Domestic Violence: Collateral Damage in the Era of Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to raise awareness of the correlations between increased domestic violence cases and social isolation in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic and by doing so to outline the need to re-access the existing framework for dealing with domestic violence cases in order to develop a system that may be in place for the protection of victims of domestic violence in the unlikely event of future outbreaks of pandemic or natural disasters.

Introduction

The COVID 19 recently declared pandemic has led to a number of strict measures adopted globally in an effort to contain the spread of the virus and minimize its global impact. With the increased number of deaths recorded the majority of nations increasingly adopted measures ranging from social distancing to complete lockdowns of regions or whole nations. Despite the fact that such action deemed absolutely necessary in the current circumstances it has also revealed an alarming threat of increased cases of domestic violence. Given the fact that absolute lockdowns result in individuals being isolated at home poses the question whether the COVID 19 pandemic may lead to a ‘domestic abuse pandemic’ as vulnerable individuals are expected to reside with their abuser during the lockdown period. The purpose of the article is two- fold. To highlight a worrying trend and to suggest that early domestic violence preventive mechanisms should be ready to be activated in case of any future disasters.

The Outbreak of COVID 19 and Domestic Violence

The recent outbreak of COVID 19 throughout the world led to the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on the 11th March 2020, pointing out that ‘more and more countries are now experiencing clusters of cases or community transmission’ and urging states to escalate their responses in such a way as to take pre-emptive action wherever possible in order to delay the pandemic. In the days following such a declaration states on a unilateral basis and following up on the urgent call by WHO to detect, test, treat, isolate and track contains

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1 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-52076789 accessed on 5th of April 2020


3 ibid
and mobilize in response to the pandemic, adopted a number of measures such as quarantines and social distancing as well as absolute lockdown of whole countries globally. Although particular countries faced with severe spread of COVID 19 such as China, Italy and Spain were amongst the first to adopt strict lockdown measures in order to contain the spread of the virus it was soon globally realised by most states that national lockdowns could be the only viable mechanism to minimize the impact of the pandemic.

Despite the fact that such measures exhibit an ability to contain the spread of the virus, their impact on various aspects of life has also been felt as certain adjustments had to be made in terms of workplace, education and social interaction. At the same time, a number of voices are warning that the adopted measures could potentially lead to an increased number of domestic violence cases due to the restriction of individuals within the household. In fact, recent statistical information revealed the worrying trend, and triggered a number of governmental statements in order to re-assure that victims of domestic violence will not be forgotten during the COVID 19 crisis. Moreover, previously conducted research on the association between natural disasters and domestic violence reveals that there is indeed a strong correlation between natural disasters and increased cases of domestic violence. The existing literature suggests that in the event of either natural disasters or man-made crisis there is evidence to suggest an increased level of domestic violence cases. In an attempt to further appreciate the links between disasters and domestic violence the WHO had previously highlighted the correlation between domestic violence and natural disasters by outlining that the effects have both an immediate and a long-term impact on violence: increased stress and feelings of powerlessness due to bereavement, loss of property and loss of livelihood; mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder; the scarcity of basic provisions and the destruction of social networks. As it is suggested by existing literature, personal threats to life, loss of loved ones, property loss, immense destruction, breakdown of social security systems, collapse of social cohesion and harmony and so on, are the most important reasons behind this trend and diverse studies highlight that the effects of catastrophic disasters on mental health are larger than mild ones. Despite the fact that existing literature highlights the association between interpersonal violence and natural disaster, it should be stressed out that such research is quite limited and fails to provide a conclusive account of the steps that need to be adopted in order to break the links between disasters and increased levels of domestic violence.

In an attempt to fully appreciate the aforementioned associations one can turn to existing criminological
Domestic violence is a persistent problem globally and has triggered a number of suppressive responses at national levels existing long before COVID 19. However, as the current outbreak demonstrates the existing system in place is not capable of securing a safe place for victims of domestic violence. This is evident by the increased reported domestic violence cases. Therefore, it is suggested that the emphasis should be placed on developing preventive mechanisms in order to address violence prior to any disaster rather than dealing with the problem in the aftermath of any disaster. In fact, clear guidelines should be adopted prior to the state of emergency in order to be in place for the future.

Conclusion

The data available to the present day reveal an increasing trend in the cases of domestic violence during COVID 19 pandemic. Although we need to produce more data in order to make conclusive remarks on the association between domestic violence and the pandemic it is suggested that further research needs to be conducted in due course in order to reveal the true extent of such associations. Such research could potentially inform the development of future preventive programmes that could be in place in the unlikely event of future disasters. At the present state of affairs and with the number of deaths increasing globally on a daily basis the focus is placed on managing the public health emergency as a top priority. What remains to be seen is the process by which we can ensure that the health emergency does not trigger a domestic violence wave with long term effects.


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