

COVID-19, LOCKDOWN AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN HOMES

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COVID-19 has imposed mandatory lockdowns in many countries including India. However, since the lockdown has been imposed, attention is being focused on its economic repercussions and on providing food and shelter to poor and migrants. But the pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities and created challenges at other fronts too. More specifically, women's lack of autonomy in the patriarchal homes is further getting reduced when today, 'homes' which are no longer merely seen as comfort zones, but during the lockdown, homes are evolving as spaces where people are working from home and earning their livelihoods, children are attending classes and other activities are being coordinated. Violence in such homes against women and children is rising during the lockdown. Women and children trapped within homes with the perpetrators of violence are facing severe abuse. In order to combat the situation and to make homes as safe zones, special measures are required. The government needs to declare domestic violence as 'essential services' and must take steps to provide immediate relief to women and children. In the long term, the need is to address entrenched structural discrimination in order to ensure gender equality within homes. Lockdowns may be interpreted in different ways. One is to lockdown our collective imaginations and allow the pre-existing stereotypical gender notions to continue and reiterate, or it could be, to isolate the world from the patriarchal notions and to reimagine a violence free gender just world.

What is happening during the lockdown?

In Uttam Nagar, Delhi, a 28-year-old woman, a mother of two toddlers, faced serious physical abuse at the hands of her husband and his family. Initially, the police sought to mediate between the two and asked woman to stay home during the lockdown. But the abuse worsened after husband came to know that she has filed a police complaint. On 14 April, 2020, the police took her for medical checkup, recorded her injuries and transported her and her two children to the Shakti Shalini shelter home. The woman alleged that she has been physically and mentally tortured for past four years. This time she was brutally beaten up and when she begged to spare, he told her to get out of the house. It is when her brother called up from Nepal and found out her situation, he contacted the shelter home which in-turned called up the police helpline to investigate the matter.

In Kerala, one of the members of the State's Women Commission got a call from Chennai pleading for help by a man who said that her sister, along with her daughter, residents of Idukki district, are hiding in forest as her sister's husband has ejected both of them out of the house. The man said that there are wild animals in jungle. The case was investigated and the husband was taken into custody. (The Hindustan Times, April 26, 2020)

In Malda, West Bengal, a 26-year-old woman who has been married for past five years was allegedly strangled by her husband. In another incident, a man killed his wife after she protested against his alleged extra-marital affair.

In a slum, in Chennai, Parvathi, 25-year-old woman, on 25 March 2020 was severely beaten by her alcoholic husband. Earlier, when he used to beat her, she would run outside in the narrow lanes

to call for help from neighbors. This strategy usually works every time, but this time situation is different. Because of police barricade, she cannot go out to seek intervention of neighbors.

In another incident in Chennai, a 45-year-old woman has been abused by her alcoholic husband for years, but the violence diminished a few months back when she got employment to serve as a maid and would return home with money. After the lockdown was imposed, her employer asked her to stay home and she was not paid. As her husband was deprived of his daily drink, he was in foul mood and started abusing her. She ran out of her house, courageously walked to the police barricade, and asked to be taken to the police station. The officer on duty asked her to go home saying that police and courts are shut because of lockdown.

Bunty works is a garment factory and her husband is a garbage collector. He is an alcoholic and physically abused her during the lockdown. She angrily asks, "They (the government) think we will sit at home and drink tea and watch Ramayan (mythological TV show) My husband got angry about small things on the first day of lockdown and hit me and broke the TV". (Aljazeera 18 April, 2020)

In Maharashtra, Shefali (name changed) packed her belongings and sought refuge in her friend's home when her schizophrenic husband began to threaten her again. In December, last year, he had violently thrashed her. (The Telegraph 16 April 2020)

In Vadodara, a man, working with a private electronics company, breaks his 24-year-old wife's spine after she defeated him in online ludo. He mercilessly thrashed her as she defeated her consecutively in the game. She suffered severe spinal cord injury and is hospitalized. Perhaps, his 'ego is hurt thinking that his wife outsmarted him and was more intelligent as she also contributed to the family income' by taking tuition classes. (The Times of India, April 27, 2020)

In Assam, a [woman crossed two paddy fields](#) with her five-month-old child to seek refuge in her parent's home from her abusive husband during the lockdown. The husband turned up at her natal home, snatched the child and left. It took efforts of village headman, NEN and ASHA workers to reunite baby with her mother.

These are few cases that have been reported in the print media during the period of lockdown. There may be many others which have not been reported, perhaps, being suppressed by the police or women could not get out to report abuse.

The chairperson of NCW [claimed](#) a rise of 94 percent in complaint cases including that of domestic violence after lockdown. Between 23 March 2020 to 16 April 2020, 587 complaints have been received, a significant surge from 396 complaints received in previous 25 days between February 27 and March 22, 2020. This calculation includes the complaints received through WhatsApp and other modes of communication. Total complaints from women [increased to 116 in first week of March 2020 to 257](#) in the final week of the same month.

The [calls received by the DCP](#) in Delhi jumped to 1000-1200 per day as compared to 900-1000 calls received earlier. On the whole, around [2500 cases reported from Delhi](#) alone during the lockdown. Similarly, Punjab reported 21 percent increase in number of cases pertaining to crime against women with [700 cases being reported](#) since lockdown has been imposed. Between 20

March 2020 to 20 April 2020, 34 percent increased calls are being received pertaining to domestic violence on the helpline numbers per day. The cases of violence are increasing reported not only from rural areas but also from cities. Patriarchy exists across the boundaries of caste, class, religion and other variables. The data of rise in cases of domestic violence after lockdown is also reported from other agencies.

The figure represents double the average rate of death and highlights the extreme danger women face when trapped in the same house as violent men. Women and girls are at increased risk of abuse when they are trapped with the perpetrators and there is less scrutiny and no support available for the victims. The child helpline too, reported to be receiving [twice the numbers of calls](#) it receives on an average day. Many of them are about physical and sexual abuse of children and two are about child marriage. The incidences and data indicate the level of abuse, the severity of violence and intensity of harassment women and children face during the lockdown.

It is not that women are not being abused in homes earlier, but during the lockdown, the virus is mirroring and [magnifying the discrimination](#), class inequalities, oppressions, privileges, casteism and the patriarchal violence all of which already existing in the male-dominated society. In fact, structural gender-based violence is being reiterated during the lockdown where women who are already considered at a lowest rung within the family hierarchy and are now being economically and social disempowered.

The [National Family Health Survey](#) data reveals that domestic violence is not considered as a serious crime. 42 percent men and 52 percent women believed that husband is justified in beating his wife in certain situations such as when she argues, disobeys, cannot serve hot food or could take care of babies. Only less than one percent sought help from police. Finding support from the natal family or a community is already [difficult in case women face violence](#) in marital homes. Medical care and psychosocial support are not easily available. Parental homes have helped women to provide refuge in some cases earlier, but with the lockdown it is not easy to access the same. Further, the fear of putting elderly parents in vulnerable situation of getting infection adds to obstruction. Law enforcement in many cases has not uphold [women's interest](#) in long run. Thus, [domestic violence remains highly prevalent](#) but least reported human rights abuse.

Domestic violence is rooted in power and control. Further, the lockdown is adding to this marginalization. As a care worker at homes, women are at high risk of contracting the virus which enhances their vulnerability to the risk of acquiring disease. Women have already been economically marginalized in the labor market; lockdown is further adding to the risk of being pushed out of work. Economic dependence on abusive male members therefore increased adding to the vulnerability. Sexual violence is adversely affecting women and in absence of medical help, women are being forced to take [abortion drugs without supervision](#).

Lockdown could not contain violence in homes

COVID-19, like all other of its previous predecessors, is [transforming the world in its own ways](#) and is affecting different people differently. Coronavirus has also revealed the ugly face of crime committed within the so-called sacred domain of home. Violent men could not be stopped though the governments over the world are developing vaccines to stop spread of coronavirus. In the

isolation during lockdown, when the perpetrators know that women have no other support available and cannot escape easily, they ferociously abuse women. Patriarchy is dehumanizing men and women. Lockdown may be controlling the spread of virus but it could not prevent men dominating and controlling women. Lockdown could not contain violent ugly behavior of men. Lockdown could not prevent men from displaying their sense of entitlements and privileges or from asserting their prerogative to abuse women in home.

Caged in violent homes, with no contact from the outside world, the victims are being placed in the situation where it is difficult to seek help or support from outside world. Lockdown implies spending more time with abusive men as perpetrators. The exposure and opportunity for abuse increases as there is no one to intervene to protect women. Restricted mobility, limited privacy, no contact with the outside world, and locked with abuser, women are constantly facing grave dangers. Abusers are taking advantage of isolation measures and abusing their powers knowing the fact that women are at the disadvantaged situation where they may not have an internet connection or access to mobile phone to reach out or contact someone for help. Hence, the very technique that is being used to protect people from virus is making an adverse impact on women and children in violent homes as the abuser is getting more opportunities to unleash violence.

Even otherwise, home is a contested site for unequal gender relations where both men and women are placed unequally and men hardly share the household unpaid care work. The gendered social norms burden women with the responsibility of unpaid care work within homes and women are being judged on the basis of the quality of work. The cultural and social biases act against the interest of women during the lockdown as women are expected to take up [traditional gender roles and engage in domestic work](#) with little or no contribution from men.

Lockdown is probably not a new experience for a woman. Women have been contesting the boundary of 'public' and 'private' or *ghar* and *bahar* since ages. But, today, patriarchy clubbed with gender in-sensitive policies, is shrinking the women's autonomy and have reduced women to second-class citizens. The '*lakhsman rekha*' drawn once again around the house by the Prime Minister in his address to nation reiterates the patriarchal imagination and symbolizes the [complex relation between feminine gender and nationhood](#) through ancient ethos.

How COVID-19 is changing the concept of 'Homes'?

Home, in simple terms, conveys a place which is associated with simple pleasures, privacy, freedom, security, togetherness and a sense of belonging. In complex notion, home is a space where the household tasks of caring as well as the politics of domestic social relations are embedded in the [relation of power and patriarchy](#). It is therefore also associated with slavery, feudalism, capitalism and a site for production and reproduction of patriarchal ethos.

During the mandatory lockdown being imposed during pandemic, homes no longer remain as mere comfort zones but are being evolved as institutions which are reproducing and reiterating patriarchy. The very nature and character of home as an institution is changing in the lockdown. The middle-class homes have been converted into institutions from where –

- 1) people are working from homes, so homes are being turned into offices and workstations where activities are being taken up to earn livelihoods,
- 2) children are taking online virtual classes and therefore houses have been turned into schools and colleges where both teachers and students are interacting from different spaces,
- 3) places where sick and elderly are being taken care of as many hospitals are turning the non-COVID patients away, so homes have been transformed into convalescence places where sick are being taken care of,
- 4) taking care to ensure regular supplies of daily consumable items and services, thus pre-market and post-market activities are being coordinated from homes, for instance, kitchens are substituting for the activities of hotels and restaurants and services such as plumbing and electrician are being taken by the members of the family.

Therefore, the concept of home in itself is altering as homes are turning as providers of all such services which in pre-COVID stage are being taken care of through schools, colleges, offices, nursing homes, hospitals, restaurants or through technical services such as plumbers or electricians. As a unit of production, home during the COVID breakdown is emerging as a single institution that is taking care of multiple needs. Also, during pre-COVID stage, many middle-class houses have employed range of people to provide help such as domestic workers or maids, drivers and other support services which is no longer available during the lockdown so the entire burden of carrying out all such activities are either shared by other household members, or it eventually falls on women within the households in the patriarchal homes where men hardly help in doing any household chores. Middle-class homes thus, reinforcing patriarchal power relations.

Within the poor household, women are already facing atrocities in all forms such as deprivation and denial of basic necessities which include starvation or lack of access to basic medical or other necessary facilities, besides violence. Lockdown led to further loss of little income which they may have in the earlier pre-COVID stage. Poverty implies not only starvation but also additional stress and loads of other problems. The government guaranteed supply of food to the poor but the [promise of free ration does not assure food on table for domestic workers and migrants](#) in cities. Also, there are a large number of migrant workers involved in '[dirty, dangerous and demeaning](#)' jobs are stuck in the city, left with no rations, food, drinking water or money. Their families in villages are starving on the other hand. Pandemic has deepened not only job and livelihood crisis for many but it has also created a situation of insecurity and a sense of loss for millions. For women, such situation is triply disadvantageous in terms of deprivation of meager resources they had earlier, patriarchal power notions as well added violence.

In slums of Dharavi in Mumbai, one of the largest slums, in one of the biggest democracy, where [almost 800,000 people live in a one square mile stretch](#), several deaths are being reported due to the corona virus. Density of population in slums makes the concept of social distancing ineffective. Families, consisting of 8 or more people, in such slums live in one single room where observing social distancing is impossible. [Lanes are narrow with shoddy infrastructure](#) and living conditions are unhygienic. Many share the same public toilets and water taps. Surrounded by gleaming skyscrapers, slums make up a fifth of urban households with a large chunk of population cramped

in small spaces. People surviving on daily earnings have hardly left with any savings so that they could survive during the lockdown. Domestic violence for poor women hardly becomes a priority when survival of self and children is at stake every moment. For women in slums, marginalization in homes thus has added dimensions in terms of clumsy space to share with besides all other gendered notions women face in poor household.

Thus, though the 'home' acquired a special place in the strategy to deal with coronavirus, yet, it holds a different meaning and impact people accordingly. During mandatory isolation, home lent a sense of security and comfort to some, yet at the same time, home is also becoming a place where many women are facing brutal violence, discrimination and burdens of various kinds. And for many, home has become an unsafe insecure zone, coming out from such place seems impossible, at least for the time being. Home, in lockdown is therefore becoming a place to reiterate power manifestation, feminization of unpaid labor, violence and reproduction of patriarchy. In this time when home has occupied a central place in the lives of billions of people, it has become a chamber of torture for many women. In order to ensure that homes remain as 'safe zones' for all, it is essential that steps be taken to stop violence and protect women and children.

Steps taken to prevent domestic violence in other countries during lockdown

In other countries too, reports show that domestic violence incidents are increasing during lockdown and many countries have taken measures to contain violence against women. [UN chief Antonio Guterres is calling for global 'ceasefire'](#) because of horrific global surge violence directed towards women and girls linked to lockdown imposed globally in response to the pandemic.

In several parts of Europe, domestic violence is declared as an 'essential service'. Helplines have been opened up in many countries to support the victims of violence but in many situations, women are finding difficult to contact, because abuser constantly being around may strictly control the movements of the victims. Therefore, at some places, new strategies are being evolved by those handling hotlines, such as, digitally contacting the victims wherever possible, using online chats, WhatsApp and other such portals where victims could easily establish contact with the helplines.

In Argentina, pharmacies are helping women to report abuse. In France, [pharmacies](#) and grocery stores are housing pop-up counseling services and [20,000 hotel rooms are made available to women](#) who cannot seek shelter at any other place or could go home. In Spain, [women are exempted](#) from lockdown in case they need to leave the abusive home and are allowed to use [codeword "mask 19"](#) to alert the pharmacy shops. Women are advised to use '[Silent solution](#)' emergency call which allow people the police using touch phone without the need to speak. Chatbots are deployed to assist women.

[Canada](#) and Australia have announced special funds for violence against women as a part of their national plans to counter the damaging fall out of COVID-19. Italy allocated [emergency cash scheme](#) for workers in underground economy. [Vulnerable women in](#) Yukon are being provided with free cellphones equipped with free internet services to stay safe amid lockdown. In US, several [organizations](#) distributed bras, tampons and pads to people experiencing homelessness.

Congolese women while drawing lessons from Ebola outbreak are focusing on prevention of domestic violence and are organizing [social media campaigns](#) asking community leaders to speak online against abuse. Video clips featuring men doing household chores and participating in child care are being shared in order to promote gender equality. Egypt has strengthened its [program to advance women's rights](#) through providing stimulus package and also granting protection to women workers.

Steps taken in India during lockdown to prevent domestic abuse

Though the concept of domestic abuse is being discussed in India, but no steps have been taken to deal with the issue at the policy level. In fact, several NGOs when petitioned the courts, some courts have issued directions to the state to provide protection to women and children.

For instance, the Delhi High court, after a petition filed by an NGO, on 18 April 2020 directed the Delhi government to deliberate on measures to curb domestic violence and protect victims during the lockdown. The state in its reply stated that it has put a protocol in place where a survivor once call the helpline number, the tele caller will take the complaint and will forward it to the counselor who will establish a phone communication with the survivor on her account during the lockdown. However, this approach has several loopholes. Frequently, the survivors are not in position to communicate easily with the counselor when the perpetrator is constantly controlling and monitoring the victim. The court has [directed both the central and the state government](#) to effectively implement the provisions of the [Domestic Violence Act 2005](#).

The Jammu and Kashmir High Court took *suo moto* cognizance of domestic violence cases and on 18 April 2020, offered slew directions that include creation of special funds and designating informal spaces for women such as grocery stores and pharmacies where women could report abuse without alerting the perpetrator.

The Karnataka High Court, too has asked the state government about the helplines and action taken on domestic violence complaints. The state in its reply stated that helplines, counselors, shelter homes and protection officers are working round the clock to help victims of violence.

In Tamil Nadu, protection officers appointed under the Domestic Violence Act 2005 are allowed to move during the lockdown and some women in dangerous situations are being rescued and have been moved to shelter homes.

Further, several NGOs have been lending a helping hand to women in distress. An organization has launched an initiative called '[red dot](#)' under which a woman can be identified as a victim of domestic violence by the NGOs and authorities if she puts a red dot on her palm. Within three days after this scheme is launched, it received 20 complaints as claimed.

In UP, the state government has initiated a [special helpline for women victims of domestic abuse](#) under the title 'Suppress Corona not your voice' as a part of enhanced response to cases of violence against women. The police have assured that once a woman lodge a complaint, a woman police officer will attend to it. The purpose is to reassure women and to send a stern message to the abuser that he cannot use isolation as an opportunity to abuse a woman.

The NCW chairperson claims that ASHA and Anganwadi workers and other frontline health workers are counselling against domestic violence and women can report these workers in case they are facing abuse.

However, these measures, seemingly and evidently, are not sufficient enough. Considering the diverse situation of India, and recognizing the limitations, a multi-dimensional approach is required to be evolved to address the grave situation of domestic violence.

Way Ahead

COVID-19 has [created binaries and has exposed the underlying prejudices and discrimination](#) that exists in 'India' which ironically clapped and banged *tahlis* and the '*Bharat*' which walked miles, during the lockdown without food and water to reach home besides exposing the divide along the religious and gender lines. The need is to explore beyond these binaries and take actions to restructure the power dynamics that operate to create the social hierarchies.

During the lockdown and in post COVID-19 situation, 'homes' have acquired a special place in the process of dealing with the virus, therefore, the government needs to ensure the safety of all the members residing within homes. There is a need to rethink and restructure patriarchal assumptions and the notions relating to stereotypical gender norms. A crisis situation provides a platform to rekindle the collective imagination to alter the pre-existing ideas about the gender discourse.

Homes cannot be reduced to the chambers of torture for women and children. The safety of women and children cannot be compromised in so-called 'private' spaces while drawing '*Lakshman rekhas*' further reducing women to second-class citizens depriving them of their agency and their beings. Dismantling patriarchy and gender inequalities at homes and in public spaces is perhaps, essential to create a better world.

In order to ensure that homes remain as 'safe zones' for all, it is essential that steps be taken to stop violence. The corona virus is new and scientists are finding cure to deal with it, but the virus of patriarchy, casteism and communalism, all are old and the cure of these has not been found as yet. It is essential to tackle patriarchy and all other forms of inequalities and discriminations to create a better world.

UN has made several [recommendations](#) to address the situation such as increased investments in online services and civil society organizations, ensuring that judiciary holds the perpetrators accountable for their violent actions, setting up emergency warning systems, declare shelter as an essential service, create safe ways for women to seek support, avoid releasing prisoner convicted of violence against women in any form, scale up public awareness campaigns particularly those targeted to men and boys.

The government in India besides considering these recommendations need to take other essential steps to curb domestic violence. It is urgent that domestic violence be declared as an 'Essential Service' and those involved in providing support and relief to domestic violence victims be allowed to move and reach out to women and children who essentially need help. The list of

essential services may also be expanded to include basic hygiene products such as menstrual pads, medicines and contraceptives.

Immediate steps must be taken as soon as the case of violence is highlighted or a woman tries to raise a complaint. The voices of women need to be heard and should not be suppressed. Domestic violence should be considered as a top priority of the government and immediate framework needs to be formulated to reach out to women in need besides providing for food and water to those who need these facilities on urgent basis.

SOP or the Standard Operational Procedures need to be evolved with a guideline and a framework to provide immediate and long-term relief to women and children in distress situations. Guidelines may be formulated to address not only physical violence, but also steps that could be taken to address economic violence as well as mental and sexual violence.

Immediate support to be rendered to calls received through helplines and through other means. The coordination could be setup between the CAW cells, the district control rooms and help desks. Women cops and counselors may be allowed to pay visit to callers to help with utmost urgency.

Considering the fact that only one-third Indians have access to internet out of 1.3 billion population and only 30 percent users are female. Frequently, usage of internet by women is controlled and monitored by male members with the families. Therefore, besides the use of phones, mails or media, other strategies such as alerting through pharmacies and grocery stores need to be considered across the country. These pharmacies and shops could in turn alert the local health care workers and police so that subsequently action could be taken against the perpetrator of violence and immediate relief could be provided to the victims. The message that needs to be spread is that 'domestic violence will not be tolerated'.

Involving ASHA and Anganwadi workers may help to quickly provide relief given the fact that these are frontline health workers in COVID prevention work. Investments need to be made to provide basic essentials such as food, water, education, science, health and social security.

Monotony, boredom, proximity, stress due to loss of job or income all may be the triggers but cannot be used as lame excuses by men for their violent behavior. Men are responsible and should be held accountable for their illegal unwanted actions. The police and judiciary must take immediate action on the complaints of domestic violence and repeat offenders should be strictly prosecuted with no leverage accorded to them.

Shelter homes and One-Stop Centers may be allowed to function day and night with necessary safety measures for COVID. A special fund may be created for the purpose to help NGOs and shelter homes providing support to women and children. This may be regularly monitored by the NCW and the State commissions to avoid repeating abuse of such resources.

Innovative and creative ideas are required to support women in need. Several organizations have suggested to [share help-seeking information stickers on food packets](#) and may be on grocery items. Intervention of bystanders and neighbors is essential and they must report to the authorities or simply bang the doors.

Gender sensitive training programs should be launched and short videos and other resource material may be generated to instill the values of gender equality within homes including sharing of household care work by men and also to spread the information regarding '[zero tolerance of violence](#) in homes' and that the homes are 'safe zones' for all the members.

Lockdown has highlighted the importance of home and keeping in mind its necessity in future it is essential that 'democratic norms' to be observed and homes should emerge as safe zones where violence should be eliminated in all forms. Restoring rights and dignity of all is important. Economic, social and political empowerment of women is important in long run. Lockdown could imply strengthening existing stereotypical notions of locking our collective imaginations to the idea of women as second-class citizens or it could also imply locking the patriarchal notions and ideas to imagine a violence free gender equal world.

The author is an advocate and a researcher practicing and advocating for human rights, gender and governance issues. She is associated with several human rights and women's organizations and has written several books, research papers and articles. Her recent book is titled as [Women and Domestic Violence in India: A Quest for Justice](#). She is a co-author of [The Founding Mothers: 15 Women Architects of Indian Constitution](#). She is [publishing regularly](#). Some of her writings are available [here](#) and [here](#). She may be contacted at snigam00@gmail.com