

No lockdown for abuse

Both formal and informal means of support can be extended to women facing domestic violence now



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In the first week of the lockdown, one of the 257 complaint calls that the National Commission for Women (NCW) received was from a father in Rajasthan who said his daughter was being beaten by her husband and had not been provided food since the lockdown began. The call helps to highlight the plight of many silent sufferers of domestic violence across the world in these times. In China, France, the U.K. and other countries, there have been reports of a significant increase in domestic violence cases since the imposition of lockdowns. These reports highlight the need for Indian authorities to take this issue seriously too.

The literature on domestic violence suggests that when men and/or women get employed, domestic violence tends to fall as interactions between couples reduce. Under a lockdown, interaction time has increased and families have been left without access to the outside world. The literature also suggests that violence is a way for the man to assert his notion of masculinity. The current atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, food insecurity, and unemployment may create feelings of inadequacy in men. All these factors are only likely to aggravate tensions at home and make women victims of those tensions. The lack of access to friends, family and support organisations is expected to aggravate the situation for abused women further.

Violence against women in India

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data show that 24% of women faced domestic violence in 2015-16 not seeing any reduction since 2005-06. Compared to the survey results, the actual reports of domestic violence to the police are negligible at 58.8/ one lakh women. The disparity between the crimes reported in a survey and registered with the police highlight how women are unlikely to seek help. The more telling statistic from the NFHS data is perhaps that 52% of the surveyed women and 42% of the surveyed men think there is at least one valid reason for wife-beating. This attitude highlights how ingrained and normalised the idea is such that an abused woman should not expect support from others. The NFHS data also highlight how the proportion of women reporting violence is increasing among families with lower wealth. The lock-

down due to the pandemic is leading to a substantial negative income shock for everyone. In our interviews with unorganised sector workers, we often heard that women suffered domestic violence coupled with the husband's alcoholism. The NFHS data also show a high correlation between alcohol intake and domestic violence. Keeping in mind that access to alcohol may be limited in these times, frustration could also lead to abuse.

What can be done?

The most important thing that we can do is to acknowledge and accept that domestic violence happens and work to reduce the stigma attached to the victims of such violence. Such support may prompt abused women to seek at least informal means to redress their issues. The NCW has appealed to women to reach out to their nearest police stations or call the State Women's Commission for support. While this is the least that can be done, there are some other formal means by which we can extend help to women right now. The provision of cash transfers and ration support are likely to sustain the family and also reduce stress in the household leading to lower violence against women. Since the lockdown began, the amount of TV viewing, particularly of news, has increased. Coupled with a lack of other activity, this is an opportune time to improve messaging. The NCW could increase its advertising expenditure on TV to relay messages requesting women to contact the police station for help. The 181 helpline number set up for this reason should remain active, and women should be reminded of this number via TV ads. The government could also send mass SMS messages as it did during the onset of the COVID-19 crisis as most women have access to at least a basic phone.

The French government has extended monetary support to organisations fighting this crime. British activists have requested their government to release emergency funds to support organisations that are dealing with domestic violence-related issues. The Indian government should also extend monetary support to such organisations in India rather than rely entirely on ASHA workers on whom the burden of community welfare is already very high. The staff of such organisations should be allowed to travel without being stopped by the police.

Studies show that women more than men tend to be affected adversely during epidemics. We need to take these advisories seriously to prevent further widening of the rift between men and women in our society.

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