

Domestic Violence During COVID-19 Lockdown in India
Report by Shakti Shalini

We, Shakti Shalini, an organisation promoting gender equality since 1987, publish this report for public circulation to describe, analyse, and suggest the way forward, regarding the state of affairs of domestic violence during the COVID-19 Lockdown in India. Our analysis is drawn from our understanding, based on decades of experience, on the specific structural and affective workings of domestic violence.

The lockdown has been a particularly unique period in time for domestic violence – its victims as well as those of us who respond to this issue. It has created an unprecedented scarcity of support systems, options, isolation, and helplessness for the victims. The means to transport oneself to safety, to communicate with supportive individuals/ groups, to negotiate with police and judicial systems, to retreat into domestic privacy and solitude, shrank for the victims, most certainly, and also for social workers and activists. Shakti Shalini immediately launched a 24/7 helpline for victims, compiled and published a list of organisations providing support to victims across India, strengthened national activists/ social workers networks, gave psycho-social support and phone counseling, intervened with police official, and conducted a few rescue operations.

The Statistics Curve from Dip to Ongoing Rise

Shakti Shalini's experience and data from the lockdown reveals a unique curve that, in and of itself, makes certain key preliminary points. The nation-wide lockdown began on 25th March, 2020. We, at Shakti Shalini, first experienced a marked dip in the number of help and crisis calls from domestic violence victims in first week and then saw the calls gradually increasing. To illustrate, on a regular day before the lockdown we would receive an average of 7-8 new calls for help however, in the first week of the lockdown the daily average number of calls for help fell to 1-2 calls/ day. However, after we compiled and published a nation-wide list of organisations that victims of domestic violence could contact for support during the long down, we rapidly began to receive more calls. To demonstrate, in the month of April, 2020, we responded to 77 calls. And in the month of May, 2020, we responded to 115 calls. The calls we now receive are almost double of what they used to be prior to the lockdown.

We conclude that the immediate silence and dip in calls by victims that we experienced in the first week of the lockdown (only), was due to the suddenness with which support systems, resources, and information became non-functional and unavailable. The sudden disappearing of support systems intensified the helplessness, entrapment, isolation, threat, fear, and trauma that is always, already central to domestic violence, leading to victims entering shock and silence. Active effort by activists/ organization to spread information and continue limited counseling and intervention has gradually encouraged victims to explore help again. The number of victims reaching out has since been rising consistently and can be expected to continue far beyond the figures and statistics that existed prior to the lockdown.

Shakti Shalini's Strategy for Supporting Domestic Violence Victims During the Lockdown:

1. Resource Compilation

On 4th April, 2020, Shakti Shalini compiled and released a **nation-wide list of organisations supporting domestic violence survivors during the lockdown**. The list is a live resource that continues to be updated and expanded. At present, the list covers **helpline services across 14 states in India and two national helplines**.

2. National Alliance Building

In order to compile the list and to ensure that victims received support with maximum coordination and effectiveness, Shakti Shalini engaged in rigorous **national level networking and alliance building amongst gender rights organisations**.

3. 24/7 Helpline

Shakti Shalini converted its landline number, **011-24373737**, that earlier operated only during work hours, into a 24/7 helpline to respond to domestic violence survivors.

4. Support Services

Shakti Shalini has provided **psycho-social support** to survivors through the lockdown. We have widely tapped into existing and upcoming networks of partners across the country to provide survivors **referrals** to organisations within their proximity. In some cases, we have successfully facilitated **police intervention** as well as conducted a few **rescue operations**.

The Unique Distress of Domestic Violence Victims During the Lockdown: Shakti Shalini's Observations and Analysis

1. The closure of courtrooms:

The closure of courtrooms due to the lockdown has put a sudden halt to the legal proceedings of domestic violence survivors who had chosen the judicial path of resistance and prevented new cases from being filed. It is important to note that for survivors the judicial process functions as a working hope for a survivor to secure justice, freedom and liberation from violence, financial security and right, custody of children, and physical and psychological safety. In Shakti Shalini, we have put on hold all new requests for judicial intervention. There is little information even amongst lawyers on how and when exactly judicial processes will resume. The sudden halting of the judicial apparatus and lack of information has intensified states of uncertainty, anxiety, stress, helplessness, entrapment, and trauma amongst survivors leading to adverse psychological effects.

2. The preoccupation of the police:

In our limited experience, during the lockdown the police has been inundated with numerous responsibilities of maintaining the lockdown causing increased unresponsiveness towards domestic violence victims. Additionally, due to the non-operation of transportation services, our social workers and counselors have not been able to assist survivors in person through the processes of filing a police complaint, lodging an FIR, negotiating with the police system, etc. Finally, victims are afraid of

complaining to police since it is common for domestic violence to significantly increase in the aftermath of a complaint if it is not followed up with immediate action. **However, there are exceptions that must be highlighted:** In the case of one woman in Ghaziabad who was facing immense domestic violence, we facilitated her to contact the police. The local policeman was very supportive. He supported her in front of her family and even gave her his own mobile number to reach out if she faces any further violence. This significantly reduced the violence she was facing. Once the lockdown was eased a little and 7:00am-7:00pm movement was allowed, the lady took the help of the same policeman to relocate to her father's house where she is now safe. Once the lockdown is lifted, she will plan further intervention with Shakti Shalini.

3. Consequences of closure of public transportation:

In their journey of negotiating with violence, victims may often exercise the option to run to a shelter home / a family member / a friend as a measure of self-preservation, even if just for a temporary refuge, to place their bodies and minds in a space of safety from danger. The complete stop in public transportation left victims completely entrapped in the same physical space with their abusers with zero means of escape. The suddenness of the transportation shutdown did not permit victims any time to prepare themselves psychologically or practically to respond to such an unprecedented extreme condition of entrapment.

4. Collapse in civil society support systems:

Social workers and organisations such as Shakti Shalini and others have not been able to visit the homes of survivors, or accompany them to hospitals / police stations / courtrooms, or bring them to our shelter home for safety. The inability to access the support of a social worker/ counselor to reach a shelter home and navigate public institutions to fight the violence one is facing, has intensified the sense of isolation, loneliness, and helplessness amongst victims.

5. Awareness

Post the release of the pan-India list of organisations supporting domestic violence victims during the lockdown, there was a marked increase in calls for help. From this, it is evident, that in the initial days of the lockdown, victims lacked information regarding the organisations that would still be accessible for help during the lockdown. While information regarding the same has spread via social media and journalist coverage over the course of the lockdown, its reach remains limited. This applies specifically to those individuals, particularly women, queer communities, and children, across the nation who do not have any access to social media.

6. Trapped in Violence

The closure of courtrooms, preoccupation of the police, shutdown in public transportation depriving victims of an escape route, and shrinking of civil society support services, caused victims to be trapped 24/7 inside the walls of their houses with abusers. This is a structurally unprecedented, unanticipated, and heretofore unimaginable degree of entrapment. Additionally, increased unemployment, drying up of sources of income, exacerbated poverty, hunger and sickness due to the lockdown has intensified the levels of frustration, desperation, impatience, and anger within households that has been directed in the form of violence upon the vulnerable members of the family. Most of Shakti Shalini's clients consist of socio-economically

marginalized survivors of violence who live in small homes, often with many family members, and do not have constant access to a private space. In our experience, victims usually call for help when their abusers had left home for work. Very often they request us to refrain from contacting them and, in stead, wait for their message or call so that they aren't discovered seeking help. This is because domestic abusers tend to become more violent if they learn that their victims have dared to complain/ get help/ resist and rebel. The lockdown has deprived victims off of even the bare minimum privacy or secrecy that they require to break free of domestic violence. Shakti Shalini's data reveals that through the lockdown, victims have contacted us majorly between 9:00pm – 10:00am when most family members are asleep. Many have directly shared with us that they would prefer to only speak during night hours when their family has slept so as to minimize the risk of exposure as far as possible. Some also made sure to tell us beforehand that they will cut the call if they sense a family member approaching/ overhearing and then call back; due to this, very often, we had to conduct counseling conversations in installments. In our analysis, the lack of privacy in homes coupled with the terror of being discovered seeking help is probably a major reason why various victims, who may have otherwise sought help, may not have done so during the lockdown.

The Way Forward

The depth and scale of the impact of the lockdown upon domestic violence victims is yet to be discovered. Contrary to various hypotheses, Shakti Shalini does not expect there to be a sudden surge in domestic violence reporting and calls for help immediately post the lockdown. Rather, it is our understanding that the unprecedented nature and degree of helplessness, entrapment, isolation, and trauma experienced by survivors during the lockdown may have intensified the silence blanketing domestic violence. Moving forward, very carefully planned and coordinated structural and cultural interventions are perhaps required to lift some of the sense of helplessness, isolation, and entrapment experienced by victims, to begin the process of building their trust and belief in the availability of support systems, and to rejuvenate their psychological capacities to resist violence and seek help. Most importantly, responding to the impact of the lockdown on domestic violence is to be viewed as a long-term process that will require a committed and ongoing effort by public and private institutions ranging across mental and physical healthcare, legal support, funding institutions, workspaces, shelter homes, and rehabilitation programs.

It is heartening to note that the media (journalists, social media, and publications) have raised and explored the issue of domestic violence at the local, national, and global level so widely through the lockdown. It is now a priority to continue discussing the manner in which the impact of the lockdown on domestic violence unfolds in the long run.

Shakti Shalini's suggestions to the state, public/ private institutions, and general public for addressing domestic violence post the lockdown:

1. A national helpline for domestic violence survivors.

2. Inclusion of organization/ groups/ activists providing crisis intervention to victims of violence in the list of essential workers and providing them necessary support to deliver services.
3. An increase in the number of shelter homes with regular quality checks and a focus on ensuring that shelter homes are full of therapeutic, artistic, and skills based activities so that the environment of the home promotes freedom, independence, safety, and happiness.
4. Close coordination and intensification of CSOs across the country supporting domestic violence survivors.
5. An increase in financial support by funding agencies and corporates to organisations supporting survivors with a focus on long term projects.
6. Ongoing media attention to the long-term impact of the lockdown on domestic violence.
7. Regular gender sensitization and domestic violence awareness in all workspaces and educational institutions.
8. Focused research to understand and assess the impact of the lockdown on domestic violence from interdisciplinary perspectives.
9. Greater involvement of young people with organisations supporting domestic violence survivors.

Shakti Shalini would like to thank **Avon India** for launching the campaign **#IsolatedNotAlone** amidst the lockdown to provide awareness and support for responding to domestic violence. Our management, support team, and shelter home for survivors is supported by Avon India. We would also like to thank **Salasar Techno Engineering Limited** for consisted support to our Crisis Intervention and Counseling Centre dedicates to supporting survivors.

If you are facing violence, reach out! There is help.

Our helpline is 011-24373737

Resource

PAN-INDIA LIST OF ORGANISATIONS OFFERING PHONE/ TEXT/ONLINE SUPPORT TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN		
Nazariya	Delhi	9818151707
Shakti Shalini	Delhi	24373737
Jagori	Delhi	26692700/ 8800996640
Sama Resource Group for Women & Health	Delhi	9871642320/9650971363
Saheli	Delhi	24616485
Women's Manifesto	Delhi	8860454212
Marg	Delhi	8178709096
Sofia Educational and Welfare Society	Delhi	9711969692 / 9821029325
Ummeed Ki Kiran Clinic	Delhi	18001021075/27642481
CORO	Delhi	9870493858/ 9892632382 / 8879892149 / 8850118908
Centre for Advocacy and Research	Delhi	26410133
ARU Foundation	South Delhi	9911346882
Action India	Delhi-NCR	9911667995
Seher	Delhi-NCR/ Haryana	8826819805
No Tears Foundation Trust & Nitiaalya	Delhi-NCR/ Lucknow	9911694947
Aali	Lucknow	9415343437
Humsafar	Lucknow	7007629220
Study Hall Educational Foundation	Uttar Pradesh	9839044559/6386193775
Nari Samta Munch	Pune	9987720696
Cehat	Mumbai	9029073154
Moonlight Foundation	Mumbai	8928585479
Majlis	Mumbai	7506732641
Ridhi Sidhi Bahuuddeshiya Sanstha	Maharashtra	7038816330
Women's Manifesto	Kerala	7560977795
Bembala Foundations	Bangalore	9980660548
Swayam	Kolkata	9830747030/9830204393/ 9830204322/ 9830737030/ 9830079448
Sakhi	Bhopal	18002332244/ 8989585097/ 8959592560
Centre for Criminology and Public Policy	Rajasthan	8110835606/9724906119
Special Cell for Women	Assam	6000015191/8876127539
Grameen Mahila Kendras	North-East Network	Kamrup:9365648832/ 9435017824/9957029961, Darrang: 9577576677, Golaghat: 8638747110
Invisible Scars	Hyderabad	8008933445
Society for Cyberbad Security Council	Hyderabad	9000885241
My Choices Foundation	Hyderabad	9333404141
Shaheen Women Resource and Welfare Association	Hyderabad (Old City)	040-24386994 / 9866824053 / 9885050588
Bhumika Women's Collective	Telangana	18004252908
Aakansha Seva Sadan	Muzzafarpur	9905443544
Adithi	Bihar and Jharkhand	9934029353
Aali	Jharkhand	9693853019
Psychologists for India	National	9000070839
Helpline	National	04027605316



COMPILED AND VERIFIED BY SHAKTI SHALINI
TO ADD YOUR ORGANISATION CALL 011-24373737 (UPDATED ON 29th MAY, 2020)