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COVID-19 and the violence against women and girls: 'The shadow pandemic'

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As the COVID-19 lockdown regulations in the United Kingdom (UK) and in many other countries are gradually easing and life returns to a 'semi-normal' adjustment, governments are now facing the consequences of the lockdown measures which have lasted for several months. Domestic and gender-based violence have increased globally, but the unsettling spikes continue to grow during this pandemic period.

Gender-based violence is a human rights violation, and violence against women and girls is a public health crisis with detrimental impacts on the victims/survivors, their families particularly children and the communities. Recent emerging data highlights that since the outbreak of COVID-19, violence against women and girls, including domestic inter-personal violence and sexual abuse has intensified in several countries.

Although data is often hard to come by and these may well be an under-estimate, it has been reported that since the lockdown in France on 17th March 2020, domestic violence cases rose by 30%. In Argentina, the lockdown was imposed on 20th March 2020, and since then emergency calls from domestic violence cases had risen by 25%. In Cyprus and Singapore, helplines have registered a rise in calls of 30% and 33%, respectively. Finally, there were increased domestic violence cases and a demand for emergency accommodation in Canada, Germany, Spain, the UK and the USA (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020).

On 23rd March 2020, the British government failed to take into account the needs of the victims of domestic violence when imposing their lockdown measures and did not adequately foresee the rise in domestic violence incidents. At least 26 women and girls (with the youngest aged just 2 years old) had been killed in suspected domestic homicides in this period. Within the first month, 16 of them were murdered, which was three times more than the number of women killed under similar circumstances in the same period in 2019 (Taub & Bradley, 2020).

Interestingly, in Italy, although there was a dramatic drop in the number of calls to the Domestic Abuse helplines, the number of desperate text messages and emails to these organisations shot up dramatically. Many victims feared that they would be overheard by their abusive partners or stopped from leaving their home and therefore used texts and emails to ask for help (Graham-Harrison et al., 2020).

Research by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) predicted that there will be at least 15 million more cases of domestic violence around the world in 2020 for every 3 months that lockdowns are extended (Ford, 2020).

Intuitively, there is little doubt that in these stressful times, being confined indoors without access to support systems, the increased risk must raise concerns and be tackled accordingly. 'A pandemic within a pandemic', not only exposes the struggle to find the 'vaccine' for the latter but also immunity against the former. Even though the United Nations created a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (United Nations, 1993) following a clear recognition of the extent of the problem and action needed. However, this was non-binding so perhaps that is the reason why in many countries massive gaps remain in policy and its implementation. This has become even more recognisable and visible due to lockdown.

Learning from history

The Ebola pandemic had displayed that multiple forms of violence had exacerbated within crisis contexts, including trafficking, child marriage and sexual exploitation and abuse (UNGA A/70/723, 2018). It is predicted, that the COVID-19 is likely to steer similar trends at present (IASC, 2018). This is already being seen in the Philippines and India, as COVID-19 has immersed into the urban and rural areas, women's trepidation and experience of sexual violence and other forms of violence in public spaces is likely to escalate (Kumar, 2020), as physical distancing has emptied streets and transport, except for those who are performing those essential services.

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The Ebola and Zika outbreaks also exacerbated existing inequalities, including those based on economic status, ability, age and gender. As the distinct socio-economic inequalities widen, it places the most vulnerable groups of women at an even higher risk of violence. Following the aftermath of the crisis, violence against women and girls will continue to escalate, at the same time as unemployment, financial strains and insecurity increase. A loss of income for women in abusive environments makes it even more difficult for them to escape.

The costs of gender-based violence

The global cost of violence against women and girls (public, private and social) is estimated at approximately 2% of global gross domestic product (GDP), which is roughly US \$1.5 trillion. As the spike of domestic violence cases rises, it's easy to predict that the global cost is subsequently going to rise now and continue in the aftermath of the pandemic (UN Women, 2020). The financial impact of COVID-19 resulted in widespread closure of businesses and industries, increasing the financial strain on communities, particularly the already vulnerable segments of the population. Women are disproportionately placed in insecure, lower-paid, part-time and informal employment, with little or no income security and social protection, therefore less protections from economic recession during the crisis (UN Women, 2020).

Actions

The healthcare systems are already overwhelmed and overstretched, and the burden of COVID-19 is tipping the capacity of hospitals and clinics to breaking point. However, we cannot ignore the ongoing pandemic of gender-based violence. Resources are being diverted away towards the immediate public health measures, but services for women who have experienced violence are also essential. Expanding the capacity of shelters, strengthening helplines, rapid police responses, ensuring psychosocial support for women and girls who experienced violence and access to frontline health and social support workers; these are vital to ensure recovery from violence.

In many countries, hotlines, crisis centres, sheltered accommodations as well as critical legal aid and social services have been scaled back or having to close their doors, due to infection control measures. Survivors of gender-based violence have little access to protective services during periods of quarantine. Whilst the need for access to support services is increasing in demand, even the access to judicial systems are hard. Governments can help support victims and survivors of domestic violence through a number of means. Using remote technologies court hearings can be conducted

and justice dispensed as has been demonstrated in countries as diverse as Kenya and Trinidad (UN Report, 2020).

Put women in the centre of policy change, solutions and recovery

Women's organisations and other community organisations must be given the power to ensure that vulnerable women and girls have their concerns and needs identified rapidly and suitable interventions applied urgently especially when vulnerable girls and women are confined with their abusers. These organisations must be encouraged to speak up on behalf of vulnerable individuals.

It is apparent how the responses of past epidemic outbreaks had struggled to intervene on gender-based violence in time. We must learn from our past in order to show progression towards gender equality. As a start we call for better understanding of the impact that the pandemic has on girls and women for which age and gender segregated data is crucial to be aware of the incidence of violence against women and girls (including domestic, psychological, emotional, economic and sexual violence), as well as mapping of available services, their suitability and capacity to respond appropriately.

Globally, governments and health communities must continue to respond to COVID-19 pandemic with diligence and determination, but there must be a genuine recognition that countries and their governments are struggling to halt the ongoing pandemic of violence.

Urgent steps must be taken to identify the extent of the problem and steps taken to eliminate these acts of abuse and violence.

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