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Letter to the Editor

Despite the known negative health impact of VAWG, India fails to protect women from the shadow pandemic



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With over 256 million infections and 5.1 million deaths worldwide as of November 19, 2021, COVID-19 has severely impacted people's physical, mental, and sexual health. Contrary to expectations, though, suicide rates were either stable or lower than expected (Tandon, 2021a). The gendered nature of the pandemic was visible everywhere. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weak underbelly of the global economy and the unpreparedness of public healthcare systems (Tandon, 2021b).

COVID-19 was particularly harsh on women in South Asia, which also witnessed high infections and death rates. In Bangladesh, the government adopted the death penalty to curb rape (Sifat, 2020). In India, violence against women and girls (VAWG), particularly domestic violence (DV) increased, as stay-at-home locked women down with their sexual oppressors. Loss of jobs added to the vulnerabilities of women, particularly in homes affected by alcoholism and substance abuse (Vora et al., 2020).

VAWG has spurred psychological problems for women, such as depression, anxiety and perceived stress (Indu et al., 2021). This trend is largely in line with the globally-documented negative impact of VAWG on health, including a US lifetime cost of rape estimated at USD 122,461 per victim (Peterson et al., 2017) and widespread mental health disorders.

Despite existing knowledge that natural disasters, including pandemics, were gendered, India failed to protect its women from violence on multiple planes, including individual, governmental and institutional levels.

In patriarchal India, female safety is associated with the security offered by the four walls. However, homes became unsafe for women during the lockdown, as work-from-home males vented their frustration and stress on their partners and children.

Though individuals failed to create safe havens at home, India also has a surfeit of dedicated government institutions for disaster management and women, such as the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the National Council for Women (NCW) and the Ministry for Women and Children. Though overall VAWG crime numbers fell during the pandemic (Table 1), India failed to step-up support for its female population.

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Between March–November 2020 (KPMG, 2020), the government announced three economic packages amounting to INR 24.35 trillion (USD 328.8 billion). Of this, about INR 300 million (USD 4.05 billion) was set aside for the Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) account holders. The PMJDY is a financial inclusion programme operated through banks. During COVID-19, 200-million female PMJDY account holders were supposed to receive INR 1500 (USD 20) in equal instalments over three months. However, 40% of the account holders could not avail of these benefits, either because their accounts were dormant or they had limited access to banks (Patel et al., 2020).

Similarly, the Nirbhaya Fund could utilise only INR 19 billion (63.45%) of INR 30 billion released since its inception in 2013. The Fund aims to enhance safety and security for women by providing a one-stop facility for medical aid, legal and psycho-social counselling, and a temporary shelter for VWAG victims. So far, 700 one-stop facilities have been set up. This translates into one facility per 817,837 women since India's female population was 586.4 million, according to the 2011 Census.

Institution-wise, the World Bank signed a USD 1-billion fast-track COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project with India. However, none of it was for supporting women, the victims of the shadow pandemic. Among other things, this sum was meant to set up isolation wards—very similar to those where unsuspecting female victims were getting raped during the pandemic.

In sum, India needs a replicable template for national emergencies and normal circumstances to support its women from the horrors of VAWG.

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Conflict of interest

None.

Table 1
COVID-19: Incidence of Rape in India.

COVID-19: Incidence of Rape in India						
Year	Murder, Rape/Gang Rape and Rape	Attempt to Rape	Sexual Assault	Insult to Modesty	Domestic Violence	Total Crimes
2019	283	3944	88367	6939	553	405861
2020	219	3741	85392	7065	446	371503
Change %	-22.61	-5.15	-3.37	1.82	-19.35	-8.47

Source: National Crime Records Bureau, India.

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