendations to help manage subsequent policy laws. Gender experts' views should be sought before starting policymaking for women. In the same context, gender experts should be present in the field to alleviate the plight of women in times of crisis. This will serve the purpose of the COVID-19 pandemic and other future crises. The government should diversify the economy by investing in some other lucrative economy sectors where women will be empowered. The government should provide financial life jackets or protection measures for women in crisis. This will better equip women to combat domestic violence. Policies like this can be found in both the United States and India. Another point of action is to contain known triggers of domestic violence. For example, in this study, it was stated that excessive alcohol consumption was linked to domestic abuse. The government can then prevent alcohol abuse in crises by either banning alcohol sales altogether or reducing per capita sales. The theory is that low consumption or zero consumption will likely allow abusers, who are alcoholics, to stop abusing family members. Finally, the government should improve access to support systems - remote helplines and shelters. In this way, women will be given a chance to escape from abusers and avoid subsequent harassment. However, these support systems should provide victims with adequate shelter and legal safeguards against violence.

6. The Way Forward

In as much as the outbreak of Covid-19 has placed a huge burden on the authorities around the world, certain measures can still be put in place to ensure that the incessant rise in Gender-Based Violence is curbed. These measures should be aimed at targeting all governmental, non-governmental organizations and health care facilities around the world. 'Dignity kits' which contain sanitary kits, soap flashlight and whistles can be distributed at the county level. Other articles to enhance living for women such as cash transfers or vouchers can also be disbursed hence reducing the risk of infection through social contact.

The government can also provide services which are targeted at supporting the mental health and psychosocial aspect of women across the world. This includes the

provision of safe spaces and online counselling services, even when the physical services have been shut down. The orientation of health care providers on the handling of victims of abuse is also necessary while providing them with the equipment required. Proper sensitization can be done to ensure that members of a community can easily keep track of one another. This will go a long way in identifying abuse victims since community members will be able to communicate with the victims much easily unlike the agencies.

7. Role of the government in abating the Covid-19 GBV surge

7.1. Active Carelines and Information Channels

The government needs to ensure that hotlines and other means of accessing help in cases of violence against women and children are open during the coronavirus lockdown. It is also important to make available the numbers and addresses of local care-givers in the media to ensure that abused women can always have access to help locally. One of the most affected countries during this pandemic, Italy advertising the 1522 helpline for violence and stalking to prevent "an emergency within an emergency". Other countries such as France, Australia and the UK have invested in the provision of carelines for victims of GBV during this period.

7.2. Provision of Adequate Shelter and Housing

Provision of adequate shelter for women and children in abusive relationships will go a long way in ensuring that they have a haven away from their abusers. In Trento, Italy it was ruled that abusers must leave the family home rather than the victim in situations of domestic violence [March 28]. Austria and Germany have also made similar rulings although this makes it a challenge to protect the victims since the perpetrators are aware of the location of their victims. Canada has allocated \$50 million to women's shelters and sexual assault centres as part of the Covid-19 relief package [March 18]. In the same light, France, a funding increase of €1.1 million has been made for anti-abuse organisations included 20,000 hotel nights for survivors to escape abusive partners [March 30].

7.3. Improved Access to Services for Survivors

Due to the limiting nature of mobility and movement during this quarantine, some countries bringing up alternatives to expand access to violence-related services. In France, a 'pop up' centres in grocery stores where women are likely to be already visiting, have been initiated [March 30]. Specific 'code word' signals have been developed countries such as France, Italy, and Spain, which signals to pharmacies to contact the relevant authorities. In Italy, the UK, among others, concealed apps have been released or improved for women to use to send signals especially when in close quarters with their abusers. Protection services for women

and children must be it is also necessary to consider “essential” all forms of protection services during the coronavirus lockdown.

7.4. Risk Factor Reduction

It is necessary to curb ways which may increase the risk of abuse against women and children. South Africa has banned alcohol sales [26 March]. Nuuk, the capital of Greenland has also taken similar measures to reduce the risk of violence against women and children in the home [March 29]. With a complex relationship between violence and alcohol abuse, there is limited evidence of these policies will affect the increasing levels of violence. Other policies targeted at the promotion of stable mental and psychological health should be put in place to reduce VAW/C during this pandemic.

7.5. Making Judicial Adjustments

Due to the rapid increase in mortality following the Covid-19 pandemic, the stay-at-home order has markedly reduced the activities of the judiciary. Despite this, modifications to the family law have been made by the Australian government as a means to allow for better response by the judiciary to cases during the quarantine [April 3]. These modifications include firstly, the imposition of electronic monitoring requirements for bail and conditional suspension of imprisonment orders. Secondly, the ability to file restraining orders via online portals. Thirdly, the creation of new offences and increased fines with extended periods of restraining orders. Other countries like Columbia have used virtual means to pursue domestic violence cases to clamp down on the increase in abusive behaviour. All these are targeted at ensuring that violence against women and children is curbed during this period.

8. Conclusion

Globally, women all over the world represent a larger percentage of unskilled, informal and part-time workers. This means that as the world is ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic, issues regarding their health and safety become important as they are most affected by a crisis such as this. It is therefore urgent to create conducive working environments for women with dependents in skilled and better-paid jobs hence encouraging them to seek these out. As the lockdown increases, paid household jobs are now left for women who are temporarily out of jobs to do without payment further making them financially dependent.

Furthermore, as the world enjoins women to perform acts of charity such as the production of facemasks and other essentials, it is necessary to put them on stipends which will not only encourage them but also give them a source of income throughout the pandemic period. including programs that aid victims of Gender-Based Violence and integrating such programs as parts of a disaster relief programme permanently will go a long way in curbing the pandemic induced surge in VAW (Willmer, 2020). This

means that community programmes should include options for shelter and psychological support in cases of disease outbreak and natural disasters for abuse victims.

As the world is thrown into chaos and waiting for its healing, we must go back to the drawing board and re-strategize on our crisis management techniques. This can only happen if we see this viral outbreak for the exposé to an underlying problem rather than just a disease. Thus, ensuring that women and children are better protected in the future.

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