

Gender Equality during a Pandemic: The Problem of Domestic Violence in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This article analyzes the issues of gender equality during a pandemic, the concepts and types of domestic violence, the impact of a pandemic on the statistics of domestic violence in the world, measures taken by states to protect victims of violence during quarantine, as well as proposals to improve measures taken by the relevant authorities to protect victims of domestic violence in Uzbekistan during the pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic; Gender equality; Domestic violence; Physical abuse; Economic abuse; Psychological abuse; sexual abuse; Protection order

Introduction

The quarantine and self-isolation regime introduced in the world and in Uzbekistan has changed the usual way of life of millions of people. For some families, enclosed spaces have become a toxic environment for conflict, resulting in increased domestic violence.

Insulation contributes to increased tension and pressure caused by safety and health issues, as well as financial worries. It also leaves women face to face with aggression-prone partners, separating them from the people and resources that can help them. These are ideal conditions for domination, manifestations of violence behind closed doors. At the same time, as pressure on health systems reaches a critical point, shelters for victims of domestic violence also have fewer seats, and service shortages are exacerbated when centers redeploy to deal with COVID-19.

So what is the meaning of domestic violence? How domestic violence differs from family conflicts? The conflict is local in nature and based on the specific problem being solved, after which the conflict does not recur. Violence is systematic; these are conflicts that follow each other. In a situation of domestic violence, one person constantly monitors or tries to control another and control his behavior and feelings with the help of force and manipulation. Most often, women become victims of domestic violence.

When most people think of domestic violence, they imagine a situation where the abusive partner physically hurts the victim. However, physical harm is only one form of abuse and there are various types of domestic violence; domestic violence can be physical, emotional, sexual, financial, or psychological [1].

Definitions of domestic violence recognize that victims can include anyone, regardless of socioeconomic background, education level, race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. Domestic violence was formerly referred to as wife abuse. However, this term was abandoned when the definition of domestic violence was changed to reflect that wives are not the only ones who can fall victim to domestic violence. The definition of domestic violence now recognizes that victims can be:

- Spouses
- Sexual/Dating/Intimate partners
- Family members
- Children
- Cohabitants

Physical abuse is the most recognizable form of domestic violence. It involves the use of force against the victim, causing injury (a punch or a kick, stabbing, shooting, choking, slapping, forcing you to use drugs, etc.). However, the injury does not need to be a major one. For example, your abuser slaps you a few times, causing only minor injuries that do not require a visit to the hospital. Although the injury is minimal, the slapping would constitute domestic violence.

According to the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan “On protecting women from harassment and violence”, physical violence - is a form of violence against women that infringes on their lives, health, freedom and other rights and freedoms protected by law by causing bodily harm of varying severity, leaving them at risk, refusing to render assistance to a person in a life-threatening situation, committing other violent nature offenses, use or threat of other measures of physical impact.

Sexual abuse is a common form of domestic violence. It includes not only sexual assault and rape, but also harassment, such as unwelcome touching and other demeaning behaviors. Based on law, sexual violence is a form of violence against women that infringes on sexual integrity and sexual freedom by committing acts of a sexual nature, without their consent, as well as coercion to have sexual intercourse with a third party through the use of violence or the threat of its use or the commission of indecent assault against female minors [2].

One of the types of domestic violence, financial abuse is perhaps the least obvious. Financial abuse may take on many forms, such as a husband preventing his wife from obtaining an education or a job outside the home. Financial abuse is extremely common, particularly when families have pooled their money into joint accounts (with one partner controlling) and where there is little or no family support system to help. Financial abuse is simply another form of control, even though it is usually less obvious than physical or sexual abuse.

According to the law, economic violence - a form of violence carried out in everyday life, at workplaces and in other places, action (inaction) against women, causing a restriction on their right to provide food, housing and other conditions necessary for normal existence

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and development, restriction on the exercise of the right to property, education and labor.

The other type of domestic violence is psychological abuse, which is a catchall term for intimidating, threatening, or fear-causing behavior. This behavior must be persistent and significant. A one-time event generally will not be enough to bring a domestic violence action. Like emotional abuse, psychological abuse may not, on its own, be enough to bring a domestic violence action unless it is especially severe.

A wide variety of behaviors falls under the umbrella of psychological abuse. Some common examples include:

- Preventing the victim from talking to people unless they have "permission";
- Preventing the victim from leaving the house;
- Threatening the victim with violence or
- Emotional blackmail for doing something the abusive partner does not agree with.

The law says that psychological violence is a form of violence expressed in insulting women, slander, threatening, humiliation of honor, dignity, discrimination, as well as other actions aimed at restricting their will, including control in the reproductive sphere, action (inaction) that caused the victim of oppression and violence fears for their safety, resulting in the inability to protect themselves or harmful to mental health.

Violence against women and girls is a human rights violation, a universal issue, with great impact on victims/survivors, their families, and communities [3]. Before the pandemic, almost 18 per cent of women and girls aged 15 to 49 years who have ever been in a relationship have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months [4]. The figure rises to 30 per cent when considering violence by a partner experienced during women's lifetime [5]. More than a third of women who are intentionally killed are killed by a current or former intimate partner [6].

Although violence by a partner is one of the most common and widespread forms of violence against women and girls, they experience violence in a variety of contexts – in times of peace or conflict, or in the wake of conflict – and in diverse spheres: the family, the community and broader society. Rapid advances in technology provide another avenue for cyber violence against women. Available data show that less than 40 per cent of the women who experience violence seek help of any sort. Among those who do, most look to family and friends. Less than 10 per cent of those women seeking help seek help from the police [7].

In France, for example, cases of domestic violence have increased by 30 per cent since the lockdown on March 17 [8]. Helplines in Cyprus and Singapore [9] have registered an increase in calls by 30 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively [10]. In Argentina, emergency calls for domestic violence cases have increased by 25 per cent since the lockdown started [11].

In Canada, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom [12], and the United States [13], government authorities, women's rights activists and civil society partners have indicated increasing reports of domestic violence during the crisis, and/or increased demand for emergency shelter [14].

In Australia, a Women's Safety New South Wales survey reveals that 40 per cent of frontline workers have reported increased requests

for help by survivors, and 70 per cent have reported that the cases received have increased in their level of complexity during the COVID-19 outbreak [15].

In Uzbekistan, since April 10, the Commission on Gender Equality of the Republic of Uzbekistan, together with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Center for Civic Initiatives Support, launched the Helpline hotline to protect women's rights and prevent oppression and violence. From April 17 to April 23, 203 calls were received to the number, which are 82 cases more compared to the previous week. Calls were recorded from 179 women and 24 men. Of these, 65 applications revealed cases of physical and psychological violence (this is 29 complaints more than last week). The number of complaints regarding divorce increased by 44 cases. Three cases of suicide prevention have been reported. The remaining appeals were related to conflicts between parents on the issue of raising children and collecting child support [16].

There is also a hotline for the Center for Rehabilitation and Adaptation of Victims of Violence - 1169. There is an opinion that the Tashkent Center for the Rehabilitation and Adaptation of Women Victims of Violence accepted a large number of victims during the quarantine period, so there are practically no free places there.

At the same time, information on the work of 197 centers for the rehabilitation of victims of violence remains closed: it is not known how many employees work in each center, their qualifications, the number of beds in each center, the number of people contacting one another center, the nature of the assistance provided, the degree of workload, and so on [17].

The head of the Jizzakh regional center for the rehabilitation and adaptation of people affected by violence, said that the number of calls to them increased sharply after the introduction of quarantine measures: in March there were 40 calls, and by April 15 - 76. For comparison, in 2019 in March 14 people turned to them, and in April - 18.

Now in this center live 8 women and 9 children who have suffered from domestic violence. For the pandemic period, they are provided with food, medicine and hygiene products at the expense of the Ministry of Mahalla and Family Affairs, as well as at the expense of the state order from the Public Fund under the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Unfortunately, free beds in most of the rehabilitation and adaptation centers are full, but the number of visits is not decreasing. Government should supply these centers with extra beds, food, medicine and hygiene products for several months, so that they could help to other victims of domestic violence especially in pandemic time. In addition, the center's specialists (lawyer, psychologists, social workers) can advise and support the work of such institutions if, for example, the government decides to open additional places for victims of violence in empty sanatoriums or hotels.

Many countries fight domestic violence during quarantine time by taking special measures to protect women from violence and harassment during a pandemic. Current circumstances make it even more difficult to contact the police, including restricting the access of women and girls to telephones and helplines, as well as disrupting public services such as the police, the judiciary and social services. Such violations can also endanger the care and support that victim's need, such as the clinical treatment of rape, mental health care and psychosocial support. They also contribute to the impunity of criminals. In many countries, the law is not on the side of women; in every fourth country, there are no laws that directly protect women from domestic violence.

If left unchecked, this problem will also exacerbate the economic impact of COVID-19. Earlier, the global losses of countries around the world because of violence against women were estimated at approximately 1.5 trillion dollars. This figure can only increase as violence grows now and levels continue after a pandemic.

In order to ensure safety of women, in Canada, domestic violence shelters are to remain open during the lockdown. Canadian aid package was recently announced to include 50 million dollars to support shelters for those facing forms of gender-based violence. In Quebec and Ontario, domestic violence shelters are deemed as essential services and must remain open during the lockdown.

In Italy, instead of the survivor having to leave the house of an abuser, prosecutors have ruled that in situations of domestic violence the perpetrator must leave the family home. In France, as shelters exceed capacity, alternative accommodation is being provided for domestic violence survivors by hotels.

Australia, France and the UK allocated additional dedicated funding to support women experiencing violence and to organizations providing services.

In Uzbekistan, Zamin International Public Foundation, directed funds to support women in need in pandemic period. Projects of the Foundation are funded by charitable contributions from individuals and legal entities, as well as grants from international organizations. Now, during the quarantine period associated with the coronavirus pandemic, the people of Uzbekistan have faced difficult challenges. In such a situation, the trustees and chairperson decided to redirect some of the Foundation projects funds to support women and families in particularly difficult situations. Zamin Foundation directed five billion Uzbek sums to five thousand women who are especially in need of financial support in all regions of our country [18]. Also, at the initiative of the Public Fund for Support and Development of National Media in the framework of the charity project "Safe Help", a thousand women in need received a plastic card with 1 million soms. A thousand plastic cards were issued within the framework of the project, to which the Fund transferred a billion soms. These cards intended for women who, due to quarantine, find themselves in a difficult financial situation: those in need of social support, single mothers who have lost their jobs. The Commission on Gender Equality of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Office for the Prevention of Offenses of the Central Internal Affairs Directorate of Tashkent, the Coordination Center for Sponsorship Charitable Organizations under the Ministry for the Support of the Mahalla and Family provided great assistance in compiling the mailing list [19].

The problem of increasing violence against women should be urgently addressed through measures included in economic support packages and incentives that respond to the severity and magnitude of the problem and reflect the needs of women facing multiple forms of discrimination. The UN Secretary-General called on all governments to include provisions on preventing violence against women and redressing the harm caused to women as a result of such violence in their national plans to combat COVID-19 as one of their main parts. Shelters and hotlines for women should be considered life support services in each country, with targeted funding and widespread efforts to raise awareness of their availability.

Many online and mobile technology service providers are taking steps to deliver support to survivors during this period of limited mobility and increased demand, such as free calls to helplines in Antigua and Barbuda agreed by two telecommunications firms.

In Madrid, Spain, an instant messaging service with a geo location function offers an online chat room that provides immediate psychological support to survivors of violence. According to the Minister for Gender Equality, the number of calls through this service has increased by 270% since the beginning of isolation.

In the Canary Islands, Spain, women can alert pharmacies about a domestic violence situation with a code message "Mask-19" that brings the police in to support. In Cumbria, UK, police have enlisted postal workers and delivery drivers in looking out for signs of abuse. A popular app called 'Bright Sky' provides support and information to survivors, but can be disguised for people worried about partners checking their phones [20].

Also in UK, in early April, several organizations requested hotels to provide vacant rooms as temporary shelters for victims of violence. Hoteliers agreed, but asked the government to cover the cost of living and meals for new arrivals. An estimated 1.6 million women and 786,000 men experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales in the year ending March 2019, according to the Office for National Statistics. To compare, in 2018, 173 people were killed in domestic violence-related homicides, according to data obtained by the BBC from 43 police forces across the UK [21].

In Canada, domestic violence organizations across Ontario are raising concern over the increase in calls shelters have been receiving in the last few weeks, while others are worried that fewer women are calling them because the pandemic has created barriers to accessing services. Since the virus started spreading, Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH), which represents over 70 shelters across Ontario, states that 20 percent of their organizations have experienced an increase in calls. The organization typically gets 200 calls on a weekly basis from women who are looking to get connected to resources. Since the outbreak, that number has doubled to 400. Both federal and provincial governments have announced COVID-19 measures to support domestic violence shelters.

Parliament approved a financial aid package, committing some \$200 million to help shelters across the country, including those who service women and children fleeing domestic violence [22].

France has witnessed a 36% increase in the number of reported domestic violence cases to the police in Paris and a 32% rise throughout the rest of France. Two women have been killed since the lockdown began, in a country with higher rates of deaths by domestic violence compared to its European neighbors. While the lockdown is currently in place until April 15, there is a high likelihood it will be extended, further jeopardizing the safety of victims of domestic violence.

The French Gender Equality Minister, said that the government would pay for 20,000 hotel nights for victims and put in place approximately 20 counseling centers at stores across the country in order for women to be able seek out help while they leave their home to run errands [23].

In Uzbekistan, besides helplines launched by the Gender Equality Commission, information on support services for victims of domestic violence will be distributed through pharmacies under the project of UN Development Program in Uzbekistan and the Ministry for the Support of the Mahalla and Family [24].

Information materials - posters and brochures - on assistance to victims of domestic violence will be distributed by pharmacies in Tashkent and Tashkent region of Uzbekistan. These materials include phone numbers where a person who has experienced domestic violence

can seek help. The project also created info graphics distributed with other materials through pharmacies. They contain information on how to continue to strengthen family ties during quarantine, bringing family members together in difficult times.

How can Uzbekistan protect victims of violence about isolation time? The positive experience of other countries can be used to reduce the consequences of domestic violence in Uzbekistan during the quarantine period:

- To reconsider the approach to reconciliation of families and ensure isolation of victims of violence in special shelters, as is done throughout the world. Given that families remain isolated, a woman may again face aggression, even if she received a protection order or the family was reconciled. For "taking a quarrel out of the hut," violence can be especially brutal.
- In case of shortage of places in rehabilitation centers, finance the creation of new places in these centers. Also subsidize local hotels, motels, health camps to accommodate victims of violence for several months. This will help preserve the health (and, possibly, life) of women and children suffering from domestic violence.
- Contact women who have previously experienced domestic violence. Find out what kind of help they need, if they are being reused. If necessary, offer temporary shelter.
- Condemn domestic violence at the highest level during isolation, as was done in the UK.
- Launch a single service that allows you to report domestic violence via SMS. This will help reach remote areas where there is difficulty in accessing the Internet.
- It is also necessary to strengthen the institutional control of those responsible for the prevention of domestic violence. 24-hour helplines of departments, on which you can complain about the inaction of employees, will quickly provide assistance to women and identify unscrupulous personnel. The publication of regular detailed reports on all allocated and received funds and their use will provide an opportunity for public control and increase confidence in the government of Uzbekistan and public funds.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is already testing us like most of us have never experienced before, causing emotional and economic turmoil that we are trying to overcome. Violence, which is now becoming the dark side of this pandemic, is a mirror and a challenge to our values, our resilience and common humanism. We must not only survive under the conditions of the coronavirus, but also be reborn, and women must become a powerful force at the center of the recovery process.

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