

# THE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 ON INTIMATE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN INDIA – THE HIDDEN PANDEMIC

## THE RESEARCH AND ITS CONTEXT

Women are disproportionately affected by any form of domestic-, gender-based or intimate partner violence. That is the case worldwide, in every city, in every house, in every social class. The WHO concludes in two different studies that such forms of violence, including intimate domestic violence (IDV), are higher in settings where women have limited access to public life, jobs and social services (WHO 2012;2021). The lockdown that followed the outbreak of Covid-19 in India, and many other countries, is limiting this access of women and exacerbates the issue of domestic violence worldwide. The increased need for accessible support services puts pressure on local actors and NGOs supporting female survivors of intimate domestic violence while the lockdown exacerbates existing challenges in the response to intimate domestic violence. The question remains what effects do Covid-19 and the Covid-19 lockdown have on the work of national NGOs and other actors supporting female survivors of intimate domestic violence in India?

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INTIMATE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN INDIA AND HOW IT CHANGED THE NATURE OF THE RESPONSE

To understand the effects and challenges of Covid-19 for actors responding to domestic violence, the impact of Covid-19 on domestic violence itself needs to be understood first. Amid the global pandemic, questions around testing capacities, available vaccines and economic impact often overshadow the side effects of such global disasters. The influence of Covid-19 on domestic violence is therefore often referred to as the hidden pandemic of 2020. Factors that exacerbate domestic violence in India but also worldwide, such as economic uncertainty, increased stress at household level, and changes in power dynamics are further aggravated by

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the lockdown. The National Commission for Women (NCW in India) published contradicting numbers of increase of intimate domestic violence during the first months of the pandemic. Uncertainty remained whether and how severe the impact of Covid-19 and especially the lockdown is on domestic violence in India. By October 2020, the NCW published numbers supporting what the UN called the expected “horrifying surge in domestic violence“ (UN, 2020). Reported cases of intimate domestic violence increased by 250% in 6 months, compared to 2019 (NCW, 2020). While the UN and other global actors ask for action against those side effects of the pandemic, the response to intimate domestic violence in India is still considered “non-essential“, which significantly limits the room for action of responding actors such as small, local NGOs and associations. Services and institutions that are considered “non-essential“ have to comply with stricter lockdown measures and travel restrictions than those considered “essential“ (such as police, supermarkets, hospitals etc.).

## **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF ACTORS AND STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN THE RESPONSE TO INTIMATE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN INDIA**

The severe impact of being considered a “non-essential“ service significantly influences the relationship between stakeholders and other important actors in the response to domestic violence. The “essential“ actors enjoy much more freedom of movement and increased funding and support from the government, while actors considered “non-essential“, including their response to domestic violence, are limited in their actions and lack access to resources. This increases the inequalities of power and deteriorates the relationship between stakeholders. The best example in the case of domestic violence in India is the relationship between the police (considered “essential“) and NGOs responding to domestic violence (considered “non-essential“). The dependency of NGOs on the police is extremely high, while the police are overworked with too many responsibilities during the pandemic and unable to keep up. Furthermore, the police are not trained properly on how to sensitively respond to intimate domestic violence or let only take the issue serious. On a positive note, the relationship between NGOs and associations improved in the response to intimate domestic violence through cooperations, shared workload and the combined effort to improve access of survivors to support services. Helpline coverage improved through cooperations where several NGOs shared responsibilities, making helplines accessible 24/7. Community outreach-projects were partly successful thanks to the cooperation with food distribution centres. And the implementation of

App-services for survivors was made possible through partnerships with the tech sector. Those include informative apps about support services and emergency-contact apps.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LOCALISATION AND DECISION-MAKING POWER IN INDIA

Partnerships between local stakeholders in India largely improved through shared challenges and less support from international actors. Generally, the issue of intimate domestic violence in India is covered by a culture of silence and the belief that the issue is a private matter and not a global, public issue. Therefore, the response to domestic violence has been and still is very much localised. Globally, the response to domestic violence is seen as such a culturally sensitive issue that the trust in local actors is much bigger. Larger, international NGOs in India reported that the work with affected families and survivors poses many cultural challenges which can easily be mitigated by localising the response. The localisation of the response to intimate domestic violence in India seems to have not changed significantly with Covid-19. What has changed on the other hand is the Decision-making power of local actors. Previous to Covid-19, responding actors to intimate domestic violence had much more decision-making power and freedom of actions. Being considered “non-essential“, limits this Decision-making power and leaves actors powerlessly complying with rules and regulations from the governmental side. Those are often neither realistic nor feasible for the response to intimate domestic violence in India.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve decision-making power and thereby also the response to intimate domestic violence in India, lobbying to make the response to domestic violence recognised “essential“ is a crucial recommendation. Countries such as Spain and Portugal have proven that considering gender-based violence services as essential does not influence the spread of the virus (European Union, 2021). Furthermore, on a more practical side, investment in digitalisation, such as apps for survivors and bystanders is highly recommended, as it improves the access to support services in lockdown times.

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