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Research Update

RAPID RESEARCH RESPONSE TO COVID-19 ■ SERIES: GENDER 03 ■ 12 MAY 2020



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Phase II Media Tracking of Domestic Violence, Bangladesh

Introduction

Concern has been expressed both nationally and internationally about the possible increase in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic due to lockdown, increased isolation, stress and poverty. Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) has undertaken a media tracking exercise to understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence, how it is being reported as

well as the discussions surrounding it. Our previous brief focused on rising domestic violence reports in international media, the lack of visibility in the national press and the challenges in reporting cases. The present brief tracks the media coverage of domestic violence during the COVID-19 crisis from the period of 16th March to 9th May 2020.

Key Findings

International media reports on domestic violence during COVID-19 continue

Global media has continued reporting domestic violence incidents during the pandemic. In the **United Kingdom**, charities and campaigners against domestic abuse have reported a [surge in calls to helplines](#) and online services since the lockdown. In London there have been [4,093 domestic abuse arrests](#) according to the Metropolitan Police.

Latin America has experienced a spike in domestic violence cases. [Evidence of rising violence against women](#) has been found in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil and Colombia. In Argentina, 18 women were killed by their partners or ex-partners during the first 20 days of quarantine. In Mexico, around 200 women have been murdered since the quarantine. Calls [to helplines have increased](#) by 40% in Argentina, 30% in Sao Paulo 70% in Chile and 130% in Columbia.

In **India** cases of domestic violence have increased in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and Punjab. [The National Commission for Women \(NCW\) received 587 complaints](#) of domestic violence from the period of March 23 and April 16. The NCW [launched a WhatsApp number](#) to tackle domestic violence during the lockdown. However, according to some experts, the government took no further steps after launching the WhatsApp number, [as the number became inactive](#) after a few days of launch.

More data made available on the extent of domestic violence but no conclusive proof of increase in rates

According to a survey of 17,203 women conducted through telephone by Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) partners in April 2020, [4,249 women and 456 children were subjected to domestic violence](#) in 27 districts of Bangladesh during the lockdown. Among them, [1,672 women and 424 children](#) had experienced violence for the first time during this lockdown. [848 women were assaulted physically, 2,008 mentally, 85 sexually, and 1,308 financially](#) by their husbands. A survey conducted by BRAC reported that for 85% of the respondents, [the abusers are from their own homes](#). According to Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), [58 women were murdered by their husbands](#) during the period of January-April 2020.

Increased focus on preventive measures in national media

Within our reporting period, the media coverage on domestic violence has focused more on preventive measures and essential steps to minimize incidences of domestic violence.

Barrister Fahmida Hassan, a legal practitioner based in the UK, [suggested](#) that the Bangladesh government launch dedicated and responsive emergency helpline numbers and websites for domestic violence victims, advertise helpline numbers on all media platforms, provide support organisations with an emergency financial package to ensure the availability of shelters and support services, and provide medical assistance, psychological counseling, legal aid and other support to victims. Simple ways to contact the police for urgent help, such as text messages or use of code words with doctors or pharmacists could also be developed. She also suggested that local authorities turn vacant hotels and public university halls to emergency accommodation where victims could quarantine safely.

An [online report in the Daily Star](#) focused on providing key information about individuals could do to prevent and address violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as reaching out to family and friends through calls and texts, identifying neighbours, friends, colleagues, and relatives for seeking shelter, contacting service providers for medical assistance, and reducing sources of stress.

An increased awareness of domestic violence in the digital community

There has been an increased focus on domestic violence in the digital space, with contents such as short video clips, advertisements and [comic strips](#) to raise awareness about the rising incidences of domestic violence during the pandemic among wider audiences. Social media influencers¹ are also talking about domestic violence through live videos and posts in many public Facebook groups and on their Instagram profiles. One such influencer was heavily criticized in social media for blaming a victim for not leaving her abusive partner, and she received a lot of [backlash from other social media influencers](#) for using her platform for shaming domestic violence victims. Facebook communities such as [Naari Tumi Eka Nou](#) have been developed to raise awareness against domestic violence.

¹users who have access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach.

Increased media and press discussion on domestic violence by experts

There has been an increase in media programs (talk shows, webinars, etc.) on domestic violence that are being aired on television and social media. These programs bring together specialists and professionals working on domestic violence issues to share their opinions and discuss the current context. Live virtual talk shows ([Vertex Chambers](#)) and press conferences ([MJF](#)) with legal experts, human rights activists and youth leaders are being circulated across Facebook and YouTube. These are raising awareness on domestic violence and possible preventive measures. Through these shows, general people are being able to ask their queries directly to panelists and experts.

Live talk shows on domestic violence are being aired on television and Facebook. Sometimes [findings of different surveys conducted by development organizations](#) on women's conditions are discussed in these platforms.

Access to on-line counselling and assistance is difficult

It remains important to understand whether the hotline services are effective. In India, though a Whatsapp number was launched by the government, it was of little use. After the number went inactive within a few days of launch, the government publicized an email address of NCW members and began receiving complaints on social media and through its online portal. This was also criticized [as only one-third of women have access to the internet in India](#). In Bangladesh, in addition to the government's national helpline for domestic violence, other legal aid and development organizations have also developed helpline numbers during the COVID-19 crisis. However there are questions about how effective hotlines are. [An opinion piece](#) focused on the challenges of getting help from a tele-counsellor, reporting that *Kaan Pete Roi (KPR)*, an emotional support and suicide prevention helpline in Bangladesh, had experienced a sharp decrease in calls, by almost 60% compared to the standard average of the past several years. The KPR administration ran a poll on Facebook, based on which they concluded that for the majority of families in Bangladesh, there is no privacy for making phone calls about their mental health statuses. Moreover, people are not being able to leave their houses and recharge credit on their phones. In order to address privacy concerns, the author suggested changing the

hours of service provision and shifting to chat/text-based options. For the low credit issue, the author suggested the services to be toll-free or as cheap as possible. Though the calls to KPR have decreased, [actively suicidal calls have increased by 10%](#).

The closing of courts has made filing cases difficult, leading to a demand for establishing virtual courts

In an [online view-exchange meeting](#), jointly organized by the Citizen's Initiative against Domestic Violence (CIDV) and Rape Law Reform Coalition, a group of legal aid experts and rights activists proposed introducing virtual courts to prevent violence against women during COVID-19 in Bangladesh. They recommended introducing online case filing opportunities and virtual courts. In a press release published on 30th April, the coalition made a plea to the Chief Justice to take necessary steps so that courts can take domestic violence cases into account and victims can file GDs and FIRs online. They [also demanded](#) the deployment of two policemen, including one female police officer at each police station, and one police officer at each outpost throughout the day. Subsequently the Law Minister announced that the ordinance on allowing virtual court functions would be issued by the next week. An ordinance allowing courts to hold trials digitally using IT infrastructure was [approved by the Prime Minister](#) on 7th May 2020.

Recommendations

- Hotlines should be made toll free in order to make access to online complaints and counseling services easier for abuse victims.
- Framing of domestic violence issues on social media should be done responsibly, in order to avoid debates that may distract from the importance of the issue itself.
- Government police and hotline statistics and trends of domestic violence should be made publicly available on a regular basis.
- Special attention should be given to ensure that existing mechanisms to deal with domestic violence complaints remain functional in spite of COVID-19 pressures and difficulties.
- Virtual courts to be monitored to ensure domestic abuse complaints are dealt with rapidly and efficiently.

Methodology

Our information sources include major national and international media sources such as The Guardian, NBC News, Aljazeera, The Daily Star, Dhaka Tribune,

The Daily Observer, Bangla Tribune, Hidden Pockets, Facebook groups and pages and Instagram blogs.

[Brac Institute of Governance and Development \(BIGD\)](#), Brac University is a globally-recognized centre of excellence in rigorous research on policy and development interventions, with the aim of bringing together academics and practitioners to raise critical questions on development, providing lessons on good practices, and advocating for pro-poor policies.

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It is also a part of the [Rapid Research Response to COVID-19](#) project which aims to generate rapid and actionable research-based insights to policy and program actors, on the socioeconomic impact the COVID-19 pandemic on our lives, focusing on the poor and vulnerable population of Bangladesh.



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