

Covid-19 and Domestic Violence: Reading the 'Masculine Anxiety'

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Abstract

One among the various unforeseen scenarios into which the Covid-19 pandemic has thrust us, is a significant and rapid spike in cases of domestic violence. Over the past few months, there have been umpteen reports of domestic violence. And, as if by default, the victims in almost all such cases are women. Isolation, social distancing and avoiding public space are some of the basic precautionary steps during these viral times. Quite paradoxically, this isolation and distancing allows the socially marginalised and subjugated class to be an easy target. The masculine psyche considers such time as a threat to their identity and in order to regain power and have control in their relationship opts for violence and develops a hostile attitude in order to claim their superiority. The paper would try to analyse and reflect upon the important aspect of the 'masculine psyche' as it operates within patriarchy and show how this physical restriction and loss of the public sphere creates a sense of anxiety within that masculine psyche, with violence towards their partner as an unfortunate, yet unmistakable, manifestation of this anxiety.

Keywords: Pandemic, isolation, social distancing, masculine psyche, domestic violence.

I

History has apprised us time and again how the outbreak of pandemic due to multifarious reasons changed the trajectory of civilization and humanity at large. One would concur to the fact the epidemics have in the past intensively affected the economy, health, social life, politics and the natural environment. The world today is witnessing a

similar challenge. The survival of human life is being disrupted with the outbreak of the Covid-19. The virus with its easy transmission from person-to-person resulted in isolating patients and individuals to reduce further cases of transmission. The governments across the world and the health organizations immediately came together and measures to control the swift transmission of the virus were pressed into action. However, on January 30, 2020 the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of Covid-19 as an international public health emergency.¹ The pandemic indubitably has challenged the humanity at large and the only wherewithal to avoid the transmission of Covid-19 is maintaining social distance and self-isolation, restricting the fundamental need to survive as a social being. The guidelines provided by the World Health Organization suggested for a complete lockdown during the widespread of Covid-19, disrupting the social life and confining all individuals within their respective homes. The restrictions to movements and social gatherings have aroused among individuals the fear of contagion and studies have reported that in such challenging times almost 75% of the individuals experience psychiatric morbidity. Restrictions to social gatherings and no access to the physical environment outside the private sphere during the past few months has been a threat to the mental health of individuals. Studies have reported that during the period of social isolation, the psychological response to this rapid transitioning environment leads to distress, anxiety, loneliness, anger, and stigmatization.² The social isolation leading to stress and anxiety has intensively affected the marginalised category and the subjugated class, and by default the victims being women. As usual, even during the challenging hour amidst the outbreak of pandemic, women have fallen prey to physical and psychological violence. Violence and discrimination against women have been an issue of debate for a very long period of time, the outbreak of Covid-19 has escalated the cases

¹ Souvik Dubey *et al.*, "Psychological impact of Covid 19", *Diabetes Metab Syndr* 14, 5(2020):779-788, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsx.2020.05.035>.

² Kang Sim and Hong Choon Chua, "The psychological impact of SARS: a matter of heart and mind", *CMAJ* 170, 5(2004): 811-812, <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.1032003>.

of violence against women. This triggers among us, at least some of us, a sense of urgency to take note of the vicious equation between a pandemic and escalation of gender-based violence. More than being an academic research work, what follows in the next few pages is more of my reflection on this equation from an entry point, that according to my knowledge, is oft neglected - the contested terrain of masculinity.

II

Violence against women has been rapidly increasing in the past few months and the factors for such being many and irrefutable. Women as the marginalised and subjugated category have been in conflict with the society for years and the battle seems to be never ending. Domestic violence against women has been one of the most challenging issues across the globe and in the recent days it has witnessed a significant spike in reported cases. Violence could take different forms making the victims suffer from both physical and psychological abuse. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 has stated that any form of abuse that shall impair an individual would be considered as domestic violence by the law.³ The gender based inequality is justified on basis of the specific gender roles that has been attributed to a certain category of individuals where social and cultural norms play a significant role labelling the women as weak, irrational and tolerant and men as superior, authoritative and impatient. Researchers after making a close study of the factors causing gender-based violence or violence against women have agreed that 'ecological framework' becomes an important and inevitable factor. Society, community, relationship, and the perpetrators are the elements of an ecological framework that maps the risk of gender-based violence. It is also important at this juncture to mention about the psyche of the individual who gets affected intensively due to the external forces adding onto the already existing social stratification and the social construction of 'masculine'

³ Aanchal Singh, "What is Domestic Violence? An introduction to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005," *The Leaflet*, December 5, 2018.

<http://www.theleaflet.in/know-your-rights-domestic-violence-an-introduction-women-2005-act-aanchal-singh/#>

and 'masculinity'.⁴ Masculine identity and masculinity is socially constructed and therefore can be understood as a normative domain and often the term masculinity has been associated with power, stoicism, violence, aggression and dominance. Violence against women from the male counterparts is also a result of the psychological transitions that occur due to various external factors such as socio-political change, economic anxiety, conflict and isolation. The gender roles in a society is not anatomically defined, but psychologically and socially constructed. Men are expected to sustain the patriarchal norms and not appear weak and submissive but are to make utmost advantage of their dominant nature and stoicism. The restrictions placed on masculine ideals where men are not expected to apparently express their emotions and sentiments later develops a hostile attitude contributing to the factors leading to gender-based violence. With the uncertain change in all domains due to the outbreak of Covid-19, one of the most talked about issue during such challenging hour has been the rapid spike in the cases of domestic violence all around the globe. Various disciplines have been engaging themselves in order to mitigate and cease the transmission of virus however, women in such time of crisis is falling victim to the 'shadow pandemic'. The U.N. Women brought forth the concern that after the outbreak of the pandemic, women were being significantly challenged and were falling victims to the shadow pandemic⁵. The basic precautionary measure under taken to control the transmission of virus was to put restrictions on physical movements and social gatherings. The restrictions upon social gatherings have in some way assisted in controlling the transmission of virus but simultaneously there has been an unprecedented rise in the cases of domestic violence against women during the pandemic. Studies have reported that the

⁴ Nancy Perrin *et al.*, "Social norms and beliefs about gender based violence scale: a measure for use with gender based violence prevention programs in low-resource and humanitarian settings," *Conflict and Health* 13, 6(2019), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-019-0189-x>.

⁵ Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, "Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic," *UN WOMEN*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

pandemic has been twice challenging on the part of women for they have fallen prey to the shadow pandemic and a rapid spike in the cases of domestic violence has witnessed. Various factors are responsible for such a dramatic rise in the cases of domestic violence and the most significant being the social instability in play. It is here that we need to understand how the construction of gender-norms including the notion of masculinity contributes to the already existing social evil. Masculinity has been universally accepted to be associated with power over social, economic and political affairs. Masculinities have multiple versions and therefore cannot be considered as having one single ideology as it changes geographically, culturally, and socially. Different internal, interpersonal, institutional and ideological factors explain how masculinity with its multifarious tentacles justifies its act and beliefs. At the Internal level, the acceptance of personal beliefs and submissive nature on the part of the women justifies the dominant attitude of their male counterpart. The Interpersonal level explores the behaviour and practices of the individual in their interpersonal relationship which allows them to behave and sustain the superiority and dominance of the male/masculine over the women/feminine. The policies and cultural practices of various institutions play a major role at the Institutional level for justifying the unjust practices in the society against women. The society has accepted that men are more rational and are more of political creatures and thus support the notion of men having more power and dominance over female/feminine in the Ideological level.⁶

Domestic violence during the pandemic has posed threat to the already subjugated and marginalised class due to the execution of lockdown globally. These measures taken to prevent and stop the spread of virus might as well have been effective to do so however, the nationwide lockdown and the limitations put to the basic fundamental human need to survive as a social being has significantly affected all sectors of life but the most affected are the women in the society. Women

⁶ "Self-Learning Booklet: Understanding Masculinities and Violence against Women & Girls," *UN Women*, 2016,

<https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org/portal/product/understanding-masculinities-ans-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

have been suppressed and taken control of for a long period of time and sadly it exists even today. The violence (physical/mental) that prevailed even before the outbreak of pandemic has seemingly intensified during the time of crisis. Labelled as the vulnerable, weak, irrational and submissive in nature, women during the lockdown who have been compelled to stay indoors are being victimised and suffering mental and physical abuse which cannot be justified. It is to be noted here that this confinement that has been in practice for the past few months after the outbreak of the pandemic has put restrictions on all class and category and thus, the victims of domestic violence could be of any gender. A complete shutdown of all public spaces including the working sectors and educational institutions has limited the physical movements of individuals. This closure of public spaces has disrupted the systematic lifestyle of every individual causing distress, anxiety, anger and fear of contagion. The prohibition that has been laid down during the pandemic has caused the male/masculine identity and their patriarchal codes to be at threat. With no access to the physical world outside and the economic anxiety among men has been one of the major factors for the rise in cases of domestic violence. The pandemic has adversely affected the mental health and can be confirmed with studies that read negative change in the physical activity, consumption of alcohol and smoking. Women who have always been subjugated and marginalised do not have any means of escapism during such time of crisis are confined within their homes with an abusive partner. The anxiety caused due to the economic crisis during the phase of lockdown has an increase in a violent, abusive relationship towards the 'submissive' partner. It is a fact one cannot deny that unemployment has always resulted in pernicious outcome. During such times it becomes blatant for women to fall victims of domestic violence. Prolonged period of isolation from workplace and the lessening economic opportunities leads both men and women to a state of distress and depression and at times as such the toxic masculinity is in play. Men believing to have upper hand and superiority over women opt for physical and mental abuse upon their partners to relieve oneself of their pitiful state. The patriarchal codes though asserted in the public sphere are also operative within the four

walls impacting their female counterparts. The understanding that the patriarchal code is being challenged and the failure to adhere to the very codes that men are expected to perform in the society/family steer them to indulge in the acts of violence. Complete restrictions on movements and a complete shutdown of various institutions have brought into demand the existing objective of working from home. It becomes a threat to the male counterparts when women independent of any external assistance are capable to undertake tasks in the same degree as do men and the self-esteem of the partner becomes an issue of concern. This confinement of women during the lockdown period in a relationship with abusive partners makes them easy targets with no means of escapism, on the one hand, and as men tend to sabotage the effort of women trying to make a living for herself and her family, on the other.

III

The psychological impact that the pandemic has upon the psyche of individuals can be observed in the change in behavioural patterns where men become more aggressive, depressed, and hostile towards their partners. Isolation from the social activities and insecurity is another risk factor that adds to the violent and aggressive nature of men inside their homes. To regain their power, identity, and to have control over their relationship, men become more dominant and aggressive during time of crisis. Their belief as constructed by the society to adhere to their gender roles arouses insecurity and a threat to the identity on the male counterparts. Men/Masculine identity is challenged and this causes an adverse change in the psyche of the men developing a hostile and impulsive attitude towards their partner. The women sharing an intimate relationship during the phase of lockdown has been victims of the violent aggressive nature of men providing no means of escapism. Women have failed to protect themselves from the iniquity that is being performed within the four walls due to the restrictions on physical movements and therefore women are subjected to remain silent and

go through the violent abuse declared rightly as a shadow pandemic.⁷ Intimate Partner Violence is not an issue that is being brought forth during the pandemic but it has been an issue of concern in the entire globe even before the outbreak however, studies have reported that the cases have been rapidly increasing during the outbreak Covid-19. The condition that has been implemented on staying indoors has in a very disproportionate manner affected women. The policies adopted by the government and various health organizations have doubly effected the submissive partners sharing an intimate relationship. An “invisible pandemic” has come about which is being dealt by the marginalised category (women at large) in a very colossal manner. International organizations have claimed that though the cases of violence reported early to the pandemic did exist and was challenging and threatening but the recent spike in the rapid increase in the cases of domestic violence reported calls for immediate actions and measures. Several research and studies have been made in order to have a comprehensive analysis of the risk factors for such a rapid and inescapable increase in the cases reported during the lockdown. Much has been focussed on the individual level risk factors where the constructs of the society and the past experiences faced by an individual to be noted wherein individual belonging to the minority category plays a significant role. Intimate Partner Violence has also been connected with psychopathology at times and therefore parallels can be drawn with the mental health alerts that we have witnessed in the past few months due to the pandemic and the nationwide lockdown.⁸ The sudden disruption in the systematic everyday life has resulted in individuals having to confront psychological disorders like depression, anxiety and aggressive behaviour which are the general cause of any form of violence and is more closely associated with the societal norms and values. Studies have claimed that in any domain which fails to provide a gender-just society, violence of any form (physical/mental) is to be found. The absence of family, friends,

⁷ “ Understanding and addressing violence against women,” WHO,2012. <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/en/index.html>

⁸ Johan Gisecke, “The invisible pandemic,” *The Lancet*, May 05, 2020, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)31035-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)31035-7)

and support organizations during the period of lockdown has escalated the cases of domestic violence. The confinements and social-isolation has forced women to stay for longer hours with their abusive partners and has been struggling to find any means of escapism in their private space. Families adhering strictly to the rigid gender codes promote the unjust practices of the society. Women have been disproportionately affected and exposed to the violence that has drastically increased. During the initial phase of the lockdown, there was a rise of 50-60% in the cases reported for domestic violence. It was reported that during the month of February 2020, China was reported with thrice the cases of domestic violence reported in January 2020. Individuals working in anti-domestic violence law claimed that the prolonged isolation and anxiety and stress aroused due to the economic instability are one of the major factors and almost 90% of the cause for domestic violence reported is due to the outbreak of the pandemic. Activist working for anti-domestic violence law had to say that, since the entire globe is concentrated to the cause and effect of the pandemic, victims of domestic violence is being overlooked. It was brought to notice that in Texas, more than 585,600 cases were confirmed which is more in numbers in comparisons to the death toll recorded. Similarly in Russia, twice the number of cases was reported in April than the reports made during the month of March. Mexico and Malawi also witnessed a rapid spike which called for immediate actions and measures to be undertaken. Cases of domestic violence have increased by 30% in France, Singapore and Cyprus has received an increase in call by 30% and 33% respectively. The Governments of Germany, India, Spain, Canada and United States have announced that there has been an unprecedented increase in the cases of domestic violence and also have been demanding for help and shelters to be provide for the victims. It becomes furthermore challenging for the victims for the probations that has been listed down by the government that restricts any form of physical movements except during the time of emergencies for women to seek for help in the social/public sphere. The prolonged lockdown and quarantine has been a potential threat for increasing cases of domestic violence and with no vaccine being manufactured to tame the transmission of virus calls for serious

interventions of the government and proper measures that needs to be implemented in order to curb the rising cases of domestic violence. The pandemic has threatened the humanity at large and it has been difficult to all class and categories of individuals to fight the life threatening spread of Covid-19. In order to mitigate the increasing cases of domestic violence various measures are being implemented by organizations and the Government. The rapid spike in the cases of domestic violence has demanded for an extensive expansion of helpline and information sharing and special police powers are in action. The Campaign Mask-19 has been started in countries like Spain, Italy, Norway, Germany, and Argentina. If women are being victimised at their home then they are asked to visit their nearest pharmacy and purchase a Mask-19 which will suggest that she is under threat and is being abused at home.⁹ Italy has introduced an app that shall provide help to the victims without placing a call. The government has also increased the fund in order to provide shelters to the victims of abuse. The vacant rooms of motels are being used as shelters for the victims of abuse in Malaysia. With the record of increasing number reported due to domestic violence, National Commission for Women (NWC) in India has requested the government to take up necessary measures. Various helpline numbers have been circulated that shall provide assistance to the victims of abuse around the nation. The Turkish government has been active to battle against the increasing number of domestic violence amidst the outbreak of pandemic. The Turkish Federation of Women's Associations claimed that the increasing number of violence required an immediate control to be adapted by the government.

IV

The entire world on one hand has been battling against the lethal spread of virus, whereas on the other hand the already stigmatised category has been at a greater risk due to the shadow pandemic. Failure to provide proper control measures and support from the government

9 Prachi and Astutya, "Pandemic triggers Domestic Violence," *The Leaflet*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.theleaflet.in/pandemic-triggers-domestic-violence/#>

shall exacerbate the problems being faced by the marginalised category of individuals. The already existing measures opted by the government in order to control the transmission of virus has been threatening to the women isolated within their homes. Society and families that adhere to the rigid gender norms in the society have been one of the risk factors that have significantly affected the marginalised class and category. The outbreak of the pandemic has witnessed psychopathological disorders in victims and as well as the perpetrators which has become one of the major cause for the rapid spike in the cases related to domestic violence.¹⁰ Disciplines have tried to study the complex societal norms and how it has an adverse affect on the behavioural patterns on individual. Two social norms have been conceived in the course of studies made i.e., descriptive norm and injunctive norm. The former is the theory in which the individual conceptualises the idea of what the other will do in a particular situation, while the later is the belief of the individual on what is expected by/from them to be done in a given situation. The above two norms have a strong influence in understanding of the men/masculine identity within the society/home which has not only proved to be erroneous but detrimental as well. Various modifications have been brought about even in the family law and the justice systems in order to curb the violent and aggressive relationships.

It is true that the entire globe with the help of various disciplines in action is in force to diminish the transmission of Covid-19 one must not overlook the shadow pandemic in play and take immediate measures as well. Governments should make necessary interventions to provide safety and shelter for the victims of abuse and a proper understanding of the various dynamics and risk factors responsible for the cause of domestic violence. It is also to be understood at this juncture that with the precautionary measures like social-isolation, restrictions on physical movements and prolonged lockdown could be fatal to the fragile and stigmatized category of individuals and thus the governments and

¹⁰ Karen Ann McDonnell, Jessica G.Burke, Andrea C. Gielen, Patricia O'Campo, and Meghan Weidl, "Women's Perceptions of Their Community's Social Norms Towards Assisting Women Who Have Experience Intimate Partner Violence," *J Urban Health* 88, 2(2011):240-253, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-011-9546-9>.

various other organization should be liable and prepared for providing the required action and response. Women have been victimized time and again and the injustice that prevails in the society cannot be justified any cost. Gender-based violence is a pandemic that humanity at large has been suffering through decades which unfortunately is overshadowed and downplayed.