

India: Stay Home, Stay Safe: Interrogating Violence in the Domestic Sphere

Monday 22 February 2021, by [SEN Rukmini](#) (Date first published: 23 June 2020).

Though India was quick to declare the pandemic-induced lockdown, how accommodative was it of the violent and gendered realities of the country?

The first social distancing advisory, which was released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on 16 March 2020, advised students to stay at home and laid down guidelines for instituting work-from-home wherever feasible. With the exception of essential travel, movement for everything else was stopped. However, while India was getting ready to prepare for a lockdown wherein all members of the household would be locked inside their respective homes for most of the time, there was no discussion on the implications this would have on the well-being of the everyday lives of women.

That home is not a safe place has been established through years of research relating to domestic violence in India (*EPW Engage* 2020). For instance, for many married women, for people (mostly women) with disabilities, as well as for those exercising personal choices—like that of choosing one's intimate sexual companion—words like “caged,” “trapped,” “confined,” and “control” have been synonymously used with the home. The National Crime Records Bureau 2018 data affirms that domestic violence tops crimes against women, with the “majority of the cases being registered under ‘cruelty by husband or his relatives’ at 31.9%. This was followed by ‘assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty’ at 27.6%. The cases of the ‘kidnapping and abduction of women stood at 22.5% and the rape cases comprised 10.3% of the overall crime figures” (*National Herald* 2020). Despite all of these widely available facts, there was no separate thought given to what impact a pandemic-induced forced lockdown could have on violence inside the home.

Domestic Violence: What Does It Constitute and What Does It Leave Out?

By the time Google created a doodle titled “Stay Home, Save Lives: Help Stop the Coronavirus,” news about the increase in domestic violence cases in India had started coming in (Hindu 2020). It is important to acknowledge that nearly at the same time, reports of increased domestic violence were already coming in from Spain and Italy, given that they had experienced the lockdown for a few weeks before India (Higgins 2020). We also had the National Commission for Women (NCW) coming out with figures pertaining to the same. According to the first report dated 3 April 2020, the NCW had received 257 complaints between 23 March 2020 and 1 April 2020, among which 69 were cases of domestic violence. This figure had increased dramatically from 30, between 2 and 8 March, indicating a twofold increase in the number of cases (Kumar et al 2020). Further figures suggested that between the beginning of March to 5 April 2020, the NCW received 310 grievances of domestic violence and 885 complaints for other forms of violence against women, many of which are domestic in nature, such as bigamy, polygamy, dowry deaths, and harassment for dowry (Kumar et al 2020). Expressing alarm on this horrifying global surge in domestic violence, the United Nations Secretary General has expressed alarm and appealed to world leaders to prioritise women's safety as they continue to fight the pandemic (Taub 2020). On 20 April 2020, the Delhi High Court, through a two-

judge bench directed the central and Delhi state governments to deliberate on measures to curb and protect women facing domestic violence and to effectively implement the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005 (*Economic Times* 2020c). Further, the NCW also announced a WhatsApp number on 10 April 2020, in addition to the online complaint links and emails, which are already operational (*Economic Times* 2020a).

By this time, the women's rights organisation Shakti Shalini had compiled a list of pan-Indian organisations who are responding to the current situation through phone/text/online support to victims of domestic violence during the lockdown (*Economic Times* 2020c). In one of the early initiatives taken by Uttar Pradesh (UP) police, there was a Hindi newspaper advertisement on 20 March 2020, saying "Suppress Corona, Not Your Voice," asking women to dial 112 to make complaints and for women police officers to make home visits subsequently (Bose 2020). Among some other initiatives taken by state commissions include the tele-counselling facility started by the State Commission for Women in Kerala (*Manorama* 2020). This was an early attempt to give relief to women suffering from stress and anxiety while staying safe within the house.. The Kerala government, through the Directorate of Women and Child Development, followed the previous initiative up with a WhatsApp number so that more women and children could complain (*Economic Times* 2020b). Additionally, the Odisha police, together with the state crime records bureau, has initiated a special drive, the Phone-Up Programme, across the state to deal with the problems of domestic violence in the crisis period (*Moneycontrol* 2020). In Punjab, there has been an over 21% increase in the number of crimes against women, with 700 cases of domestic violence being reported since the curfew and lockdown kicked in.

The method adopted to tackle this rise is for the police to keep a daily tab on crimes against women, and to coordinate with one-stop centres, which are manned by counsellors nominated by the Department of Social Security, Women and Child Development (Goel 2020). Overall, counselling services through phones and helplines have increased, and in the absence of a national policy to deal with increased instances of domestic violence, women's rights organisations, transgender and sexuality rights organisations are stretching themselves to act as the main support service (Konikkara 2020). Many more such initiatives, from other sources, have started. For instance, the WEFT (Women Entrepreneurs for Transformation) Foundation, a non-profit body working for women's empowerment, launched a new initiative called "Red Dot" under which citizens can identify a domestic violence victim by seeing a red dot on her palm and inform NGOs or authorities (NDTV 2020).

While the NCW figures are revealing and the multiple efforts that are being taken to address the situation through police, women's commissions, civil society organisations are extremely valuable, it is equally important to acknowledge that specific categories of women are facing different kinds of violence in relation to the domestic sphere. Some of these may, in non-pandemic times, not even be recorded as domestic violence. Moreover, women living with disabilities, Muslim women, LGBT+ individuals, women living with HIV-AIDS or sex workers, have been drastically impacted in terms of access to basic amenities and health care (Gupte and Dalvie 2020). According to a report from the International Disability Alliance collected from Odisha, Gujarat and Telangana Women with Disabilities Network (30 March 2020) there has been an increase in violence from partners and personal attendants as stress levels within the household have increased. There is also no community watch, and women with disabilities choose to keep quiet as they fear abandonment by family (International Disability Alliance Recommendations 2020). In some cases, caregivers are not able to reach those who depend on them. Moreover, access to medicine and groceries has been difficult, and therapy and rehabilitation have been put on hold (Bhandare 2020).

However, many of these experiences will not be considered as domestic violence (as per its strict definition under law), but it clearly is some form of violation within the domestic. Disaggregated

data on domestic violence against women with disabilities is not even provided by either NCW or NCRB, and thereby invisibilises specific kinds of experiences. Clearly, in a situation of crisis, the vulnerability of the already marginalised only increases. Sex workers in Mumbai, Kolkata and Madhya Pradesh have received no assistance from the government, and have barely any money to get by, feed their families, and buy medicines (Kajal 2020). Sex workers living in cramped brothels are also particularly susceptible to COVID-19. When a brothel is the “home,” it lacks a social support network. With regard to this, the NCW chairperson has suggested relocation, if necessary, in order to maintain social distancing (Kajal 2020). Violence that sex workers face within brothels (which are for all practical purposes their homes) will not even constitute domestic violence as per the PWDVA. Moreover, relocation from these crowded spaces, that is, brothels, to ensure social distancing, as suggested, will only mean increased surveillance by police into the lives of sex workers, which in any case would have been deeply affected economically due to the absence of clients during the lockdown.

With this juncture having given an opportunity to talk about domestic violence publicly, and in connection with a public health emergency it is important to have discussions on recognising various experiences as violation to human dignity happening as a result of being in a home, which in its dominant imagination, is heterosexual, monogamous and based on biological reproduction. The advisories that ask people to “stay home” only reinforce this stereotype of what a home looks like. The response to increased violence within the home, then, needs to broaden the meanings of both violence and the home.

Domestic Violence in Situations of Crisis

On 5 April, the United Nations Secretary General called for a global ceasefire and an end to all violence everywhere so that attention and resources could be focused on stopping the raging pandemic (UN Women 2020). According to the report, crowded homes, substance abuse, limited access to services and reduced peer support are exacerbating these conditions. The UN Policy Brief also continues to state that designating domestic violence shelters as essential services and increasing resources to them, have been proposed. One of the very important recommendations of this report is to ensure women’s equal participation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making. However, looking at and responding to the pandemic as a war only further adds onto the masculine rhetoric within an already hetero-patriarchal masculinity. Furthermore, a “ceasefire” means a temporary suspension of fights or a truce; this is definitely not a feminist response to violence within the domestic space.

Although in the current crisis, the UN has intervened comparatively early, however, it may have been prudent from the very beginning to make people aware of the possibilities of increasing violence. It may be relevant to mention here that in any situation of crisis, economic uncertainty or disaster, historically there has been a rise in domestic violence, as well as a long-lasting gendered impact on women. UNICEF’s technical note on COVID-19 and Harmful Practices refers back to the Ebola crisis wherein adolescent girls were disproportionately affected by the consequent emergencies (UNICEF 2020). Efforts to stop the Ebola epidemics had led to school closures and a loss of education; a decrease in access to reproductive health information and services; a loss of livelihoods and a contraction of social support networks. These seriously undermined strategies to end female genital mutilation and child marriage, and threatened the progress that has been attained previously. In the Indian context, women were affected more than men by the Bhopal gas disaster. While their children were born with congenital defects, they too suffered health complications, such as early menopause. And many who had lived in confinement due to the purdah system of female seclusion found themselves having to find paid work due to the death or incapacitation of their men folk (Johnson 2014). The Bhuj earthquake in Gujarat also had left many women in an especially vulnerable position, suffering not only the psychological damage of losing

family members, but also of economic insecurity at the loss of the family's income-earners (Christian Aid 2001).

There had also been an increase in the incidence of domestic violence against women. One of the organisations working for rehabilitation there had identified young mothers as facing particular traumas as a consequence of living in makeshift tents and lacking privacy (Christian Aid 2001). According to the International Federation of Red Cross study, early and sometimes forced, marriages are common in disaster settings (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2015). Forced marriages to "tsunami widowers" were reportedly commonplace in Sri Lanka after the 2004 South Asian tsunami, and even occurred in the same family. Many adolescent girls facing economic hard-ship in drought-affected areas of Kenya had recourse to transactional sex or entered child/early marriages. Research in Somaliland and Niger found that, after disasters, families considered that child/early marriage protected their daughters. (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2015)

Feminist Re-thinking on Violence and the Domestic

This moment makes us think about the need to increase facilities for women to report incidents of domestic violence in a situation of sustained restriction of mobility. In a pandemic situation how can reporting of domestic violence cases be made part of essential services? While there is a WhatsApp number that the NCW has initiated, for most women, getting access to a phone and calling for help or reporting violence might be a challenge in itself (Shivakumar 2020). Can there be other ways of expressing that one is experiencing domestic violence? At the medical store, grocery store (as per the UN Policy, as followed in Spain and France) or to the neighbour—in the difficulty of going to the police station

Moreover, it is essential to take a moment to rethink about all the kinds of everyday violations which women, belonging to different social locations, experience so that our conception of domestic violence itself can be broadened. That is, it is important to think that in these discussions of domestic violence, there is an invisibilisation of violations faced by women with disabilities, young adult women living with parents, women living with heterosexual flat mates, transgender persons forced to live within the home and detached from community, women who live by themselves, and different other forms of living arrangements. It is, then, also important to re-think that violence is not connected to marriage—pre, post, in the nature of, not because of it or due to the lack of it.

Finally, it is important to re-think the home at this juncture. While the women's movement over the years have critically engaged with domestic violence, the question remains whether the focus shifted from ensuring a less violent marriage (Vanita1999) to the right to residence in the matrimonial home through the PWDVA in 2005?

Thus, there is a need to re-conceptualise the home/domesticity itself. Interestingly, in the context of a bride burning case in Kolkata in 1996, the absence of a safe shelter for married women was confronted by women's rights activists. A married woman had died between a violent matrimonial home and a parental home unwilling to take her back after marriage. [1] A women's movement slogan that arose in this context in Kolkata was "Neither matrimonial home, nor parental home; women want their own homes. Which is that own home for women? One where there is no violator. Which is that own space for women, one where there is love." [2] This assumed binary of women's lives between the two space of maternal home or the matrimonial home, have definitely limited the possibilities of a discourse around a safe, liveable, affordable, domestic space for any woman. While economic independence is definitely a pre-requisite for this, however, it is not sufficient to even imagine a space like that at the cost of either of those homes. In the context of the pandemic, the subsequent lockdown and the close, continuous proximity in which women are having to co-reside

with abusive male relations (husbands, fathers, brothers, and companions) the need to talk about the domestic space is of vital importance. There is a need to start talking about a different kind of shared residences (not connected only to marriage)— such as a collective housing for women. Although working women's hostels, flat sharing by migrant adult women to cities pursuing higher education or jobs are present in substantial proportions, yet, it is as if these facilities are required only till the woman marries or is economically solvent finds a home of her own. The risks and difficulties of single women getting housing in big cities in India are real. It is therefore relevant to raise discussions around affordable civic/community, abuse-free secure, liveable housing, not connected with marriage, and not imagined only by the upper middle class economically earning women in some metropolitans in India. The discussion on domestic violence can no longer continue to happen in isolation from rethinking the discourse surrounding home.

Rukmini Sen is Professor in sociology at the School of Liberal Studies of Ambedkar University, Delhi. She is co-investigator from AUD, in the UGC-UKERI funded project "Feminist Taleem: Teaching Feminisms, Transforming Lives: Questions of Identity, Pedagogy and Violence in India and the UK" (2017-20) in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Engage

<https://www.epw.in/engage/article/stay-home-stay-safe-interrogating-violence>

Footnotes

[1] To read more details of the particular case referred to here, please read Roy (1996).

[2] The original Bengali slogan was: "*Shoshur bari, baper bari ar noy, meyer chai nijer bari. Konta meyer nijer bari? Jekhane nei otyachari. Konta meyer nijer basha? Jekhane ache bhalobasa.*"