

SHORT RESEARCH NOTE

Domestic violence during COVID-19 pandemic: The case for Indian women

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Abstract

Domestic violence is one of the most pernicious gendered ailments of human society. Researchers have confirmed the inevitable consequences of domestic violence (physical, sexual, and emotional) in increased vulnerability to psychopathologies in addition to physical morbidity. Domestic violence cases are vast in India, and the numbers are further aggravated at an alarming rate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study aimed at exploring the cases of domestic violence among Indian women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Newspapers reporting the incidents of domestic violence during the last 5 years were analysed to explore the issues related to the surge in domestic violence incidents during the COVID-19 lockdown period. A major increase in domestic violence cases was observed during the COVID-19 period as compared to the previous years. Also, the cases were higher during the initial phases of the pandemic but gradually decreased as time progressed. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women was unprecedented and worse than before. Home containment as a measure to protect the health and well-being of the general public has resulted in increased sufferings for women in terms of both sufferings from diseases and increased domestic violence.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, domestic violence, gender, pandemic

1 | INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been felt among the world populace as one of the most prominent threats to humankind. The damaging consequences of the disease have not only been limited to the loss of life but also have severe socio-psychological consequences. As of 20 December 2020, over 1.6 million people across the globe have lost their lives (WHO, 2020). The psychological impact of Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdowns have resulted in extreme consequences for almost everyone. It has resulted in fears, anxiety, and sadness not only among common people (Bhanot, Singh, Verma, & Sharad, 2020) but also among healthcare professionals (Jaiswal, Singh, & Arya, 2020), which has led to an alarming increase in suicidal and other psychiatric conditions (Raj, Ghosh, Singh, Verma, & Arya, 2020). However, the impact of this pandemic on women has been even worse and is worth exploring. The lockdowns and other social isolation measures implemented by all affected countries have forced women to be confined to their homes despite the fact that they are subjected to family violence, with limited or no social support options available (van Gelder et al., 2020). As a consequence, the steady rise of domestic violence during the coronavirus pandemic has surely come up as an additional and equally potent challenge at the global level. A surge in domestic violence is equivalently observed in the global South, including India (Mittal & Singh, 2020), and the current study is an attempt to explore this issue.

WHO defines intimate partner violence as 'a physical, sexual, or psychological coercive act by a current or former partner or spouse to a woman' (WHO, 2013). There are multiple psychological theorizations of intimate partner violence. Psychoanalytic theorists, for instance, emphasise on relational masochism to explain a woman's decision to persevere with an abusive partner. However, this theory has been thoroughly criticised (Fisher, 1986) for indirectly blaming the victims, reinforcing violence, and considering masochism as a feminine trait (Young & Gerson, 1991). Traumatic bonding theory (Dutton & Painter, 1993) attributes the power imbalance between the partners in explaining relational violence. When the abuse is intermittent, the attachment between the partners is strengthened through a negative reinforcement mechanism, that is, the removal of battering (Young & Gerson, 1991).

Feminist scholars contend that the patriarchal system's gender-power dynamics is at the core of domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Yllo, 1993). Johnson and Leone (2005) referred to the term 'intimate terrorism' to refer to the violence emerging from the need to exert control over the partner; this male coercion functions as a 'resource' in controlling the partner (Goode, 1971). The status inconsistency (Yllo, 1984) between men and women is one valid predictor of domestic violence.

Thus, domestic violence results from 'cultural values, rules, and practices that afford men more status and power than women' (Torres, 1991). This explains why the pervasiveness of domestic violence differs across cultures and countries. For instance, in South Asian countries, the widespread prevalence of domestic violence has cultural roots in gender roles, asymmetrical gender expectations, patrifocal family system, sex difference in resources, and dowry practice (Ayyub, 2000; Khan, Townsend, & Pelto, 2014).

In India, the patriarchal dogma is evident in every sphere of life. In Indian families, males are referred to as *annadata* (the giver of food), which portrays the man-worshipping tradition and male's upper handedness (Bhattacharya, 2004). The National Crime Records Bureau, 2018 report revealed that 'Cruelty by Husband or his relatives' in the domestic space is the highest reported 'cruelty against women' and consists of 31.9% of the total reported cases. The dowry system is also one of the most crucial predictors of domestic violence in India (Menon, 2020; Srinivasan & Bedi, 2007); in 2018, 7,166 cases of dowry deaths were documented. Thus, domestic violence has been one of the prevailing gendered ailments of Indian society for long.

1.1 | Domestic violence during COVID-19 pandemic

Although the prevalence of domestic violence in Indian society has always been troublesome, it worsened at an alarming rate during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mittal & Singh, 2020). This aligns with the global rise of domestic

violence cases during this pandemic (Roesch, Amin, Gupta, & García-Moreno, 2020; UN-Women Report, 2020), often being referred to as the 'double pandemic' (Bettinger-Lopez & Bro, 2020), 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women, 2020; Ravindran & Shah, 2020), 'hidden epidemic' (Neil, 2020), and 'the other pandemic' (Nazri, 2020). In a recent review of the gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mittal and Singh (2020) noted a significant increase in the cases of domestic violence. There was also an evident lack of supportive policies and resources for these women, as they were disconnected from their support networks during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. But for these few attempts to study the prevalence and consequences of domestic violence, there are few studies on domestic violence cases in India and their potential impact on their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present paper attempts to fill this gap using a systematic review of newspaper reports of domestic violence cases during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 | METHOD

In order to explore the domestic violence crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic, we relied on the analysis of newspaper data of three Indian newspapers: *Dainik Jagran* (Hindi), *The Times of India* (English), and *The Hindu* (English) during March–July, 2020. There have been limited published academic works and government survey reports on domestic violence cases. It was also not possible to collect empirical data, and therefore newspapers were the only immediate source of knowledge in this matter. One major limitation of considering only newspaper reports to get an idea of domestic violence cases is that most of these newspapers consider and report only severe physical battering cases. They rarely cover instances of emotional abuse and sexual violence. Thus the reported cases only provide a glimpse of this pernicious scenario, whereas the real picture is no better than any another pandemic.

The reasons for choosing these newspapers were that they cover reports and news across the states and have a broad readership (Indian Readership Survey, 2019). Also, their online sites have a convenient search mechanism. For the current work, the following procedure of systematic review was followed.

2.1 | Choice of search engine

We used Google as the search engine for the present work. Google Search provides quite a few advanced search options (region, language, exact term, etc.) to get accurate results. Also, Google's indexing seems to be better than that of the other search engines available.

2.2 | Search term and strategy

For all three newspapers, the following search term format was used: 'domestic violence site:<site name>'. For example, in case of *The Hindu*, search term used was 'domestic violence' in the website www.thehindu.com. We also made use of the 'verbatim' tool options to get search results that contained the exact term 'domestic violence' in the article.

2.3 | Automation

Usually, Google Search returns 10 links per page and on average 25+ pages per search query, so it is not possible to collect the data manually. Therefore, we used a combination of Python (<https://www.python.org/>; programming language) script and a browser automation tool called Selenium (<https://github.com/SeleniumHQ/selenium/>) to go through all the search results automatically and calculate the number of articles published in following format:

MonthYear: Number (e.g., April 2020: 33).

2.4 | State-wise data

The url of each article returned from Google search was used to find state-wise data.

3 | FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

The derived data script provided a month-wise number of published articles on domestic violence in the last 10+ years.

The total number of articles published on domestic violence in these three newspapers in the months of April, May, and June of 2020 were higher than all the domestic violence articles ever published in these newspapers in these 3 months. Publication of so many articles itself shows the severity of the crisis.

The graphical representation of the data of these months from 2015 to 2020 is shown in Figures 1–3 and Table 1. Also, it is visible that many domestic violence articles were published in April and May of 2020 (Figure 4), whereas a declining pattern of published articles is observed from June; this might be because India announced the unlocking process, meaning a less restricted lockdown, from June 1.

A graphical representation of the number of articles published in the months of March–July, 2020, is shown in Figure 4. Overall, there has been a 47.2% increase in domestic violence complaints in India (Pandit, 2020, June 2).

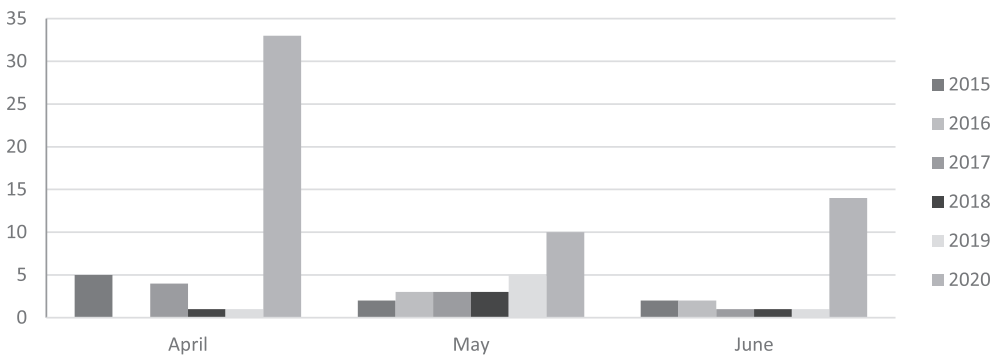


FIGURE 1 Number of news articles on domestic violence published in the months of April–June, 2015–2020, in *The Times of India*

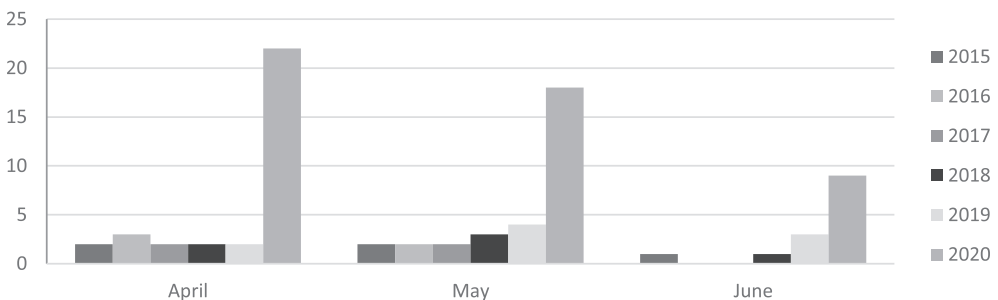


FIGURE 2 Number of news items on domestic violence in the months of April–June, 2015–2020, in *The Hindu*

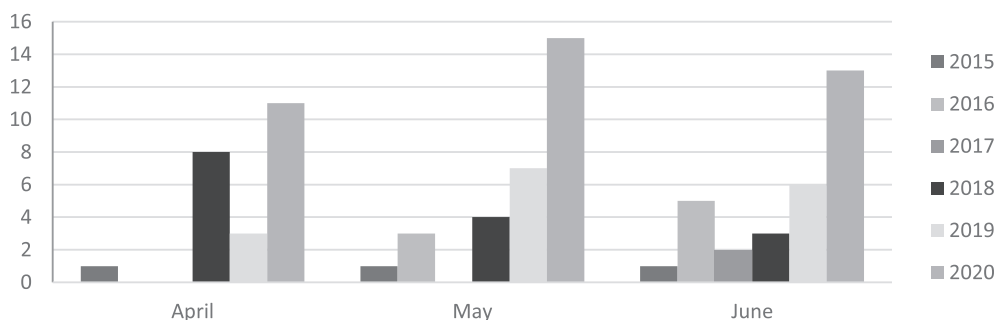


FIGURE 3 Number of news items on domestic violence in the months of April–June, 2015–2020, in *Dainik Jagran*

	<i>The Hindu</i>	<i>The Times of India</i>	<i>Dainik Jagran</i>
March	4	4	9
April	33	22	11
May	10	18	15
June	14	9	13
July	1	2	6

TABLE 1 Reports of domestic violence across the 5 months of pandemic (March–July 2020) published in three newspapers, *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *Dainik Jagran*

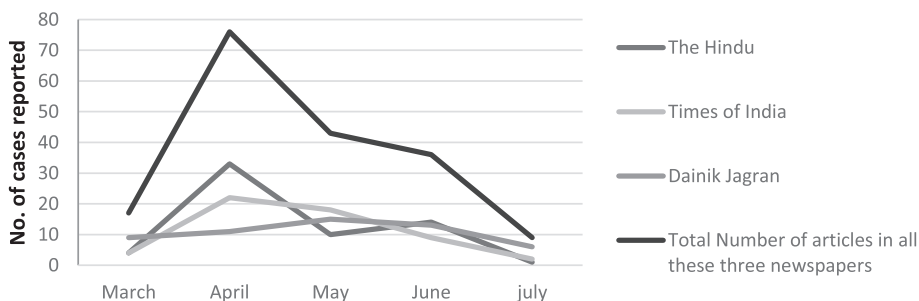


FIGURE 4 Reports of domestic violence during the 5 months of the pandemic (March–July, 2020) published in three newspapers *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, and *Dainik Jagran*

A state-wise analysis was also conducted. In *The Hindu*, the reports are encoded in a merge of city-wise and state-wise manner. In *Dainik Jagran*, it was comparatively easy to detect the states' pattern since the reports are arranged state-wise. It was not possible to arrive at any conclusion regarding the state-wise pattern following newspaper data since the state-wise data was contradictory across newspapers. In *The Hindu*, we got a fair number of reports from southern states, especially Tamil Nadu. In *Dainik Jagran*, no cases were found from the north-eastern and southern Indian states. Most of the reports in *Dainik Jagran* are based on the cases from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, Haryana, and Uttarakhand; this is somewhat in consonance with the National Legal Services Authority report, which indicates most domestic violence cases during lockdown were from the states of Uttarakhand and Haryana (Das, Das, & Mandal, 2020) and the National Commission for Women's concern over rise in domestic violence cases during the lockdown (Mittal & Singh, 2020).

From these findings, one can understand that there has been an alarming increase in domestic violence cases in India. This might be attributed to many factors.

Deprivation, for instance, is a determinant of both the frequency and the severity of domestic violence (Evans, 2005). World Report on Violence & Health 2002 (WHO, 2002), for instance, mentions poverty as the greatest risk factor for intimate partner violence. The lockdown in India has inevitable, 'unintended' (Ravindran & Shah, 2020), and negative consequences in its economy despite government reliefs (Ray & Subramanian, 2020). Loss of employment (Sharma & Sharma, 2020) and the resulting distress have resulted in aggravated domestic violence instances in India (Jha, 2020).

Looking at the trends of the reports, it can be noticed that after the opening of alcohol shops (Agnihotri, 2020; Chakravarty, 2020), there was an additional surge in familial violence. Based on a newspaper report on Uttar Pradesh (Agnihotri, 2020), the cases of domestic violence complaints on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd May were 29, 34, and 34, and the number of complaints on the 4th, 5th, and 6th May was 92, 123, and 143. This further confirms the close connection between alcohol abuse and domestic violence (Galvani, 2006).

The situation in India was further worsened because domestic violence victims were not able to come out of their houses and get away from the abusive situation due to strict lockdown in the initial months of the pandemic, a situation popularly referred to as 'locked down with the abuser' (Mohan, 2020, March 31). The list of abusers includes husbands and other relatives, including other women such as mothers-in-law. Notably, Ellsberg, and colleagues (2001) found that among women, temporarily leaving the abusive partner is one of the most common strategies to deal with violence. As a consequence of the strict gender roles, in some of the geographical areas and parts of Indian society women are not often allowed to go out of their houses anywhere other than to office or school. Thus, while for essential purposes men got the opportunity to step out of their houses, women were simply confined to their domestic space. Thus, not being able to leave the place of conflict might also explain the brutality that women encountered in terms of physical violence (Kumar, 2020a) also the suicide cases (Kumar, 2020a, 2020b; Saggi, 2020). The connection between getting locked down with the abuser and surge in domestic violence cases is supported by the drop in reports of domestic violence in June and July, after the unlocking process started.

4 | CONCLUSION

Although the coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic does not differentiate between genders in its clinical impacts, the socio-psychological consequences of the pandemic might also be mediated by one's gender. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a great crisis for the life and living of the entire world populace. Its impact on women, however, has been unprecedented and worse. Home containment, which was seen as the most effective method to protect the health and well-being of the general public, has led to increased suffering for women. While women were free from out-of-home violence acts due to the nationwide lockdown, they were increasingly exposed to the violence within their homes without much socio-legal support to help them. The steep rise in the domestic violence cases reported in the national news dailies in India is a clear indication of the trend that the domestic space is still unsafe for a majority of women. It must also be noted that while the risk of this pandemic will be over and the lockdown would be lifted, the scars of the violence would be permanent for the affected women. Although the present study presents evidence for an increase in domestic violence in India, a multi-fold increase in domestic violence cases is reported all over the globe (Evans, Hawk, & Ripkey; Mittal & Singh, 2020; Tadesse, Tarekegn, Wagaw, Muluneh, & Kassa, 2020; Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020). This is strong evidence of gender-related disparities in every society. The outcomes of this study warrants not only for strict and effective legal provisions to help these women but also call for the attention of scholars and mental health professionals to study and design effective interventions so as to educate and prepare a gender-egalitarian society that can shatter the existing power hierarchy based on gender. Not only the government and law enforcement agencies but also the non-governmental organisations and the general public must come together to create conditions in which reaching out for help is made easy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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