

Analyzing The Shadow Pandemic in India Through Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity

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Abstract

The SARS-CoV-2 virus caused a major global crisis, affecting communities worldwide with the COVID-19 pandemic. To stop the pandemic the government was forced to declare lockdown. While the intention behind lockdown measures was to keep citizens safe, they unintentionally made existing gender inequalities even worse, especially for women. This article delves into the issue of domestic violence in India during the COVID-19 crisis, taking a close look at it through Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. It would explore how lockdowns intensified domestic violence, showing how COVID-19 and gender-based violence collided. It would also shed light on the challenges faced by women and the societal structures that perpetuate violence and emphasize the urgent need for gender-sensitive responses to crises.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, shadow pandemic, domestic violence, gender inequality, hegemonic masculinity, lockdown measures

SARS-CoV-2 emerged as a global crisis fathoming the borders with the first case identified in the city of Wuhan in China. On 30 January 2020, World Health Organization declared this global crisis as, a 'public health emergency of international concern. In India, a complete lockdown was imposed on 24 March 2020 after the declaration of COVID-19 as a national disaster.¹ (Meena:2001).

Since time immemorial, it has been witnessed that disasters harshly affect the marginals, the poor, and the weaker sections of society, and a catastrophe has a huge impact on women. Covid 19 was no exception. Though the Indian Constitution gives equal rights to both men and women in every field, gender roles constitute how human experiences are shaped in society and Covid 19 pandemic augmented already existing gender discrimination within society. This led to a shadow pandemic existing within the society parallelly with the Pandemic.

Elin Martínez, a Senior Researcher in the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, has rightly highlighted that the pandemic has offered us something more than what it appeared to be. In this context, the insecurities of women and children became evident during the Covid 19 phase. The primary reason for this has been that with the advent of the pandemic, the world followed the policy of 'stay-at-home' and 'shelter-in-place' which primarily aimed to keep us safe. But for countless women worldwide, home didn't turn up to be a safe zone. They suddenly found themselves shut in with their abusers. Confinement fostered tensions in many homes. The jobless partners with immense stress and tension to run the household and the escalating anxiety among them made them abusers. India is no exception to this. With already high rates of domestic

violence cases, situations of women and children became worse during the pandemic. Using Connell's hegemonic masculinity, this article would analyze the shadow pandemic in India.

Two Pandemics together?

The term "pandemic" is a global outbreak caused by a strain of a virus previously unknown to the human population. The term "pandemic" is also used to capture the global pervasiveness of violence against women and girls and the high rates of associated morbidity and mortality.¹ (The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women), 2014).

But in India, violence against women in India isn't even looked upon as violence. It is never an exemplar of women's equality, according to the National Family Health Survey (NHFS-4, 2018), every third of woman in India suffers sexual or physical violence at home. Worse, 27 percent have experienced physical violence since the age of 15. The problem is that a lot of women and girls accept it and treat it as a part and parcel of their lives due to our patriarchal setup," says Bhakti Chowdhury, a counselor with Women Power Connect, a pan-India advocacy body on women's issues. ¹(Lal: The Diplomat:2020).

As the Covid 19 engulfed one country after another over the past two years, most governments focused on the pandemic, health-related issues, and the disease's economic and financial ramifications. The social issues got ignored completely. The pandemic required people to distance from one another and confine themselves at home. And this confinement, and separation had grave social underpinnings. Confinement led often to increasing isolation and this resulted in increasing domestic violence and affected women's physical, mental, and emotional health. During the Covid 19 lockdown, violence amplified in relationships where there existed a clear power dynamic. Globally, nearly 243 million women and girls between 15 to 49 years were subjected to sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence. A survey of 122 community organizations shows that 85% of them reported a rapid increase in violence against women and girls between March – September 2020.

The National Commission of Women (NCW) received 13,410 complaints of crimes against women between March – September 2020, of which 4,350 were domestic violence. Complaints peaked in the March–May period, with 1/3rd of complaints being filed in these 3 months alone. ¹(Press Information Bureau Website, Govt. of India.)

The increasing instances of domestic violence beget the question of whether homes were really safe places for women. It has been witnessed that unequal relationships exist whenever patriarchy and hierarchy kick in," says Ranjana Kumari, director of the Centre for Social Research. UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka named the violence against women and girls "a shadow pandemic."¹ (Lal: The Diplomat:2020). Shadow pandemic refers to a pandemic that remained in the shadow of other issues considered to be more important, with the potential to affect a huge section of the population globally. So two pandemics existed parallelly and the worst case was that they interacted with each other so much that it made lives vulnerable for many women. At this point, an example could be cited. In the dead of the night, a plaintive call was made to a crisis intervention counselor at the Centre for Social Research, a New Delhi-based non-profit working for gender equality. It was made by an abused lady and she narrated her story in the way described below.

'I'm calling you from the ration shop as I'm scared to talk from home. My husband lost his factory job a month ago and is always in the house. He beats me in front of the kids, doesn't help around [the house], and flings the liquor bottle at me if I try to reason things with him. I'm trapped in my own house. Please help!'" ¹(Lal: The Diplomat:2020).

The call was among dozens of such the organization has been flooded with those days. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic showed all, a glimpse of deeply engrained and unequal gendered social structure that actually

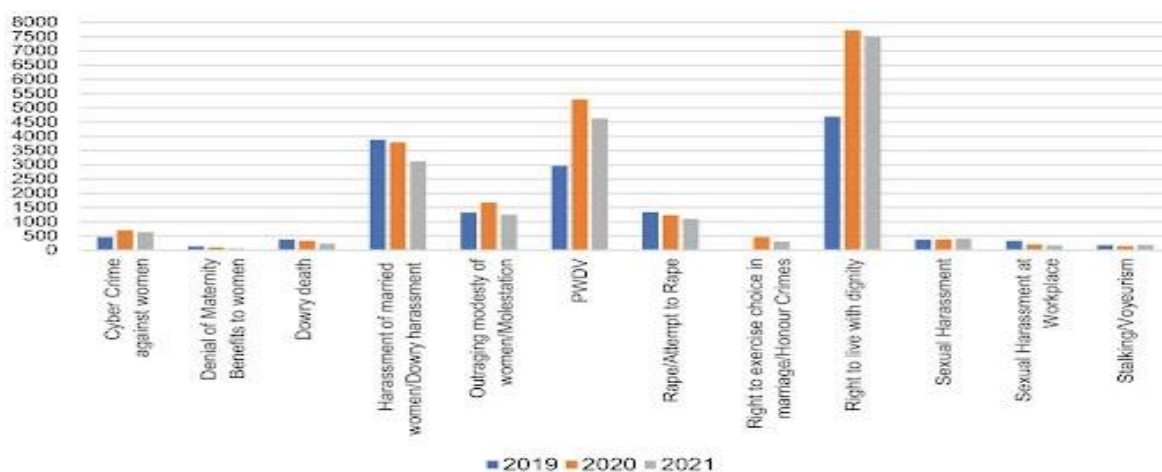
existed within the family institution but always in its latent form. The insecurities of women and children became evident during the Covid 19 phase and it was obvious that home was not a safe place for them.

Conditions of women and gender-related violence in India during the Covid situation

Past crisis experiences such as the economic recession indicated that catastrophes unequally affect men and women. Historically too, women have been treated unequally. The inequitable impact of disasters and challenges on the genders are now been a well-accepted one. Covid 19 was no different. With the rise in reports of gender-based violence on the premise of pre-existing gender inequality and minority stress, concerns behind “closed doors” are as threatening as the infection itself. As mentioned earlier, on 22nd March 2020, the Prime Minister of India announced a nationwide lockdown for one day. This lockdown was subsequently extended for a week, then for 21 days, and finally, until 3rd May 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19. India declared COVID-19 a “notified disaster” under the Disaster Management Act, of 2005¹ (Sharma et al. 2020). Extended lockdowns and other social distancing measures imposed to curb the pandemic made women more vulnerable to domestic violence as they were fighting a shadow pandemic inside their homes¹ (UN Women 2020). Family, considered as the primary support system, became the primary site of abuse and brutality. Sociologically, role allocation within society is always chauvinist in nature and this has brought about the division of household work as women's work. The change in the daily home routine and structure due to the increased amount of time spent by different individuals altogether increased the role strain and affected the ambiance of the house. Family in this context became the primary site of exploitation, which remained so with the increasing number of days in lockdown.

NCW’s data showed that domestic violence complaints doubled after the nationwide lockdown was imposed in India ¹(Vora et al. 2020). Tamil Nadu Police reported an increase in domestic violence complaints. They received approximately 25 calls every day during the lockdown period and registered at least 40 such cases. Similarly, Bangalore Police reported a spike in complaints from 10 calls to 25 calls every day from the victims of domestic violence. Another matter of concern had been the sexual exploitation faced by the women. Confined within the four walls of the home with their abusers, India saw an increased rate of unprotected sex, forced sex, pregnancy, and marital rape. On many occasions, the women were unable to connect with either the healthcare professionals who provide sexual and reproductive health services face to face or any helpline services, making matters difficult for them. ¹(Nair and Banerjee:Frontier:2021) The figure below analyses the domestic violence complaints registered by NCW for a time period of two years, 2019-2021.

Trend Analysis of Domestic Violence complaints registered by NCW (2019-2021) (Fig1)



Source: National Commission for Women (as of September 2021) and ORF online Occasional paper 14th Jan 2022

The data from different sources indicated that domestic violence incidents increased across the country during the lockdown. On the contrary, non-governmental organizations such as Jagori, Shakti Shalini, and AKS Foundation claimed that there was a decrease in complaint calls related to domestic violence. The decrease could be attributed to confinement at home, constant monitoring and controlling decision-making by the abuser, social isolation of victims from friends and family members, and reduced options for support.¹ (Krishnakumar and Verma: 2021). Most women stayed away or avoid reporting to the police out of fear, resistance, or the dread of exploitation by the police. The social and self-stigma related to disclosure and normalization by the families further lead to underreporting. About 86% of women who experienced violence never sought help, and 77% of the victims did not even mention the incident(s) to anyone. The table below could help to comprehend the situation.

TABLE 1

Types of Violence	Never Told anyone	Told someone	Sought a help from a source
Physical	79.5	9.0	11.6
Sexual	80.6	9.5	9.8
Physical and Sexual	61.3	9.9	28.8
Total	76.6	9.1	14.3

Source: (Domestic violence complaints at a 10-year high during COVID-19 lockdown, The Hindu 22nd June 2020)

The table given above made it is evident that underreporting was a problem. Among 14.3% victims who sought help, 7% reached out to relevant authorities.

Further, the nationwide lockdown created havoc for the women in India not only socially but also economically. Between March and April 2020 alone, an estimated 17 million women in both the formal and informal sectors, were left jobless. Working women with their multiple roles such as wife, mother, and daughter-in-law needed to perform all the household activities along with their paid jobs. Female child school dropouts increased during this period and many girls were forced into child marriage, child labor, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy, poverty, trafficking, and violence. All these made matter worse for the women in a country like India where about nine-in-ten Indians approve of the concept that a wife must obey her husband, the *annadata*, the *mard* of the family and nearly two-thirds WHOLLY agree with this.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Shadow Pandemic in India

Hegemonic Masculinity was developed in the 1980s primarily to provide a relational and socially constructed conception of men and their masculinities. The term hegemonic masculinity describes the hierarchical position and interaction or the domination men enjoy over most women and other men (mostly the gays). Raewyn Connell's book 'Masculinities' has dealt with the concept of hegemonic masculinity. His notion of it serves as an analytical instrument to identify those attitudes and practices among men that perpetuate gender inequality, involving both men's domination over women and the power of some men over other (often minority groups of) men¹(Connell:1987). In a recent review, a 'usual' conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity is described as:

*a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender-unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy.*¹ (Jewkes and Morrell :2012: 40)

Over the years, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been extensively used and debated. Creating the hegemonic man is a societal and cultural idealized form. This theory argued that it appears perfectly normal, natural, and necessary for men to act as the dominant player within society who enjoys power over other men and most women. This makes the hegemonic man the ideal person. The notion of hegemony has its roots in the writing of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony which analyzed and examined the various power equations and relations among different social classes of society. Therefore, in hegemonic masculinity, *hegemonic* refers to the cultural dynamics through which a particular social group (in this case it's the men) claims and manages to sustain its dominant position within the societal parameters.

Within the Indian context, to understand the 'mard' or the man and his masculinity the journalistic article written by Rajeev Bhargava has been quite interesting. He has wonderfully identified certain features of this model of manhood. First, aggression is natural and desirable in men. A 'real' man is eager to pick up a fight. He is told to wear bangles on his wrist if he does not. Even the slightest intrusion in his physical, mental, or social space is unacceptable. Second, men must be tough – muscular and unemotional; they must not be easily perturbed, and must not grieve and cry. Third, men must be ambitious and ruthless. Once they set a goal, it must be achieved regardless of consequences to others. Since winning is all-important, other men striving to achieve the same goal are rivals to be eliminated. Extreme competitiveness, in this model, is a classical male characteristic. Fourth, it does not allow men to consult others, negotiate with the weak, or settle for anything less than they want. They take independent decisions that brook no questioning. As famously put by Amitabh Bachchan in one of his films, '*Bas... keh diya na (Enough, I have said so).*' Once a man speaks, it is final; order to be obeyed blindly. Men are sovereign, free, and autonomous, in control of the world they inhabit, the women they rule over, and the children they beget. In short, part of their freedom lies in having dominion over others, particularly women and 'servants'.¹ (Bhargava: The Hindu:2019).

Constructed amidst this conceptualization, the man in Indian society appears to be a demigod who is not only right most of the time, he is superior to a woman in all varied ways. And women on the other hand are fashioned as irrational, bereft of self-restraint, crying easily, emotional, empathetic, and lacking judgment and impartiality. They are physically and mentally weak, and therefore must be dependent on and protected by their male superior. In such a backdrop, the man has the right over his woman and they can torture the wife, beat and show his masculinity over her as and when needed. All these are perfectly acceptable within Indian society and for Indian men, it's perfect to show their might to control their women and use various means of violence.

Men all over the globe are believed to perform three primary roles- produce, provider, and procreator. The nationwide lockdown created economic turmoil compounded by economic impacts. Men in many sectors lost

their jobs. Failure to fulfill the above-mentioned masculine roles mostly of the producer and provider had a psychological impact on them. Such failure is compounded when wives react to a husband's failure by challenging his misconduct. Both the failure itself and the wife's challenges, which undermine his masculinity, make the husband feel humiliated. Men often use violence in these situations to reassert their masculine authority. ¹(Summary Report ICWR: 2002:13). Therefore, when in the wake of lockdowns, the "home" was seen as a refuge, social isolation and mandatory confinement with potential abusers increased domestic violence among women. These also increased unwanted pregnancies too. All these make it evident that when the entire world was grappling with the pandemic, a shadow pandemic was spreading like wildfire in many households in India that mostly went unnoticed.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it could be understood that concepts of hegemonic masculinity play a substantial role in grasping gender equations within the Indian social milieu. Hegemonic masculinity has been used in gender studies since the early-1980s to explicate men's power. It has been used to explain men's hegemonic behaviours and the use of violence against women. In light of Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity, we could easily conclude that the Indian Machoman applying his hegemonic masculinity and with all his manliness would justify his control over the woman whom he considers to be his property. Confinement during the lockdown fostered tension as most men were strained by security, health, and money worries. It increased isolation for women with violent partners and separated the womenfolk from the people and resources that could best help them. Therefore, it could be concluded that the collateral damage of the epidemic seems higher than the damage caused by the epidemic itself as has been rightly pointed out by Smt. Ranjana Kumari, Director of the Centre for Social Research.

Endnotes

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