
Pandemic And Pandemonium

Ms. Shama D*

ABSTRACT:

The coronavirus pandemic laid its roots in early 2020 across the world, spreading its vile flames across the globe, claiming lives of millions, preying upon the socio-economic vulnerabilities of even more. With COVID-19 being a global health crisis, numerous governments had imposed country-wide lockdowns in an attempt to curb the unrelenting spread of the virus. An unfortunate consequence of people being contained within the walls of their homes, with their friends, family or even by themselves, was the unforeseen rise in the rates of violence and abuse. Men, women, children, and even animals suffered a strenuous ordeal and were victims of brutality. The strong preyed upon the weak and vulnerable, leading to a spike in cases of domestic violence and child abuse reported across the world. The author in this paper attempts to throw light on this disturbing increase of violence the people are subjected to in trying times for humanity and the probable impact it will have on its victims in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, domestic violence, child abuse, India, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Violence has been an inherent part of human nature since the dawn of time. The first acts of violence can be traced back to the earliest memories of mankind where it began for survival and eventually took the form of wars. Aggression has been an indispensable trait in all animals but it took the form of uncontained violence and bloodshed through humanity alone. The earlier centuries had normalized violence even to the point of it taking away others' lives. Crimes against women and children are forever memorialized in human history, with the advent of patriarchy and misogyny. The economically underprivileged and peasantry were constantly subjected to inhumane treatment by the nobility and aristocracy. Historical

* Student of VII Semester B.B.A., LL.B, JSS Law College, Mysuru.

events like the holocaust during Nazi Germany and the French Revolution have always been tied to bloodshed and numerous attempts at insurgence across the world have resulted in deaths of millions.

The term ‘violence’ has been derived from Latin word ‘violentia’ and is defined as “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom” by the Oxford Dictionary.¹

With the establishment of legal institutions globally, the unrestricted and arbitrary use of violence was outlawed. Yet there were no legal aids to those who were victims of domestic violence within the walls of their homes for centuries and the attempts to curb the same in the present era has still fallen short.

Violence and abuse can take any shape or form- physical, psychological, sexual, and deprivation. While it is easy to identify the physical abuse against individuals, it is nearly impossible to identify the other forms of violence. At times, the victims themselves are unable to recognize that they are victims of abuse. The toxicity within inter-personal relationships is normalized, either by the perpetrator themselves or the society they live in.

VIOLENCE AND ABUSE- STATISTICS:

Corporeal punishments have been an integral part of many cultures in the name of disciplining an individual. Whether it is a teacher physically punishing a student, a parent hitting their child, or a spouse beating their significant other-most commonly males, these acts of abuse are normalized as something customary and conventional.

The World Health Organization has in regards to child maltreatment recognized that globally, 3 in 4 children i.e., about 300 million children below the age of four are subjected to physical and psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers and about one in five women and one in thirteen men have reported being victims of sexual abuse by the age of seventeen.²

This mindset prevailing in the society has led to millions of instances of abuse and aggression, justified by the perpetrators and sometimes, even the victims. In the rare

¹Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, 1989

²World Health Organization, *ChildMaltreatment*, 8th June, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/factsheets/detail/child-maltreatment>

circumstances where an individual recognizes an abusive pattern, they still face hurdles in escaping such hostile environments. Either they lack courage, or their attempts at breaking free are demoralized by their friends and family. In few cases, they lack legal aid and are forced to face societal criticism.

The United Nations in its statistical report regarding the violence against women has reported that almost one in three women i.e., approximately 736 million women have been victims of sexual violence at least once in their life, and most violence against women is perpetrated by their partners or husbands-whether current or former-revealing an alarming number of over 640 million women aged 15 and above being its victims. The violence against women has been more prevalent in the low and lower-middle income countries and regions and less than 40 percent of the victims seek help.³

Women face the threat of death everyday with over 137 women being killed by a family member every day due to a multitude of reasons⁴. They are also subject to gender-based violence and sexual harassment in school and workplace.

In India, the National Crime Record Bureau in 2018 has reported that around 109 children were subjected to sexual abuse every day, with around 39,827 cases being reported under the Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POSCO) in 2018. There was a hike in the number of overall crimes against children over the past decade, from 22,500 cases in 2008 to 1,41,764 cases in 2018, wherein the major crimes that children fell prey to were kidnapping and offences under POSCO.⁵ In 2019, the reported cases increased to 1,48,185, where around 24,642 of the offenders under POSCO were known to the victim. Crimes and acts of violence punishable under IPC committed against children included murder, rape, abetment of suicide, infanticide, foeticide, simple and grievous hurt, kidnapping, trafficking, sale for prostitution etc.⁶

Around 3,78,277 cases of crimes against women were reported under IPC in 2018 and 4,05,861 cases of crimes against women under IPC and special laws were registered in 2019,

³United Nations Women, *Facts and Figures: Ending violence against women*, Last updated: March, 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>, Accessed on: 12th June, 2021

⁴Supra 3

⁵ Crime in India, 2018, Statistics, Volume 1, *National Crime Records Bureau*, Ministry of Home Affairs

⁶ Crime in India, 2019, Statistics, Volume 1, *National Crime Records Bureau*, Ministry of Home Affairs

with over 7000 cases of dowry deaths, and 1,26,575 cases of cruelty by husband and his relatives being registered.⁷

While every person regardless of age, gender and other physiological characteristics is equally prone to become victims of violence, children and women have historically been the main targets of such brutality, and with a lack of awareness, education and resources, continue to be the casualties of this barbaric injustice.

If history is any indication, any unchecked growth of violence will lead to the victims possibly being the perpetrators themselves in the future, continuing the cycle of abuse, as in the end, violence only breeds violence.

COVID-19 AND VIOLENCE:

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions lost their jobs and their sole sources of income, and the population across the globe were forced to withdraw within the safety of their homes.

The increase in the general stress level, enhanced with financial frustration led to a heightened rate of domestic violence and child abuse during the lockdown period imposed in various countries. There was also increase in addictions which ran rampant, particularly substance abuse, that significantly impacts an individual's behaviour, thereby contributing to the surge in levels of aggression and violent behaviour.

With the pandemic being the harbinger of a socio-economic crisis, overstressed caregivers have turned more abusive towards children. Many children across the world are unable to seek aid from external sources with their movements restricted as they are compelled to adapt to the confining lifestyle within their homes.

Child abuse and maltreatment has a long-term impact upon their lives, and are commonly associated with trauma induced impairments in psychological, behavioral, and physiological functioning and development over the course of their lives⁸. Children who are exposed to psychological mistreatment exhibit higher rates of aggression, hyperactivity, behavioral issues, anxiety, depression etc.⁹ where mockery, humiliation, belittling, verbal

⁷Supra 6

⁸ Cicchetti D. Socioemotional, personality, and biological development: Illustrations from a multilevel developmental psychopathology perspective on child maltreatment. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2016;67(1):187–211. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033259

⁹Supra 8

abuse, threatening physical harm and such other abusive patterns constitute psychological maltreatment.

Parents and caregivers undergoing depressive episodes themselves struggle to provide for the mental and emotional strength and reassurance required by their children. Instead, their stress finds an outlet through violent outbursts- whether physical or verbal- against their offspring. Without proper coping mechanisms and awareness, this may result in the rising of a habitual pattern of abusive behaviour by parents.

The most common factors contributing to violence, abuse and neglect involve the increase in poverty and thereby food insecurity owing to loss of income, lack of access to education by children, absence of nutritious meals which were provided at no cost to children by the government through various policy initiatives, isolation from community and peer groups, lack of access to resources and support networks, substance abuse by caregivers, abusive living environment to the children, cyberbullying, lack of access to healthcare in certain regions and deficiency in mental health support systems, to name a few.¹⁰

An additional concern arising during this pandemic is the unwavering surge in the number of children orphaned. With over 3 million deaths across the world owing to the pandemic, there are thousands of children orphaned with no family to care for them and no resources available to survive. Combined with the constant efforts from various NGO's and governments, it is still a matter of distress as to how numerous children will never be able to find loving homes as they are exposed to a growing risk of human trafficking. Children who are living in the streets, institutions, refugees, migrants etc., face an increased risk to be subjected to violence. Adding to this horror, children who are compelled to stay within their homes are increasingly falling prey to sexual abuse and violence, whether by their own family, neighbours or acquaintances or even strangers. It is therefore crucial that resources are made accessible to everyone to ensure that people are able to identify and develop mechanisms to reinforce positive behaviours while discouraging the negative ones, while

¹⁰ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, End Violence Against Children, UNICEF, WHO. COVID-19: protecting children from violence, abuse and neglect in the home, Version 1, May 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/COVID-19-Protecting-children-from-violence-abuse-and-neglect-in-home-2020.pdf>

promoting awareness as to means of preventing violence, abuse and neglect against children.¹¹

Another sphere of violence that has sky-rocketed during the pandemic is the domestic violence and sexual abuse, most commonly against women. With the priority taken over by COVID-19 crisis, men and women trapped in their homes are being victims of barbaric acts of cruelty that is being overshadowed by the global emergency. There has been a significant rise in the number of calls made to domestic violence helplines in numerous countries since the pandemic began and most survivors face a severe dearth in resources available to seek aid in dire times. The shelters for victims became less accessible during the lockdown and thus alienated the requirements of the vulnerable section of society.

Economic distress has contributed majorly to the risk of women experiencing violence. With a sudden loss of livelihood, women are forced to work in informal sectors that entails the risks of sexual violence and harassment against women.

Women with disabilities and disorders, belonging to rural, immigrant or refugee backgrounds are at a higher chance of vulnerability than the rest. In addition to the usual likelihood of being abused, they are subjected to crass discrimination and stigmatization from their communities and the society, thus being neglected and are unable to receive essential services during the lockdown period. In countries like India, girls are under pressure from families to get married as their access to education remains uncertain.¹²

Concluding Remarks:

The statistics we scrutinized were immensely alarming, yet we fail to realize that these are not mere numbers. These are the lives of millions of people at jeopardy, leading to extreme health concerns (physically and mentally), and even death, whether by succumbing to the violence or victims voluntarily choosing to end their lives seeing no escape. The statistics are merely a fractured reflection of the reality where most cases of abuse and brutality remains silenced and unreported.

¹¹Supra 10

¹²United Nations Women, *Impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls and service provision: UN Women rapid assessment and findings, 2020*, <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/impact-of-covid-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision-en.pdf?la=en&vs=0>



One's incapability to channel aggression in a healthy alternative should never be at the cost of the life or safety of another. Every person regardless of age and gender should regard their home as a safe haven, and not dread it as the dwelling of the evil and chaos.

It is therefore not sufficient to make efforts just during the pandemic to curb violence but proactive measures are to be undertaken at all spheres of life to eradicate this tenacious cycle of violence in all forms as it is no longer a question of human rights or morality, but it is a question of human decency.