

Violence during lockdowns in India

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The global increase in violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic has been termed the ‘shadow pandemic’. A study by Ravindran and Shah analysed evidence of violence against women in Indian society and find that, under strict lockdown rules, domestic violence and cybercrime complaints increased, whereas rape and sexual assault decreased.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a catastrophe that has caused the deaths of numerous individuals and seen an upsurge in violence against women across the world. UN Women has called this the ‘shadow pandemic’, during which one in three women experienced intimate partner violence¹. Violence against women negatively affects various aspects of society, including women’s labour participation, income and mental health, as well as child health. The economic costs of violence against women vary from 1 to 4% of worldwide GDP². India is often identified as an unsafe place for women³, and the effect of the shadow pandemic during the lockdown was poised to increase this many fold. These issues can also have substantial economic repercussions that may aggravate the adverse bearings of lockdowns on female labour-market participation, salary and domiciliary consumption⁴.

Ravindran and Shah⁴ used spatiotemporal variation in nationwide lockdowns to quantify the effects of lockdowns in a dataset provided by the National Commission for Women, covering 586 districts. These districts were categorized into red, orange and green zones for the initial period of the ‘lockdown 3.0’ (a two-week extension of the nationwide lockdown), based on the infection rate in the middle of 2020. The microcosms of the zones included spaces such as grocery stores, pharmacies, parks, transit stations and workplaces, which were part of the Google mobility index.

The National Commission for Women and Google data revealed an upsurge in domestic violence cases in red-zone districts from April to May 2020. By contrast, the orange and green zones exhibited a smaller increase in domestic violence cases. A similar pattern was observed for cybercrime complaints from all of the zones. As per media reports, there was a massive upsurge in online stalking, cyberbullying and sex trolling. By contrast, the number of rape and sexual assault cases fell significantly in the red zone in the same months; the orange and green zones had smaller declines.

The numbers cited in the paper are appalling and are most probably due to women’s reduced mobility. The dataset further revealed that domestic violence grievances continued to upsurge after the introduction of lockdown measures, and that they continued to be dissimilar from the pre-lockdown period. Official crime statistics provided by the National Crime Records Bureau show a decrease in the crime rate in 2020 as compared to 2019. Nevertheless, there was an increase in ‘disobeying public orders’ (21× increase from 2019 to 2020) and ‘cybercrime fraud’ (such as sexual exploitation



and extortion) (11.8% increase from 2019 to 2020) across India during the lockdown phase.

In the Indian context, the strictest lockdowns in the region were accompanied by an upsurge in domestic violence complaints, along with cybercrime complaints. All of these can be related to the reduced mobility of women in public spaces. In orange-zone districts (relative to green-zone districts), a greater proportion of husbands reported that hitting or beating their wives is justified: these districts experienced greater increases in domestic violence complaints. A greater proportion of wives reported that a husband hitting or beating his wife is acceptable in red-zone districts relative to green-zone districts: the National Commission for Women received fewer domestic violence grievances in May 2020 in red-zone districts than in green-zone districts. This indicates that one reason for a decline in reporting may be that women felt that domestic violence against married women by their spouses is acceptable. This aspect of violence in the domestic space is still prevalent even after the lockdown. The effects of lockdown on the mobility of women are probably linked to the observed decrease in sexual assaults and rape due to the lockdown. Nevertheless, the long-term dataset provided by the authors reveals that, after six months of lockdown, such crime rates have again reached their pre-lockdown levels. In this vein, officials and policymakers should consider altering their mindsets to bring about changes in the social norms and mores of the Indian society through behaviour-change communications and proper interventions on social issues of violence against women.

The authors acknowledge that the underreporting of cases of violence against women during the lockdowns was probably massive, resulting in the projection of low crime rates. For example, marital rape is never taken cognizance of by police officials. The authors note that a behaviour-change-communication intervention has effectively worked to reduce physical violence in the neighbouring country of Bangladesh⁵. As social norms and perceptions regarding violence are probably the key drivers of violent behaviour and reporting, as a way forward more empirical research should be undertaken to find ways to prevent violence against women in Indian society.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.