**Why is Gender-Based Violence on the rise?**

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Gender inequality and socio-cultural norms in our world today has played a key role in the exacerbation of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). In times of mass distress, civil disturbances and economic meltdown, there is always a notable increase in cases of violence against women and children. As the world is plunged into chaos due to the coronavirus pandemic, this rise in violence has once more began to rear its ugly head in our society. Across the world, it is estimated that about 1 in 3 women- 243 million women aged 15 to 49 years- has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.

With approximately half of the world population on lockdown, the incidence of violence against women has been on the rise. Countries like China, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Ireland suggest an increase in domestic violence cases since the Covid-19 outbreak although sufficient data to substantiate the claim is scarce (Godin, 2020). This increase in the cases of GBV has been linked to the shutdown of essential services during the coronavirus induced lockdown.

The fact that most women work in an informal and less secure employment setting may also be to blame for this uncanny rise in violence. A police report from Jinzhou, Hubei province indicate a three-fold increase in the GBV report in February 2020 when compared to February 2019 (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020). This may indicate that social norms affect the place and treatment of women in society.

**The global lockdown and the rise in violence against women and children**

Based on anecdotal evidence from recent reports countries such as the US, China, Brazil and Australia have seen increases in an intimate partner, women and children violence which may be as a result of the isolation and quarantine (Campbell, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020; van Gelder et al. 2020). As the effects of the social distancing measures set in, rural areas have also encountered abuse against women and children although most go undocumented due to lack of facilities.

Global disease outbreaks have been linked to a rise in mental disorders such as depression, excessive aggression, suicidal tendencies etc. The restriction on movement and freedom leads to stress and hence degradation of mental health. In France, a 32% - 36% increase in domestic abuse complaints has been reported following the implementation of self-isolation and quarantine measures (Reuters News Agency, 2020). This has led to the commissioning of hotels for victims of abuse. In the same vein, the Italian government also began commissioning hotels to provide shelters for those escaping abuse (Davies and Batha, 2020).

According to Wagers 2020, the US has an increase of 21%-35% across its states while the UK has encountered an increase in family violence and homicide (Bradbury-Jones and Isham, 2020; Reuters News Agency, 2020). With a record of about eight family violence-related deaths (Knowles 2020), the National Domestic Abuse Hotline in the UK saw a 25% increase in calls since the implementation of the stay at home directive (Kelly and Morgan 2020).

Due to a displacement in normal structures in most families due to the quarantine, the more vulnerable in society (women) are forced to stay for longer periods with their abusers. This means that as the virus intensifies in its spread, more women are forced to be exposed to their abusers during this lockdown, increasing the incidence of abuse and violence.

**How do the Coronavirus and lockdown intensify Gender-Based Violence?**

Due to the social distancing rules put in place by the government and health officials, there is an increase in ‘exposure time’, meaning that women and children have to spend more time with their abusers than they normally would. Most women also tend to endure and stay with abusive partners during periods of disaster for reasons such as for psychological and financial dependence, fear of personal safety, fear of offspring safety and emotional attachment to perpetrators. This makes the handling of the situation difficult as they remain unreported.

The presence of rising tensions and instability in the home will tend to make partners who are under stress to exhibit aggressive behaviour. This is made worse in people with a history of alcohol and substance abuse. Furthermore, the threatening of both the informal and formal social structures tend to place women especially adolescents in rather sexually compromising situations, escalating the rate of abuse. This, however, is not only limited to sexual abuse but also physical, mental and emotional abuse. With little to no help from outsiders, this can escalate over time.

**Increase in Gender-Based Violence- Is the virus responsible?**

It is pertinent to note that there is an associated increase in Gender-Based Violencein cases of disease outbreak and natural disasters. However, it is essential to determine the crux of the matter. Most reports tend to point an accusing finger on the pandemic- in this case the coronavirus. This results in improper handling of gender-based issues whenever they arise. It is therefore worthy of note that the economic and financial stress associated with the onset of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown puts a strain on most families and relationships. This produces fear and uncertainty thereby exposing the underlying societal gender inequalities and female child vulnerabilities. This means that as the world battles to handle such disasters, the women who are more financially dependent end up with no way to fend for themselves and thus may become victims of abuse.

There is a notable breakdown in government policies and financial activities during pandemics. This disorganization in structure leads to a shift in focus from the vulnerable in the society since few measures put in place can accommodate them, a fact made visible once again by the Covid-19 outbreak. Thus an increase in abusive behaviour largely perpetrated by men against women is expected to skyrocket. The economic and financial meltdown which follows crisis response in disease outbreaks also has a crippling effect on gender-based support groups, the health sector and security outfits since funds to facilitate their activities have become limited.

**The Way Forward**

In as much as the outbreak of Covid-19 has placed a huge burden on the authorities around the world, certain measures can still be put in place to ensure that the incessant rise in Gender-Based Violence is curbed. These measures should be aimed at targeting all governmental, non-governmental organizations and health care facilities around the world. ‘Dignity kits’ which contain sanitary kits, soap flashlight and whistles can be distributed at the county level. Other articles to enhance living for women such as cash transfers or vouchers can also be disbursed hence reducing the risk of infection through social contact.

The government can also provide services which are targeted at supporting the mental health and psychosocial aspect of women across the world. This includes the provision of safe spaces and online counselling services, even when the physical services have been shut down. The orientation of health care providers on the handling of victims of abuse is also necessary while providing them with the equipment required. Proper sensitization can be done to ensure that members of a community can easily keep track of one another. This will go a long way in identifying abuse victims since community members will be able to communicate with the victims much easily unlike the agencies.

**Role of the government in abating the Covid-19 GBV surge**

1. **Active carelines and information channels:** The government needs to ensure that hotlines and other means of accessing help in cases of violence against women and children are open during the coronavirus lockdown. It is also important to make available the numbers and addresses of local care-givers in the media to ensure that abused women can always have access to help locally. One of the most affected countries during this pandemic, Italy advertising [the 1522 helpline](https://www.1522.eu/) for violence and stalking to prevent “an emergency within an emergency”. Other countries such as France, Australia and the UK have invested in the provision of carelines for victims of GBV during this period.
2. **Provision of adequate Shelter and housing:** Provision of adequate shelter for women and children in abusive relationships will go a long way in ensuring that they have a haven away from their abusers. In Trento, Italy it was ruled that [abusers must leave the family home rather than the victim](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence) in situations of domestic violence [March 28]. [Austria and Germany](https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/fears-of-domestic-violence-rise-as-millions-confined-over-virus-1.4872437) have also made similar rulings although this makes it a challenge to protect the victims since the perpetrators are aware of the location of their victims. Canada has allocated [$50 million to women’s shelters and sexual assault centres](https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2020/03/canadas-covid-19-economic-response-plan-support-for-canadians-and-businesses.html) as part of the Covid-19 relief package [March 18]. In the same light, France, a funding increase of €1.1 million has been made for anti-abuse organisations included[20,000 hotel nights for survivors to escape abusive partners](https://www.france24.com/en/20200330-france-to-put-domestic-violence-victims-in-hotels-as-numbers-soar-under-coronavirus-lockdown) [March 30].
3. **Improved access to services for survivors:** Due to the limiting nature of mobility and movement during this quarantine, some countries bringing up alternatives to expand access to violence-related services. In France, a ‘[pop up’ centres in grocery stores](https://www.france24.com/en/20200330-france-to-put-domestic-violence-victims-in-hotels-as-numbers-soar-under-coronavirus-lockdown) where women are likely to be already visiting, have been initiated [March 30]. Specific ‘code word’ signals have been developed countries such as France, Italy, and Spain, which signals to [pharmacies to contact](https://spainsnews.com/coronavirus-in-the-canary-islands-women-victims-of-gender-violence-may-alert-them-of-their-situation-in-pharmacies-la-provincia/) the relevant authorities. In [Italy](https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/lamorgese-sempre-vicini-vittime-e-testimoni-dei-maltrattamenti-famiglia), the [UK](https://www.reducingtherisk.org.uk/cms/content/hestias-bright-sky-app), [among others](https://www.techsafety.org/), concealed apps have been released or improved for women to use to send signals especially when in close quarters with their abusers. Protection services for women and children must be it is also necessary to [consider “essential”](https://twitter.com/DrTedros/status/1246517636760027139)  all forms of protection services during the coronavirus lockdown.
4. **Risk factor reduction:** It is necessary to curb ways which may increase the risk of abuse against women and children. [South Africa](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52047374) has banned alcohol sales [26 March]. Nuuk, the capital of Greenland has [also taken similar measures](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/29/alcohol-sales-banned-in-greenland-capital-during-lockdown) to reduce the risk of violence against women and children in the home [March 29].  With a [complex relationship](https://search.proquest.com/openview/8192ef6f612341acbc47d29257d554b5/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=37917)between violence and alcohol abuse, there is limited evidence of these policies will affect the increasing levels of violence. Other policies targeted at the promotion of stable mental and psychological health should be put in place to reduce VAW/C during this pandemic.
5. **Making judicial adjustments**: Due to the rapid increase in mortality following the Covid-19 pandemic, the stay-at-home order has markedly reduced the activities of the judiciary. Despite this, [modifications to the family law](https://www.miragenews.com/new-laws-to-protect-family-violence-victims-during-covid-19-pandemic/) have been made by the Australian government as a means to allow for better response by the judiciary to cases during the quarantine [April 3]. These modifications include firstly, the imposition of electronic monitoring requirements for bail and conditional suspension of imprisonment orders. Secondly, the ability to file restraining orders via online portals. Thirdly, the creation of new offences and increased fines with extended periods of restraining orders. Other countries like Columbia have used virtual means to pursue domestic violence cases to clamp down on the increase in abusive behaviour. All these are targeted at ensuring that violence against women and children is curbed during this period.

**A lasting solution**

Globally, women all over the world represent a larger percentage of unskilled, informal and part-time workers. This means that as the world is ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic, issues regarding their health and safety become important as they are most affected by a crisis such as this. İt is therefore urgent to create conducive working environments for women with dependents in skilled and better-paid jobs hence encouraging them to seek these out. As the lockdown increases, paid household jobs are now left for women who are temporarily out of jobs to do without payment further making them financially dependent.

Furthermore, as the world enjoins women to perform acts of charity such as the production of facemasks and other essentials, it is necessary to put them on stipends which will not only encourage them but also give them a source of income throughout the pandemic period. including programs that aid victims of Gender-Based Violence and integrating such programs as parts of a disaster relief programme permanently will go a long way in curbing the pandemic induced surge in VAW (Willmer, 2020). This means that community programmes should include options for shelter and psychological support in cases of disease outbreak and natural disasters for abuse victims.

As the world is thrown into chaos and waiting for its healing, we must go back to the drawing board and re-strategize on our crisis management techniques. This can only happen if we see this viral outbreak for the exposé to an underlying problem rather than just a disease. Thus ensuring that women and children are better protected in the future.

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