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Impact of Covid-19 on Domestic Violence in South Asia

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Abstract *Domestic violence, rooted in patriarchy and conservatism, significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting a challenge to gender justice. This study examines the pandemic's impact on domestic violence in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, using an exploratory mixed-methods approach. In-depth interviews (IDIs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with practitioners and experts, alongside a web-based survey with field-level practitioners and community members, revealed that domestic violence surged during the pandemic. Factors such as mobility restrictions, loss of livelihoods, and prolonged presence of men at home exacerbated violence against women and young girls. Additionally, increased household chores, school closures, and the absence of recreational activities led to heightened aggression. The findings highlight that domestic violence was a widespread issue across social classes in South Asia, reflecting the pandemic's deep impact on socio-economic and familial dynamics, with women and children bearing the brunt of this crisis.*

Key Words: Covid 2019, Domestic Violence, South Asia, Pakistan, Women

Introduction

Domestic Violence remains a significant issue of human rights violations and most of the time derives its roots from socio-cultural practices. The worldwide scenario of COVID-19 has appeared as a challenge for gender justice (Bhattacharya, 2020). As projected by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2020 during pandemic hours, these would increase by 20 percent among Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, the UN member countries total of 193. It has been over the last year that 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have faced rape or physical violence by an intimate partner somewhere in the world. It is

during the same period that less than 40 percent of all women who have ever experienced violence sought any form of help or reported the crime. Of those seeking help, less than 10 percent go to the police (UN Women, 2020).

Most victimized populations consist of women, girls, and children suffering from domestic violence (UNODC, 2019). The potential victims of domestic violence remained indoors during the time of COVID-19 because economic activities were shut down, and mobility was restricted and higher increasing the risk of victimization by family members.

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Considering the normative practices and prevailing pandemic situation of the South Asian countries, namely India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, this article found whether COVID-19 affects Domestic Violence.

Domestic Violence in India

Domestic violence in India is inescapable because of the large population and rural-urban division. According to the National Family Health Survey conducted in 2015-16, 33% of married women aged 15-49 face physical, sexual, or emotional violence from their spouses, while only 14% seek help and 77% never spoke about it. Of 14% who sought help, 65% reported violence to natal families, while only 3% went for police help ([Kumar, 2020](#)). The domestic violence level is higher in rural than in the city (55%), and it includes emotional violence as well as physical violence also, according to Nida et al. In the case of India, incidents of violence increased to huge levels during the periods of the Covid-19 pandemic. The National Commission for Women reported that domestic violence cases increased by 100% between March and May 2020 compared to the same period in the year 2019. The number increased from 607 in 2019 to 1477 in 2020. Similarly, a Delhi-based NGO reported a 50% increase in calls to helplines ([UN ESCAP, 2020](#)). The complaints of rape or attempted rape also rose from 02 to 13 during the Covid-19 ([Mittal and Singh, 2020](#)).

Domestic Violence in Bangladesh

Domestic violence in Bangladesh is perennial due to the patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society.

According to various analyses, by 2011, 87% of women had been subjected to domestic violence; however, this decreased to 72.6% in 2016 ([Rahman, 2019](#)). The decreasing trend however due to the reasons of illiteracy and lack of a proper reporting system makes such trends vulnerable. For example, among the total 72.7% of women subjected to violence by partners, only 2.1 reported it to the local leaders, and only 1.1% sought police assistance. The lockdown amid COVID-19 has increased the incidents of violence against women manifolds. BRAC is one of the

reputed non-government organizations that empowers human rights and provides legal services to the poor, has documented an almost 70% rise in violent incidents against females during March and April 2020 compared to the last year of the same period (HRW, 2020).

The economic crises that people were facing amid COVID-19 further exacerbated the situation of domestic violence. BRAC pointed out that 95% of people throughout the country have experienced a loss in income, while 51% of them have seen their income reduce to zero in March 2020. Domestic violence during the pandemic took a drastic turn as 397 women died due to the menace of domestic and sexual violence and out of these only 208 cases were filed, as indicated by one report. At least 975 women were raped ([BRAC, 2020](#) & [Manusher Jonno Foundation 2020](#)). The cases are worse in refugee camps. For example, in Cox's Bazar refugee camp, Rohingya women are more likely to suffer from increased cases of domestic and sexual violence compared to other areas. A report by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) indicates that one in four women and girls were survivors of gender-based violence from January to October 2020. Furthermore, 94% of the recorded gender-based violence was by intimate partners, which is higher than the 81% average indicated by 2019. ([Gerhardt, 2021](#)).

Domestic Violence in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is one of the low-crime societies in South Asia, but the incidents of sexual abuse are increasing. According to police statistics over 33,000 cases of violence against women and children were recorded from 2005 to 2016. Around 40% increase in incidents of rape and incest were recorded in the last ten years—from 1,463 cases reported in 2006 to 2,036 in 2016. ([Abeynaike & Shajehan, 2017](#)).

During Covid-19, the cases of domestic and IPV have risen.

The Covid-19 impact on the key populations PLHIV and SR organizations' survey indicates that 76.8 % of the respondents faced verbal abuse, while 7.8% and 5.6% of women faced physical and sexual violence.

According to the survey, other than parents (25%), and intimate partners (24%), the main perpetrators are neighbors (49%) with the lowest being police (10%) ([Care Consortium, 2020](#)).

Domestic violence increased by 17% during the pandemic as hospitals reported an increase in female patients suffering from injuries related to domestic violence and hotlines reported an increase in domestic violence calls. Likewise, a surge of 30% increase in child cruelty was also reported ([Hadad-Zervos, 2020](#)).

Pakistan: Domestic Violence

Multifaceted manifestation of violence exists in Pakistani society and negatively influence the well-being of various groups, particularly women and girls. The lifetime physical and/or sexual IPV prevalence data of various types of violence against women shows that it is at the rate of 24.5%.

Similarly, in the last 12 months, the percentage of physical and/or sexual IPV is estimated at 14.5%, while the rate of child marriages in Pakistan is estimated at 21%.

This puts Pakistan at 130 ranks on the gender inequality index and for the gender gap index, Pakistan stands at rank 143 ([UN Women, 2021](#)). About 70 to 90 percent of Pakistani women suffer from domestic violence. Girls and women in Pakistan are much worse than their counterparts worldwide; women in Pakistan find themselves subjected to discrimination in almost every sphere of life (Narjis [Rizvi et al., 2019](#)). The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18, which survey included a large sample of the population from four provinces and the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas, reported that 28 percent of women aged 15 to 49 years have experienced physical violence since age 15. Thirty-four percent of married and divorced women have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence ([Tariq and Bilber, 2020](#)). There was a 25 percent increase in reports of domestic violence during the COVID-19 period, government officials say, as reported within the eastern province of Punjab as part of lockdown across that province. Authorities registered 3,217 cases between March and May, according to the Home Office, 2020. The

Digital Rights Foundation in Pakistan recorded an increase of 189 percent in complaints in their Cyber Harassment Helpline between January and February 2020, compared to March and April 2020. Among them, women constituted 74% (UN ESCAP, 2020).

For instance, the Ministry of Human Rights had its 1099 helpline, which records about 40,000 calls every month, report making only 13 calls in March 2020 on Gender Based Violence (GBV). The calls made through the helpline do not align with police figures on gender-based violence in the country.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as few as 25 calls on GBV were received at the 15 helplines during March 2020, while the police records show that 399 cases of murder against women have been reported/registered in the same period. Similarly, the police records in Sindh disclose an ever-increasing trend in violence against women with some ten cases of karo-kari (honor killing) registered in March alone ([Agha, 2020](#)).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research study follows an exploratory research design and uses mixed methods to achieve the desired objectives of the research study. The study triangulates primary qualitative and quantitative data and secondary research evidence/relevant literature. For the qualitative part of this research, In-depth interviews (IDIs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted. Whereas, for the quantitative part, a web-based survey was administered.

Types of Research Respondents and Sample

The target respondents of the research study were a) NGO members and b) Workers and experts from academia and representatives of the Men Engage alliance. The details are given as under.

The proposed sample for each of the countries regarding each of the research methods is given in Table 2. We gave due emphasis to the equal representation of women and men in the total sample size of the research. However, due to time constraints and the COVID-19 situation, we could not reach the proposed sample size fully. Because

of the unavailability of representative data, we dropped Nepal from the sampled country list. The actual sample is presented in the following table.

Table I

Country-wise Sample Size Details

Target Countries	Research Methods		
	IDI NGOs/Civil Society officials	Expert Interview academia and MenEngage Reps.	Quantitative Survey NGOs workers
Bangladesh	2	1	27
India	2	1	60
Pakistan	2	1	59
Sri Lanka	2	1	25
Total	8	4	171

Data

Analysis

Thematic data analysis was carried out for the qualitative data. Audio-recorded in-depth interviews (IDI) and key informant interviews (KII) were transcribed. The qualitative information analysis was conducted manually, and the thematic content material analysis approach, the usage of an iterative system to perceive themes and patterns, guided the analysis. During data analysis, the researchers compared codes and themes. Researchers conducted descriptive analysis for quantitative data. A simple analysis of every variable was done, and descriptive precis tables and charts based on frequencies from the database were prepared.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the study process. All the tools included a well-explained informed consent, the data was collected in an anonymous matter as well as the contextual social, cultural, and religious factors were duly considered.

Data Analysis and Discussion

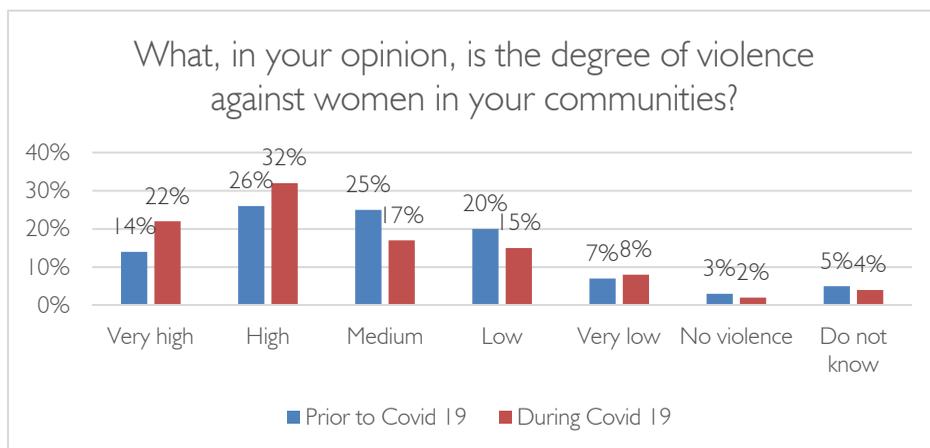
The results of this research have been presented both in qualitative and quantitative form. For the qualitative part, direct quotes from the respondents are used, while for quantitative data, graphs, and tables are presented mainly based on descriptive statistics.

Pre and Post-COVID-19 Domestic Violence Situation

Increase in domestic violence against women

In the quantitative survey, we ensured to capture the data for all the groups along with minorities. However, specifically following the lens of masculinity, the primary focus of this research was on women, girls, and children to see if men were perpetrators of violence at the domestic level. A greater number of respondents reported that domestic violence was "very high" (22%) during the COVID-19 situation compared to pre COVID-19 situation (14%). Similarly, a significant number of respondents said that violence was "high" (32%) against women during the COVID-19 situation.

Figure 1



Economic Stress and Children's Education

The data gathered from Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan showed that COVID-19-induced lockdowns and closure of schools and the emergence of online education also brought stress upon the families, particularly, in terms of availability of devices to ensure online classes and internet connection/ packages. This also turned into economic pressure. In addition, the economic pressures led to discrimination between girls and boys in the families whereby boys were more likely to receive support in terms of excess education. Similarly, families with lower socio-economic status faced greater economic pressure compared to families with higher socio-economic status.

"Children were having online classes. They could not afford internet packages. The poorest of the poor children did not have laptops or smartphones and thus lost the chance of education. Additionally, children were not trained to use online learning technologies. When available children had to travel to get internet signals. Male children had relatively greater access to education compared to female children" (IDI 1, Sri Lanka).

Study participants from India and Sri Lanka pointed out that the advent of online education and increased usage of mobile phones resulted in an increased level of pressure and stress at the household level. Children use mobile phones most of the time and cannot have quality time with their

parents. Apart from this, one of the respondents from India claimed that boys were privileged to use mobile phones of their parents and subsequent misuse of mobile phones by the boys had been reported from the communities.

"Children always remain online. Individualism has increased. It influenced socialization, and empathy and blocked everything because of all the time online. I have two children and they seem arrogant and give crazy arguments. This situation also increased stress levels and led to increased incidences of domestic violence." (IDI1, Sri Lanka)

"Online education was started by the government. Most of the time, boys received mobile phones from their parents to attend the classes. However, misuse of the mobile phone has increased during COVID-19" (IDI 1, India)

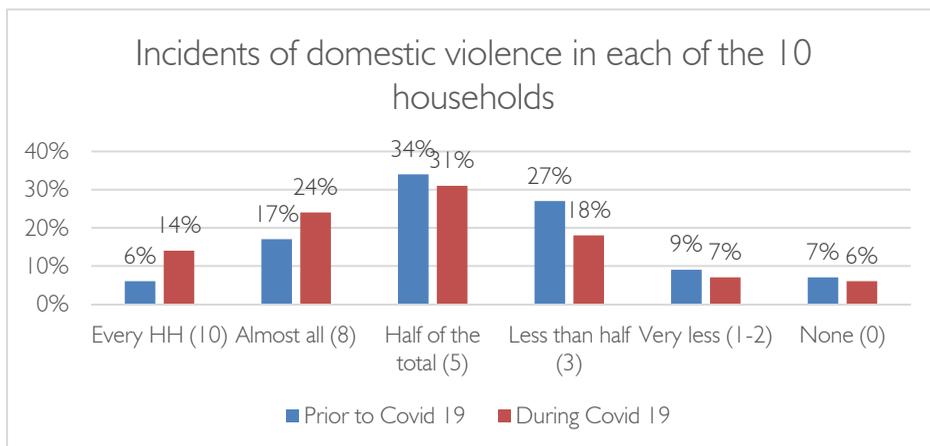
Prevalence of Violence at the Community Level

Apart from examining the situation of violence prior to and during COVID-19 for various groups, this research also investigated the overall situation of domestic violence at the household level, as a unit of analysis. The respondents were asked, what is the prevalence rate of domestic violence in each of the 10 households in their communities? Interestingly, prior to COVID-19, the prevalence of domestic violence in 10 out of 10 households was very low (6%). However, it increased drastically

during COVID-19 and was reported at 14%. Similarly, prior to COVID-19, the prevalence of domestic violence in 8 out of 10 was reported at 17%, whereas it was reported at 24% during

COVID-19. On average, the results show an increase of about 8% in the prevalence of violence at the household level.

Figure 2

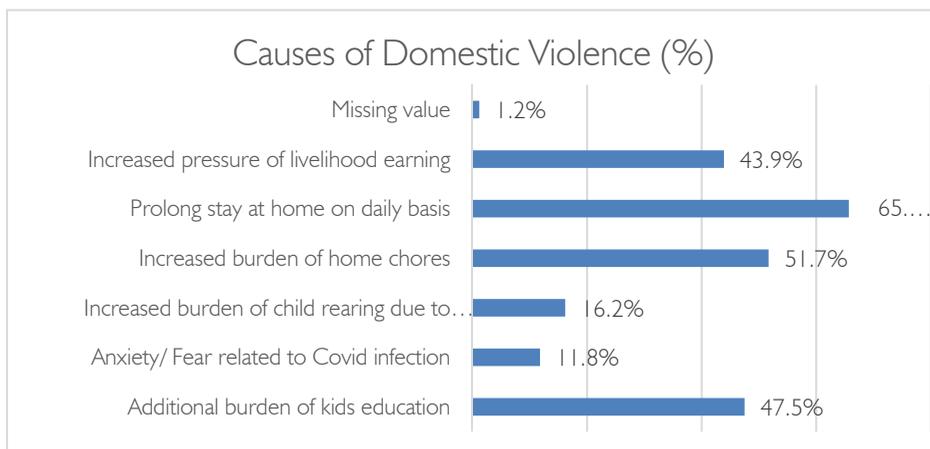


Causes of Domestic Violence

The qualitative data also corroborated the qualitative findings which stressed that one of the most important reasons behind the increase in domestic violence was the economic pressure due to loss of livelihood activities and prolonged stay of the family member at home. The qualitative data showed that 43.9% of respondents reported

increased domestic violence during COVID-19 because of "increased pressure of livelihood activities". In addition to this, a significant number of respondents (65.7%) chose the option of "prolonged stay at a home on a daily basis" as a cause of domestic violence and it was followed by the option "increased burden of home chores" with a response rate of 51.7%.

Figure 3



* Multiple response questions

Conclusion

Following the global COVID-19 pandemic, the governments in South Asia imposed partial or complete lockdowns and pleaded with their residents to stay home. But for domestic violence victims, home is a dangerous place. Because of the stay-at-home, women and children, who are most at risk of violence, found themselves locked in with their abusers in violent premises. No wonder, emerging evidence reported a drastic increase in domestic violence for the duration of the COVID-19 lockdown situation in South Asia. This study was conducted in four South Asian countries following the reports of a boom in the cases of domestic violence against ladies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The findings show that domestic violence across South Asian countries was pervasive and intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Patriarchal norms, socio-cultural practices, discriminatory gender roles and social expectations, and unequal power dynamics shaped gender inequalities and perpetuated domestic violence. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic affected the socio-economic and health lives of the people. Restricted social mobility and limited economic opportunities confined people within their homes. Besides, all the concerned governments in the targeted South Asian countries of this research invested maximum institutional resources to counter and respond to the pandemic situation. At the structural level, the pandemic situation led to the closure of schools, and offices, suspension of economic activities, and overburdening of the health system. At a societal level, social gatherings and recreational activities were badly affected. At the household level, people

spent a longer time at home, and this led to frequent interaction between family members. Compared to men across South Asian countries, women have limited mobility and access to recreational activities. Work burden, household chores, and demands from family members, husbands in particular, drastically increased for women and resulted in mental health crises for women. Men were reported as stressed out because of economic pressure to meet the livelihood needs of the family which led to their volatile behavior and increased use of alcohol and drugs. Increased sexual demands and frequent sexual encounters led to incidences of IPV, marital rape, and unintended pregnancies.

Recommendations

Future research should explore the long-term psychological, social, and economic consequences of domestic violence on survivors in South Asia, particularly examining how the pandemic has influenced their access to support services and recovery processes.

Investigating the potential of digital platforms, mobile apps, and telehealth services as tools for preventing and responding to domestic violence during crises like pandemics could provide insights into creating more accessible support systems for victims.

Further research should examine how factors like class, caste, rural-urban divides, and disability intersect with gender to influence domestic violence experiences during crises, providing a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability and resilience among diverse groups of women in South Asia.

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