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COVID-19 LOCKDOWN AND GLOBAL RISE IN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND FEMICIDE

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Abstract:

The global lockdown following the massive spread of COVID-19 pandemic has turned out to be a bitter pill to swallow for prevailing domestic violence sufferers with news data reporting a steep rise in the cases of intimate abuse and femicide in almost each country of the globe. The contagion leaves no section of the society at mercy, but news reports from different parts of the world verify the coronavirus as having a severe side effect on women amidst the quarantine period. This research article showcases the disturbing rise in the women helpline distress calls all over the world and will address this sensitive issue by throwing light on the grave matters concerning an upsurge in intimate abuse cases across the planet, which have reportedly resulted in a sudden hike in unwanted pregnancies and marital rapes, acceleration of femicide rate, and how mother's abuse is spreading drastically to children. The data will be collated from varied news sources all over the world to address this silent pandemic on a collective level. Furthermore, this paper will dissect the social, economic, and psychological causes that lead an abuser to increase his violent activities amid crisis and the resultant physical and psychological effects on the victim. Finally, I will recommend various remedial measures that can sustainably help protect mental and bodily health of intimate violence victims during the quarantine period.

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1.0 Introduction:

The global onset of the corona contagion has disrupted the regular routine of public on a worldwide scale at multiple levels which has further resulted into making one reconsider the intricacies of the relationship we have with ourselves, nature, and the society. The nexus of human relationships has seen an unprecedented shift with the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown phase. The family structure has witnessed a new era where the cloistered spaces observe an aggregation of kinfolk, with man-woman relationships churning a tough course leading to discoveries of horrible events that were yet shadowed due to the independent lifestyle of the individuals. As per the news reports coming from all across the planet, there has been a significant increase in the number of reported cases of female domestic abuse and femicide.^{a,b} Femicide and domestic violence are two terms that are often used together as one leads to another. Extreme domestic violence cases often lead to femicide and thus one cannot

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discuss one while ignoring the other. The data collected during the lockdown are enough to reconsider the horrible aspect of forced and suffocating unions that society enforces upon unwilling couples and strips the hollowness of the so-called pristine institution of marriage. In most of the cases, the violence extends out to the children in both physical and mental terms, which is a ghastly spectacle for the progressive society that we consider ourselves a part of.

2.0 Materials & Methods:

The contagion is corrupting more than just the body of the human. It has wreaked a psychologically disrupting atmosphere which has made the problem twofold. In this article, I will analyse the world-wide impact of COVID-19 lockdown on conjugal relationships and the subsequent rise in the cases of domestic abuse and femicide. The research will encapsulate enlisting the news reports portraying the abuse along with finding out the reason behind the increase in the rate of distress calls. The research will further extend into discussing the question of female body and her bodily rights and their violation amid corona lockdown with sharp growth in the number of unwanted pregnancies. I will dissect the probable triggers that urge the abuser into committing femicide in a closed space and how both homemakers and working women are equally touched by this trauma. Later, I will converse regarding how kids too are dragged along with their mothers into a vicious circle of violence. Finally, I will study both the abuser and the abused mentalities from a psychological point of view along with suggesting remedies to help the humanity overcome this pandemic like civilized individuals.

3.0 Increase in Distress Calls:

The sharp rise in distress calls amid corona pandemic is a global malaise that is mirroring the truth behind the sanctity of the family as a safe institution. As the wave of corona virus sweeps across the world, the number in the cases of distress calls rise along with the rise in the number of the people affected by the virus. So, with China being the first witness to the havoc wreaked by the virus and the domestic abuse, the suit is followed by countries worldwide be it UK, US, Italy, Germany, or India. The National Commission for Women (NCW) addresses pan-Indian distress calls related to domestic violence, and NCW chief Rekha Sharma has reported that '[d]omestic violence cases have doubled than what it was before the lockdown' ("Coronavirus lockdown: Increase in incidents of domestic violence", 2020). The lockdown has become a double-edged sword for women as they have to deal with two threats, one, to stay healthy and avoid contamination, and second, securing the physical and mental health which are at risk due to living with the abuser under one roof: 'The lockdown provides the perfect opportunity to the abuser to practice "intimate terrorism"—dictate and control all actions and movements of women, with violence if needed' (Deshpande, 2020).

With an uncertain future looming in the distant, women along with their children are threatened for their life due to being a responsibility on their male counterparts in most of the cases and the lack of a livelihood may cause the abuser to unleash the anger on the wife and kids. With many cases going unreported as the perpetrator is a family member, the concern for the physical and mental wellbeing of the victims of domestic violence is a grave one and should be tackled seriously. A New Delhi-based survivor of domestic violence recounts her horrible near-death experience to Hindustan Times which she faced after her husband came to know about the complaint she made to the police: 'I was physically, mentally tortured for four years.

^aThe term 'femicide' is used to denote intentional hateful killing of a female due to her gender.

^bThe data concerning the globally rising rate of domestic violence and femicide amid the lockdown have been taken from various news sources which are alphabetically listed in the references list.

Two days before [my brother called the shelter], my husband beat me up to an inch of my life. I begged him to spare me. He told me to get out of the house' (Ratnam, 2020). Thus, even the significant large number of distress calls cannot be taken at face value as there are many unreported cases of domestic violence all over the world as women are scared of being abused even more by the perpetrators lest they come to know about the complaint. Therefore, the countries reporting a decrease in distress calls during lockdown can be misled by the figures as 'the decrease in calls did not signify a decrease in violence: it merely meant that some victims were not able to call hotlines without being detected by their abusers because of the quarantine measures' (Unker & Bellut, 2020).

World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that 'countries "are reporting up to a 60% increase in emergency calls by women subjected to violence by their intimate partners in April this year, compared to last".... [and] [t]he UN agency for sexual and reproductive health (UNFPA) has estimated that there would be 31 million more cases of domestic violence worldwide if lockdowns continue for another six months' ("Coronavirus lockdown: Surge in domestic violence, says WHO", 2020). With no way out but to reach out for help over phone, the women helplines are receiving more than double distress calls as compared to the pre-lockdown times. Peter states that '[c]alls to the helpline are often made by women who are being tormented by their spouses or other family members or are experiencing trouble in relationships. Sometimes, they are to do with missing girls' (2020). Nevertheless, the lockdown period has made bare the hollow claims that existed in pre-COVID-19 scenario when female abuse was often ignored by strategies involving victim shaming and the conduct of a female in public sphere. With violence multiplying in the supposedly safe sphere of home, the situation makes one wonder about the intensity of toxic masculinity that always seeks for a weak target, and in the current picture, the harmful energy that was directed mostly in the public sphere, has been centred sharply at the nearest possible victim.

4.0 Upsurge in Unwanted Pregnancies:

Lockdown has resulted in a huge hike in physical and sexual violence. UNFPA has put forward the data describing 'that tens of millions of women will not be able to access modern contraceptives this year, and millions more girls will undergo female genital mutilation or be married off by 2030,' making this decade for women as 'totally calamitous,' causing '15m additional cases of domestic violence for every three months that lockdown is extended' and with '44 million women in 114 low and middle-income countries' unable to access contraceptives during lockdown, it would further 'result in an estimated 1 million unintended pregnancies' (Ford, 2020). Moreover, with gynaecologist clinics closed and no proper maternal care and supervision, the COVID-19 phase 'could mean 3 million additional unintended pregnancies, 2.7 million unsafe abortions and 11,000 pregnancy-related deaths' as per Marie Stopes International (Ford, 2020). Such a high magnitude is quite dangerous for myriad of programmes run by government and NGOs worldwide to improve the condition of girl child and abused women in various countries as more births will result in more marriages, with a vast majority of them being child and forced marriages. The institutions working in the direction of women's sexual/reproductive rights and enhancing the self-esteem associated with a woman's body are already faced with many challenges such as cultural pressure and body shaming, and in a condition where women have lost control of their lives due to the exploitation of their body within their own homes will need a large amount of boost to bring the ideal of women emancipation back on the track. Enslavement of both body and mind inflicts intense psychosomatic trauma which may lead a victim to continue with a vassal identity even after the

lockdown; with no energy and encouragement to accept the change the victim finds it hard to break the physical and mental bonds with the abuser. Moreover, the idea of being bonded to the abusive relationship due to a child may in turn cause the victim to remain trapped in unhealthy relationships.

With limited to no safe delivery and abortion services available in various parts of the world, female gender would have to pay a very heavy price through sacrificing their health and bodies. In many instances, the pregnancy will be the resultant of marital rapes or forced sexual intercourse happening within the four walls of the house at the hand of a relative or an abusive partner. Due to the majority of entertainment options being shut down due to social distancing, women at home are bearing the brunt of the frustration where the social distancing is completely ignored and there is no respect for one's body for instantaneous gratification.

5.0 Escalation of Femicide Rate:

Being locked with their abusers for a long time, the domestic abuse victims face the danger of being killed faster by the hands of their abusers rather than by the coronavirus. The lockdown has become a lockup for women where they are threatened by the thought of losing their lives with each passing day and their domestic life has offered them a torture cell amid pandemic instead of a safe territory. As per the statistics of Haaretz, '[a] total of 87,000 women were intentionally killed in 2017 (the most recent year for which we have statistics). Nearly 60,000 women were killed by intimate partners, former partners, or family members. 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day' (Weil, 2020). As a result, it is no wonder that these figures will aggravate during the lockdown period as the abusers now have the perfect circumstances and proximity of the victim to commit the crime. All around the globe the countries are reporting a rising peak in the rate of femicide. With legal proceedings suspended for meanwhile, the abusers are finding it the right opportunity to hurt the victim as the government's attention is more directed towards treating the people affected with the virus (Sachdeva, 2020).

In countries such as Latin America where femicidal violence is already prevalent, the data can reach to horrible limits as lockdown may close the doors for the victim to escape. Even the tools of help can be confiscated by the abuser to leave any trace of the crime (REUTERS 2020). Now being provided with complete privacy, abusers need not even to worry about the intervention of the society as people are now too scared to come out of their homes due to the fear of the infection. Thus, the perpetrator can exercise his violent power to the fullest without any qualms or fear of being caught by the neighbours. Women of all age groups are bearing the brunt of lockdown-induced femicides and consequentially, staying home cannot guarantee staying safe for intimate violence victims, be it from the virus or the abuse.

6.0 Extension of Mother's Abuse to Children:

The severity of inhumanity in COVID-19 lockdown phase can be gauged from the article titled "Coronavirus lockdown: Govt. helpline receives 92,000 calls on child abuse and violence in 11 days," which was published in The Hindu on April 08, 2020. As per the bulletin, the SOS calls 'increased by 50' just in the first phase of lockdown period in India, which portrays the problematic scenario which 'is increasing isolation for women with violent partners, separating them from the people and resources that can best help them. It's a perfect storm for controlling, violent behaviour behind closed doors... a shadow pandemic' for women and children, as conferred by UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka ("Coronavirus lockdown: Govt. helpline receives 92,000 calls on child abuse", 2020). The confinement has

become a trap for both mothers and children with them being unable to reach out for help from relatives or friends. Pre-lockdown period offered an agency to women to escape the abuser by taking the child along with them to live with their parents or friends. But the transportation restrictions have made the victims to stay with the abusers, unable to seek help outside. What started as a shield to protect the citizens from the contagion has become a captivity for the preys of domestic violence as they have become trapped within their own homes, providing the abuser full control over their lives as they have nowhere else to escape. The continuous presence of the perpetrators in home has rendered women scared to even raise their voice for help as such an action may make their quarantine a more horrid nightmare.

In article titled “Coronavirus lockdown: Violence against children on rise in Bhopal as city remains locked down,” Hemender Sharma states that even children are coming forward to report violence in home and form a great percentage of people placing distress calls: “‘After he failed to get liquor, the man took out his frustration on his wife and child. He asked his wife to get him money from wherever she can. She somehow managed to reach us and we have helped them,” said Bhopal Child Helpline director Archana Sahay’ (Sharma, 2020). The inability of the abusive fathers to consume intoxicating substances in the lockdown has made them a threat to their own family as they have taken to beating and verbal abuse to vent out the imbalanced emotions which are erupting as a result of no access to mentally satiating substances. Amidst lockdown children are living a nightmare in form of increased sexual abuse due to being a part of families involving predators such as stepfathers, boyfriends, or a relative living with the family. With rape cases in public sphere seeing a decline due to less social activity, abusers within the cloistered spaces of home are finding unlimited opportunities to sexually exploit both women and children. By throwing a clear light on the issue of isolation, ‘the coronavirus lockdown has spotlighted the ongoing crises of child abuse and domestic abuse’ and showcased how the violence silently perseveres behind closed doors (Fetters & Khazan, 2020).

7.0 Triggers of the Abuser amid Pandemic:

In article titled “Coronavirus lockdown toll on mental health, SOS calls shoot up,” Das points out the ‘economic uncertainties’ as the major reason behind the mental upheaval of the society which has resulted into people taking the necessary quarantine period as an infringement upon their basic rights: ‘Negative adaptation of isolation may lead to irritability, low mood, anxiety, anger, emotional exhaustion and depression’ (Das, 2020). In addition, the frustration of losing jobs and being penniless is contributing to make the lockdown like a jailed term for people. Experts say that the financial problems have significantly added to the existing mental health problems in many people, and the symptoms have surfaced in their true colours amidst the crisis. Moreover, the mental health patients are unable to seek proper medical help, medications, and counselling, which has made both their and their family’s life a pandemonium. Doctors suggest that many patients cannot digest the sudden change in their lifestyle and this may go on into becoming a contributing factor in post-traumatic stress disorder for the patients.

Discussing the economical aspect of the problem alone will not suffice to tackle the violence against women as it is a misconception that domestic abuse only propagates in the poor sections of the society. In fact, very rich families with professionally working women are culprits in this case. The man-woman equation emanates from the basic animal instinct of human concerned with bodily power and thus women of many well-to-do families too fall in the trap of violent masculinity. The pandemic lockdown has become the perfect haven for the abusers who seek for an excuse to leash out their violent animal instinct. Now many domestic abusers may take refuge in excuse of their financial and livelihood condition as the precursor to their violent behaviour.

Such kind of ambience breeds perfect atmosphere for the abuser to seek sympathy of the society and may help the abuser to turn the tables on the victim itself by accusing the latter of being too demanding and criticizing in a crisis situation.

8.0 Being a Domestic Abuse Victim amidst Lockdown:

Apart from destroying self-esteem and mental health of the victim, domestic abuse amid lockdown is also turning out to be a threat to the global economy as many women are working from home and their work quality will obviously get affected due to constant physical and mental torture. No wonder 'UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has said that "all governments should make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans against COVID-19", as there is a "horrifying" rise in crimes against them' ("Women bear the brunt, as usual", 2020). The pandemic has resulted in creating a vicious circle for the victims out of which they cannot escape and take a sigh of relief. They are forced to remain enchained with their abusers and bear the pain.

'Intimate terrorism' has emerged as the preferred term for experts for domestic violence in the quarantine atmosphere with abused women and children being reduced to the status of captives, as clearly put by Harvard University Medical School trauma expert Judith Lewis Herman: '[T]he coercive methods domestic abusers use to control their partners and children "bear an uncanny resemblance" to those kidnappers use to control hostages and repressive regimes use to break the will of political prisoners' (Taub, 2020). Apart from being abused physically, the victims are also separated from their loved ones such as friends and family, with many forced to give up their tool of empowerment such as having a job, along with being neglected in terms of basic necessities such as nutrition and sanitation. Many women who have been brave enough to take the matter in their own hands with filing for a divorce are also left stranded due to a halt in the court proceedings for the meanwhile. Thus, even the courageous victims are made to live with abusive partners and families until the lockdown period is over. As pandemic swept across Italy, France, UK, and other countries following the suit, the shelters especially built for domestic abuse victims suddenly found a sharp increase in the occupancy rate, disclosing how desperate victims are to leave the company of their abusers, even if it means stepping outside of the comfort of their homes.

The financial constraints have contributed to rendering victims unable to rent a space to safely live without any threat from the side of the abuser. In this case, government shelter homes or NGO rescue homes can serve great purpose in shielding the victims of domestic abuse without making them run out of their funds in a moment of monetary problems. Stating the horrible impacts of domestic violence on the victims, WHO has stated that '[t]he health impacts of violence, particularly intimate partner/domestic violence, on women and their children, are significant. Violence against women can result in injuries and serious physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health problems, including sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and unplanned pregnancies,' and with the increased vulnerability of women to domestic violence during lockdown, it sticks true to the analysis that 'violence against women tends to increase during every type of emergency, including epidemics' (Joy, 2020). Being financially independent plays a major role in building the confidence of the victim to escape the horrendous situation as it is found that women who are economically dependent on their partners or family tend to stay in the abusive relationships often. In this phase of economic crisis, the unemployed females are forced to live with the abusive earning spouses, and also they dare not to go to their own family home due to the thought of being a monetary burden on them in a period of economic turmoil. The crisis has not left a scope for fresh air for the victims

as 'where victims previously found space to breathe, whether at work or for social reasons, they are now spending all their time at home with their abusers' (Merlo, 2020). As a result, the psychological trauma is mounting on the victims, worsening the condition, as they are not left with a space of their own to relax and brood over the state of affairs.

9.0 Discussions & Recommendations:

Hans Kluge, European office regional director of WHO, reportedly said that '[w]ith job losses, rising alcohol-based harm and drug use, stress and fear, the legacy of this pandemic could haunt us for years' (Schnirring, 2020). COVID-19 lockdown is a period which is making people dwell upon and churn the essence of humanity. Thus, in such a critical time, the utmost urgent need is to understand each other as humans and develop empathy. The abusers must seek out for professional help themselves and in turn, the doctors and therapists should strive to help free of cost for the time-being and must also provide online counselling to both the abusers and the abused. Issuing emergency hotline numbers^c and providing shelter homes to the victims for the time period of lockdown will provide the victims relief and enable them to evade from the thought of being a burden on their friends or families.

Compassion from the side of law plays a very important role when it comes to providing mental support to women to ensure that their voices are heard. On personal level, women should create sorority groups where they can share their worries and reach out for help whenever required. Though domestic abuse is rampant in all sections of the society, but women belonging to lower sections of the society do not know and are unable to access the sources that can be of help to them. In this case, coexistent domestic abuse survey can be done along with doing medical survey of people for the COVID-19 treatment. On the other side of the story, many women belonging to upper class families know the sources but do not have courage to make complain due to the huge social status of the family. Nevertheless, many helplines are receiving e-mail complains as victims are too scared to talk to the supporters due to the perpetrator being in their proximity almost all the time. Thus, help should reach out to all sections of the society irrespective of the class status. Places that remain open 24/7 even in lockdown such as pharmacies can emerge as the help-in-need for the victims. 'Pharmacies are widespread and among the few places people can still freely visit,' and thus they make ideal spots where the abused women can easily ask the staff to assist them with their agony and take the matter to the right authorities (Higgins, 2020).

Government funding plays a sustainable role in assuring a safe and secure future for domestic abuse victims, especially in period of such a global crisis. With physical, mental, and financial support being the prime necessities to rescue the victims, the administration must also take into account to build rehabilitation centres for the abusers to offer them psychological therapy and employment opportunities to steer the course of their life in a fruitful direction. Sensitivity is required from the side of the family members to bring out their innate humanistic compassion

^cNational Commission for Women of India has issued several hotlines for women in distress, with few of them listed down below for reference:

- Central Social Welfare Board -Police Helpline - 1091/ 1291, (011) 23317004
- Shakti Shalini - 10920
- Shakti Shalini – women's shelter - (011) 24373736/ 24373737
- Sakshi - violence intervention center - (0124) 2562336/ 5018873
- RAHI Recovering and Healing from Incest. A support centre for women survivors of child sexual abuse - (011) 26238466/ 26224042, 26227647

(Source: National Commission for Women, see <http://www.ncw.nic.in/helplines>)

by putting aside their egos and centuries-old damaging patriarchal mind-set. Moreover, women should not remain completely dependent on the abusers in this hour of financial crisis and should take up some work at home that can suffice in earning them a humble income. It will not only lessen the earning responsibilities of the abusive spouse but will also make women confident to take necessary steps and leave a horrible relationship if the situation demands.

10.0 Conclusion:

All in all, though COVID-19 lockdown phase is a tough call on domestic abuse victims all over the world but it is also a test of strength and perseverance where the world has to appear victorious not just over the contagion but above all the evils rooted in the humanity, with family abuse being one of them. Intimate abuse or killing of women by men has been an ever-occurring phenomenon, and a rise in the figures amid pandemic has put the matter more in the limelight. It is sad that it takes a pandemic for us to draw our attention on this already existing threat to the humanity. Nevertheless, the world should work at social, administrative, and familial platforms to eradicate this pestering wound that makes the face of humanity unbecoming to look at. Hopefully, people all over the world emerge out victorious against the dual pestilence that is nipping gradually at the core of the civilization both physically and psychologically.

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