**COVID and gender-based violence**

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We are a part of a socio-economic system that fails to account for the (unpaid) reproductive services provided by women. We feed on the misguided patriarchal gender hierarchy to further skew the power imbalance in favor of men. Any internal or external threat to male dominance is met with resistance, violence against women and aggression. During COVID-19 lockdown, new challenges were faced by everyone, especially women. They were in a precarious situation as they were stuck at home with their abusers.

In a typical Pakistani household, males are known to be the ones in charge of financial matters and household decision-making. In contrast to this, women are generally expected to dedicate themselves to domestic duties and be subservient to their ‘Majazi Khuda’ husbands. According to the UN Women’s “Progress of the World’s Women 2019-2020” report, an average Pakistani woman spends 11 hours on household chores and reproductive work for every hour that a man dedicates to similar work at home. As problematic as sexual division of labor already is, the situation gets worse when we account for the fact that a woman’s engagement in reproductive work and elderly care is often overshadowed by a man’s monetary contributions to the household. This flaw in our system not only impedes the progress of women in our society, but also gives rise to unrest and incidents of violence whenever the household power dynamics are challenged.

A research on prevalence of “Intimate Partner Violence in Pakistan: A Systematic Review” shows that up to 84% of women participants have been psychologically abused by their husbands in their lifetime, while 77% and 80% of women in other studies have confirmed that they were targets of sexual and physical violence, respectively. According to Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS 2017-18), 16% of women had faced some form of physical IPV, while 1 in 4 women had undergone emotional and psychological abuse at least once during the 12 months preceding the survey alone. It is important to note that these statistics provide conservative estimates of violence prevalence in Pakistan, as women are fearful of the consequences of sharing sensitive information about their marital lives in patriarchal societies.

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So why are the issues of power imbalance and IPV more relevant now than ever before? Since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, things have taken a turn for the worse in many places: Cyrpus and France recorded an increase of 30% in domestic violence reports, while our neighbour India experienced a twofold increase in incidents of violence during this pandemic according to a report “Gender and Pandemic – Urgent call for action” by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Ministry of Human Rights (Pakistan) acknowledged in its report “Gendered Impact and Implications of COVID-19 in Pakistan” that incidents of domestic abuse can go up in this pandemic. Even though Pakistan lacks a national database of IPV incidents reported during this pandemic, Aurat Foundation produced a report ‘Violence against Women & Girls in the Times of Covid-19 Pandemic’ after conducting a study on women from 25 districts across Pakistan and found that 2297 of the participants had undergone abuse of some form in 2020. Another crucial observation in this report highlighted the fact that the highest number of incidents of violence coincided with the peak of COVID-19 pandemic in July 2020.

Despite a lack of IPV data for Pakistan, the trends in other countries along with numerous informal accounts of local women do point toward a likely increase in abuse cases instigated by intimate partners. Moreover, if we delve deeper into sociological and criminological theories that deal with transgression, we find overwhelming support for this claim. Due to lockdowns, movement has been restricted and therefore, women find themselves trapped in homes with their abusers.

Exposure Reduction Theory posits that IPV incidents can be reduced by decreasing the amount of time victims spend within the proximity of perpetrators. Using this line of reasoning, we can further assert that when both victim and the aggressor spend most of their time together at home, just like during this pandemic, it becomes extremely difficult to prevent incidents of abuse.

Increased levels of stress also trigger episodes of violence at home. Covid-19 has taken a toll on mental health and psychological wellbeing. While wives are dedicating even more time to reproductive work than they did before, there is a mounting pressure on husbands as their livelihood, and consequently their dominance in the household, is under constant threat. As a result, staying at home with abusive husbands coupled with a spike in stress and anxiety levels can be a recipe for disaster.

There is a dire need for the local, provincial and national governing bodies to work together and devise effective institutional provisions aimed at safeguarding women from domestic violence. While Pakistan did start recognizing marital rape as a punishable offence back in 2006, the country still has a long way to go in its fight against domestic abuse; from raising awareness about different forms of domestic violence and coercive control, to collecting accurate data on IPV, more work needs to be done to instill systemic changes that can protect and support women. Until we push for social and institutional reforms to support victims of abuse and encourage conversations around women health and wellbeing, almost half of our population will continue to live in fear, distress, and agony.

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