

Forum: Special Conference on Post Pandemic World

Issue: The rise of domestic abuse and femicide in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

“One in three women worldwide experience physical or sexual violence mostly by an intimate partner”¹. Emerging reports from people on the front lines indicate that all forms of violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse, have increased since the COVID-19 outbreak. According to UN Women, this is the Shadow Pandemic that is escalating within the COVID-19 crisis.

Impeded isolation in the case of pandemics like COVID-19 is an unusual and frustrating experience that for many women entails being cut off from friends and family as well as regular, everyday activities. Family violence is likely to be significantly more likely as a result of actions like social isolation, staying put, limiting travel, and closing important local organizations. Additionally, women face financial difficulties brought on by job loss, reduced working hours, and stress from failed businesses, all of which enhance their risk of being harmed because they are forced to rely on family members and/or partners.

Women are now far more likely to experience domestic violence as a result of the confinement measures put in place as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Women have been trapped at home, isolated from their usual support networks like family and friends, unable to escape from family situations, and with limited access to facilities designed to help in times of crisis, due to COVID-19 restrictions that overlap with the tactics used by abusers in violent relationships. In some circumstances, abusers intensify aggression against women by using the restrictions to exert authority and control over their partners and further restrict access to resources and psychosocial assistance from both official and unofficial networks.

¹ "The Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19." UN Women, 2021, www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19.

DEFINITION OF KEY-TERMS

Femicide

“Killing of women and girls because of their gender”²

Patriarchy

“A society in which the oldest male is the leader of the family, or a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage”³

Violence

“Actions or words that are intended to hurt people”⁴

Domestic Abuse

“Cruel treatment of a person by someone who lives with them, that could include violence or other types of cruel behaviour”⁵

Gender Disparities

“Differences in women’s and men’s access to resources, status and well-being, which usually favour men and are often institutionalised through law, justice and social norms.”⁶

² "Femicide." European Institute for Gender Equality, <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1128>

³"Patriarchy." Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/patriarchy>

⁴"Violence." Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/violence>

⁵"Domestic Abuse." Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/domestic-abuse>

⁶"Gender Disparities." European Institute for Gender Equality, <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1162>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

COVID-19 : The “perfect storm”

Apparently, the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus was the "perfect storm" for the rise of domestic abuse and femicides. Imposing public health measures such as social isolation and quarantine is one of the key approaches to stop the spread of infection. Community "lockdown" tactics related to COVID-19 have included orders to stay at home to regulate the spread of infection to mandated and enforced family-only lockdown measures.

Immediately upon the pandemic's declaration, these limits were put in place, drastically altering the everyday life of many. Due to the constraints, a lot of employees who used to commute from home to work must now work from home. Since the implementation of strict measures against the rapid spread of COVID-19, there has been an increase in undesirable and unpredictable violent behaviours in relation to the crisis. The pandemic outburst, the consequences of the multiple lockdowns, and the economic repercussions have sparked extremely negative reactions in the community, including feelings of resentment, anxiety, fear of infection, and sadness. This crisis has lasted longer due to isolation, an increase in the number of infected people, and a lack of community resources.

There has been a sharp increase in domestic violence around the world at the same time when social isolation strategies have been put in place. In the worst situations, family members are frequently trapped at home for long periods of time with a violent perpetrator. During this pandemic, social isolation, confinement, and financial problems are some of the main causes of mental and emotional anguish and susceptibility. Global public health issues are mostly focused on the psychological discomfort brought on by the pandemic's fear. Pandemics create conditions that are conducive to the emergence or escalation of family violence due to the high levels of anxiety they cause.

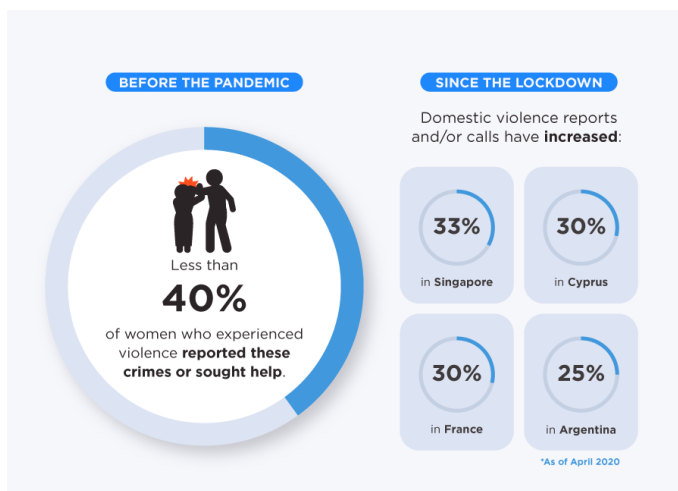


Figure 1: Statistics from UN Women showing the increase concerning domestic violence during COVID-19

As was mentioned before, there are some aspects of pandemics that make them particularly challenging for women. Women were restricted to their home as a result of social isolation methods and unable to get the customary support from friends and relatives in cases of them feeling unsafe in their own home. In addition, COVID-19-related instructions to stay at home have increased calls reporting domestic violence around the world. Along with an increase in social media dialogue on the subject, there has also been a rise in online searches relating to such violent domestic actions and intensified emotional reactions to domestic violence. Abusers will employ a variety of tactics to keep their partners or relatives under control when they suffer from their abusive behaviour, including social isolation, movement surveillance, and supervision or tracking of everyday activities. The sanitary tactics that are being promoted and encouraged by governments around the world in the context of COVID-19 in an effort to reduce rates of infection, provide perpetrators more power and validity in the demands they make on their partners and/or family.

The multiple factors contributing to the rise of domestic abuser

During this pandemic, social isolation, confinement, and financial problems are some of the main causes of mental and emotional anguish and susceptibility. Global public health issues are mostly focused on the psychological discomfort brought on by the pandemic's fear. Pandemics create conditions that are conducive to the emergence or escalation of family violence due to the high levels of anxiety they cause.

As was mentioned before, there are some aspects of pandemics that make them particularly challenging for women. Women may be restricted to their homes as a result of social isolation methods and unable to get the customary support from friends and relatives. During lockdowns, alcohol sales surged, and research indicates that drinking tends to raise the frequency of domestic violent behaviour against women. Furthermore, being in close quarters with male partners during lockdown provides women almost no autonomy, which can potentially contribute to an increase in domestic violence at home.

In many cases, the power dynamics in many households changed as a result of men losing their job posts and, thus, monthly income due to COVID-19. Some male figures were left feeling inadequate and powerless since they were unable to fulfil the stereotypical position of family provider. It has been proven that those unpleasant emotions experienced by men enhance domestic violence towards women. During COVID-19, law enforcement was overloaded with additional demands, and as a result of the inadequate instruction and lack of planning, this led to a reduction in the protection provided to women who had been the victims of domestic

abuse by their companions. This let the abusers feel more in authority and discouraged the victims from coming forward with their complaints.

Since the onset of the pandemic, there has also been a rise in domestic homicides, and especially femicides. Suicides were connected to both the outbreak of the virus and received domestic violence. The gravity of domestic abuse during COVID-19 is demonstrated by the number of femicides and suicides that occurred as a result of this violent societal phenomenon. Increased stress, financial difficulties, resentment, housing problems, employment, are potential violent triggers following disasters. These factors can cause relationships to become more tense. Additionally, after disasters, there are increased levels of mental distress for a number of causes, some of which may be related to familial violence. One of the causes of the widespread violence against women during catastrophes may be gender inequity. It is conceivable that women's pre-disaster social and economic circumstances contributed to their vulnerability to violence in the aftermath.

Gender Disparity

Gender disparity is one of the factors contributing to the widespread violence against women during catastrophes. Along with the social, political, and economic subjugation of women across society, these issues mostly revolve around unequal power interactions between men and women.

Social, economic, and behavioural factors, including age, religion, income, level of education, and alcohol usage contribute to women's disadvantage. The economic situation of women, which is likely to prevent them from having access to education, health care, or land ownership, further increases this post-disaster risk by placing them in a dependency on families and other relationships that may be violent. Women are particularly vulnerable to risk during catastrophes because in most cases, the societal norm imposes that they are responsible for looking after children, the elderly, and the sick, and they have limited access to facilities for mental, sexual, and reproductive health.

Thus, this is the situation especially in patriarchal societies where women are typically subordinate to men, and this contributes to the oppressive conditions that lead to the possibility of violence against women. A study in India⁷, where women are associated with the majority of care duties - similarly to most regions globally - indicated that women experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression than males do. This was ascribed to the higher expectations placed on them by having family members constantly present in the home.

⁷ Nour, Nawal. "Maternal Health Considerations During Disaster Relief." PubMed Central (PMC), 2011, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3100103/.

Moreover, according to a study on pandemic-generated fear conducted in Iran, women experience significant psychological anguish.

The view of the victim

Most victims have a tendency to think that abuse cannot be prevented, it is inevitable to escape and at least, partially the fault is theirs. Every time an abusive action takes place, the victims feel deceived by their intimate partner. This betrayal, combined with some form of violence, leaves the victim in emotional suffering and frequently suffers physical harm as well. The victim's physical and psychological condition indeed deteriorate. Particularly, victims frequently go through constant anxiety, insecurity, and fear as well as a sense of insecurity around their partners. Apart from that, they may suffer from a lack of confidence and low self-esteem as they may be emotionally and financially dependent on their abuser, are in a difficult position in order for them to be able to dissolve their marriage, feel endangered on a daily basis, afraid of the consequences of trying to leave the abuser, and engage in passive behaviour to shield others from experiencing further abuse.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Greece

Following the removal of pandemic-related sanitary regulations, the situation has constantly become worse in Greece, raising concerns about the Greek state's inability to handle the problem of safeguarding victims. Domestic abuse offences increased by more than three times in Greece between 2010 and 2020. The increase in femicides this year has brought police shortcomings in dealing with brutality against women to light, including claims that comments from authorities served as recommendations to reduce sentencing for potential offenders. Lawyers and activists have frequently emphasized how the common classification of femicides as "crimes of passion" promotes an environment where violence against women is tolerated. The Greek #metoo campaign, which gathered traction in 2021, is to thank for bringing violence against women and abuse experiences into the public spotlight for the very first time. While this is unquestionably a step forward, it has also highlighted the unhealthy, toxic macho culture and misogyny that permeate Greek society. Reports of abuse that have reached the media have sparked a heated debate, highlighting Greek society's reluctance to let go of archaic ideas about gender roles in society and prejudice.

Brazil

One of the nations most severely impacted by the COVID-19 virus is Brazil. Simultaneously, domestic abuse has increased significantly in the country. Domestic abuse survivors were obliged to stay at home with their abusers due to the restrictive measures and, especially due to confinement protocols. This violence, which primarily affects women and their spouses, frequently concludes even in murder. Lockdowns authorised by the government and dimmed economic outlooks made COVID-19's effects on femicide and domestic violence more severe in Brazil. Numerous couples were made to leave the workforce, making the situation at home more tense. Additionally, women were separated from external assistance programs both physically and mentally.

Mexico

Mexico is a country where violence is frequently observed. The situation remains the same for the case of women and the domestic violence they oftenly face. Mexico has witnessed a rise of domestic abuse and femicides during lockdowns and in the post pandemic era. In 2021, 1.004 cases of femicide were reported in the country, with that being a 135% increase from the reports of 2015.⁸ The Mexican population demands by the administration effective actions to eliminate the issue and a plethora of riots and protests have been organised as a way to publicly condemn domestic violence and femicide.

UN Women

UN Women, an organisation of the United Nations, advocates for the rights of women all around the world. Specifically, regarding the rise of domestic abuse and femicides in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation has condemned such acts, advocating for the countries' governments to react to this problem immediately. UN Women was the one to introduce to the international community the term "Shadow Pandemic" when referring to the issue, as this parallel to the COVID-19 crisis is equally important yet it is often disregarded.

European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)

The European Institute for Gender Equality, established in 2006 in the context of the European Union (EU), aims to eliminate gender inequalities while advocating for women's rights and aiming for their prosperity. The EIGE has gotten truly involved in the issue of femicides, releasing multiple guides and literary reviews that emphasise the cruelty and explain the patriarchal beliefs rooted in those crimes.

⁸ "Understanding the Dynamics of Femicide of Mexico." Vision of Humanity, 6 June 2022, www.visionofhumanity.org/understanding-the-dynamics-of-femicide-of-mexico/.

Futures Without Violence

Futures Without Violence is a non-profit organisation that aims to eliminate violence rooted in households with the victims being women and children. The NGO's agenda covers a wide range of aspects that are related to the issue. Specifically, Futures Without Violence advocates for the creation of clear policies that truly prevent and eliminate such violence towards women. In addition, the organisation seeks for the engagement of the male population in order for them to get informed and raise awareness for the phenomenon.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

DATE	DESCRIPTION OF EVENT
December 20, 2006	The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is founded
July 2010	The UN Women organisation is founded
December 18, 2013	The United Nations' General Assembly adopts the Resolution A/RES/68/191, entitled "Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls"
March 11, 2020	The outbreak of COVID-19 virus is declared a pandemic
July 1 st , 2021	The Chinese government introduces the registration system for domestic violence
2021	The Greek #MeToo movement is empowered

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

Resolution A/RES/68/191⁹

This resolution of the United Nations' General Assembly, passed on the 18th of December 2013 takes into consideration the violent behaviour that women and girls frequently experience and encourages all Member States to take initiatives and implement measures regarding this important issue.

UN Women Submission to the forthcoming Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences on "Femicide to be presented at the 76th session of the General Assembly"¹⁰

This report submitted by UN Women in 2021 extensively elaborates on the significant crisis that has been occurring since the COVID-19 outbreak, the one regarding femicides and domestic abuse. The report covers a variety of states where the problem is more frequently observed and it highlights the psychological and physical pressure that women have been receiving, calling the General Assembly to take action.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

China's registration system for domestic violence

The system was put into force on July 1st 2021. Based on that, Chinese citizens wishing to get married have the opportunity to complete a specific form and get informed about whether their partner has been reported to be violent towards their relatives or to any past spouse. This initiative could be really helpful when it comes to preventing violent incidents in the household

The global MeToo movement

In the post pandemic society, the MeToo movement has been more empowered than ever. Since the COVID-19 restrictions generated a significant rise of domestic abuse and femicides

⁹ "Taking action against gender-related killing of women and girls." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 11 Feb. 2014, www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CCPCJ/Crime_Resolutions/2010-2019/2013/General_Assembly/A-RES-68-191.pdf.

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Office, UN Women, 2021, www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/SR/Femicide/2021-submissions/UNs/un-women.pdf

globally, the international community found the strength to declare and condemn such acts through the MeToo movement; a movement observed all around the world. In this way, there was a rise of awareness for the issue that managed to reach the public eye and the news industry. Because of the movement, many women felt confident to report incidents of domestic abuse that they had experienced since they were able to find the necessary support from a community that respects them. The MeToo movement contributed to the advocacy regarding the implementation of preventive measures to regulate the problem and was a motivation for the international political scene to include the mitigation of the rise of domestic violence and femicides in its agenda.

Anti-femicides protests in Mexico

As mentioned before, violence against women is frequent in Mexico. In order for the citizens to raise awareness for the problem, multiple protests occurred in Mexico City (the state's capital) . Those protests aimed to the remembrance of the victims of femicides and the expression of discontent and anger regarding the absence of reaction by the government. Many were the occasions when the protesters had to face law enforcement officers that used violence in order to control the crowd. In any case, the protests were a collective response to the apathy of the government concerning the issue and the tolerance of such cruel gender based acts.



Figure 2 : Mexicans protesting against gender-based violence in 2020

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Creation of a database

One approach is the creation of a national database on abusers that would enable people to look up the history of their partner's abusive behaviour. Consequently, the threat to victims is potentially reduced. Additionally, this database may offer insightful information for pending cases and may assist in domestic violence mitigation. In that way, the cases could be limited as the potential victims prevent themselves from such situations through the informative database.

Reformation of legislation

Due to security and safety concerns, but also the absence of confidence in the legal system, victims of domestic violence in certain nations choose not to press charges after reporting the incident. Domestic abuse will be further prevented by renewed, effective legal frameworks that would expedite the court action procedure while also guaranteeing the progression of the examination, despite whether the victim has withdrawn the accusations. Once victims submit a report, it is crucial that law enforcement and social services demand rapid court action in accordance with the determined risk. With the reformation of current legislation, the potential loopholes that may currently exist will be eliminated, leaving no space for the abuser to not be properly punished.

Provision of psychological support

It is imperative to understand that incidents of domestic violence deeply affect the victim. As it has been previously mentioned, the impact that those acts have on women is truly severe with their mental health being the predominant aspect that is influenced. Therefore, the provision of psychological support would be fruitful for victims' well-being. That could include the establishment of special institutions where affected women could be consulted after the violent incident and restore their psychological status. In addition, the creation of specific hotlines could be effective as victims would be able to immediately seek assistance upon the matter.

The approach of education

The behaviour of abusers in those situations is rooted in how they have been educated as well. If educational systems are based on stereotypical beliefs and patriarchy, it is reasonable, yet not tolerable, for the occurrence of numerous incidents related to domestic violence towards women. Thus, it is important for the population to receive holistic and open-minded education stimulus so that eventually gender disparity can be eliminated and furthermore such brutal acts as well. Educational systems without stereotypes, embracement of the macho culture and toxic masculinity; systems that do not project men as the leader of the household and the society.

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