

ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OF SELF HELP GROUPS TO ADDRESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN SITUATION

Divya Chavan, Symbiosis Law School
Shashikala Gurpur, Symbiosis Law School
Bindu Ronald, Symbiosis Law School

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to address the issue of domestic violence which women are facing during the pandemic-Covid-19 lockdown situation which has arisen all over the world. This paper will endeavour to use Self Help Groups by way of involving and empowering them to mitigate domestic violence against women during the times of pandemic lockdown situations and propose to put together other solutions after observing the attempts made by different governments with respect to violence against women.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Domestic Violence, Self Help Groups, Women Empowerment, Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown Situation, National Response Plans

INTRODUCTION

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19, has not only spread globally across international boundaries but has also affected a large number of people severely and has required the World Health Organization declare this as a 'Pandemic' on 11th March 2020 (Porta, 2014). Due to the severity and the contagious nature of this disease, the governments of various nations were forced to announce lockdowns and quarantines in the countries, to suppress the spread of Covid-19. While many governments of several nations have declared such lockdowns to address the 'pandemic' there is a 'shadow pandemic' (Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020), that is, violence against women which is growing all across different countries such as China, France, South Africa, Malaysia, Australia, Canada, India amongst others. It is required that instances of violence against women, especially domestic violence, needs to be combatted in order to attain Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, that is achieving Gender Equality. This human right violation which has serious effects on victims, their families and the community at large needs to be addressed through various legislations, policies and programmes by member States of the United Nations. According to statistics, women who experience physical or sexual violence in their life time, account to 35% across the world (WHO, 2013). Even though there are a number of cases that are reported, many cases of violence go unreported due to various reasons. The World Health Organization, in their note dated 7th April 2020 mentioned that during unrest and emergency situations such as epidemics and natural disaster, violence against women tends to increase. Thus it is very important to address this issue in times of the current pandemic of Covid-19 which has affected the entire world. In fact the United Nations Secretary General-Antonio Guterres, in his speech/address dated 5th April 2020, emphasized that every nation should make important provisions in the national response plans during the Covid-19 lockdown situation to prevent and redress violence against.

Statement of Problem

It is important that oppression against women is addressed at all times, even in times of a crisis or a pandemic situation in order to achieve equality. Various theories of Feminism

endeavour to describe why women have to face oppression, causes and consequences of such oppression, and strategies that can liberate women and provide equality (Tong, 2009). Various feminist groups have played important role to address the root causes of such oppression faced by women in order to achieve gender equality. Liberal Feminism has been an important theory with respect to feminism and to achieve gender equality. Enyew & Mihrete (2018) have referred to Giddens who has discussed Liberal feminism in 2001 stating that gender inequality is created when access to women and girls is lowered with respect to their civil rights, not providing them with proper education and employment. Liberal feminism theory further states the reason of women being in a subordinate position is because of legal and customary limitations and lack of opportunities that they have to enter into the public sphere.

India has been active to provide for various strategies in order to address the oppression and marginalization faced by women by not only adopting various human rights instruments but also adopting different laws, policies and strategies to address this issue. India has ratified Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1993 and also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, thereby guaranteeing to take positive measures in order to safeguard the rights of women especially their rights against violence and discrimination. As per the UN- Women report, since the outbreak of the Covid-19, violence, mainly domestic violence has increased against women and girls across many nations. The numbers across nations portray a harsh reality and further reinforce the need and importance to stop violence against women and to ensure that this doesn't weaken the aim to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 especially in the times of pandemic situations, epidemic and situations of Natural disasters. In Jingzhou, China, had domestic violence cases tripled in February 2020 to that compared to the complaints of domestic violence received in the previous year, in the United Kingdom, the complaints of domestic abuse increased by 25%, in France, by 30%, in Argentina by 25 %, in Cyprus by 30% and Singapore by 33% since lockdown. In Canada, Germany and USA, there have been increased calls of victims and there also has been a demand for shelters to be used during such emergencies. In India, after the nationwide lockdown was declared on 23rd March, 2020, the National Commission for Women India, received complaints on their online medium and on their WhatsApp helpline number-7217735372. According to their data, 587 cases/complaints of domestic violence between 23rd March 2020 and 16th April 2020 from across India, which were higher than the complaints received in the period preceding the lockdown, which was 396 cases between 27th February 2020 to 22nd March 2020 (Figure 1).

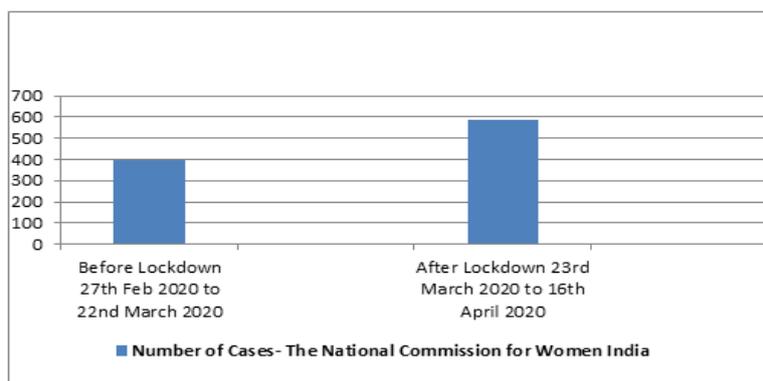


FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF CASES- THE NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR WOMEN INDIA

Though some states in India, such as West Bengal and Telangana have seen a rise in cases of domestic violence but some states such as Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and Maharashtra, the number of calls where victims complained of instances of Domestic violence has dropped. Further the Delhi Commission for Women, New Delhi, has stated that there have been a decrease in call from 808 (duration 12th March – 25th March 2020) to 337 (duration 7th April to 20th April 2020). Thus, it is observed that there is underreporting of cases regarding domestic violence particularly during the Covid-199 Pandemic lockdown situation.

There are various laws that are passed in India for the protection of women from the horrors of violence and in particular domestic violence. Such laws include the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, personal laws and most importantly the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, which has not only explained domestic violence but has also provided reliefs to victims. Domestic violence in India includes various instances of physical, verbal, emotional, sexual and economic abuse or violence by the family or the partner of the victim. Women can either approach the local police or women centric centres/policing initiatives formed by the police, such as the Bharosa Cell in Pune City to complain instances of domestic violence. Further women can also take recourse of the provisions of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, where they can approach the Protection Officer or the Court for protection of their rights against abuse. Laws and systems by the government have certainly attempted to ameliorate the conditions of women, but still there are gaps in the law its implementation and proper establishment of systems. Women are still silenced by emotional ties, family norms, values, properties etc. Many women in India do not have a social, economic or a legal persona and bear the inequality and the violence faced by them as they are not empowered enough to raise their voice and are unaware of their legal rights (Singh, 2013). But even if women are aware of their rights many a times they are unable to assert it, due to the inaccessibility to justice system.

Especially in such crisis pandemic lockdown situations, violence against women is aggravated due various factors being- persisting gender inequality, increased household chores, financial insecurity and shift in economic power between the partners, under the same roof as the perpetrator and no access to psychological support. Due to the Pandemic, there is increased aggression due to various insecurities, especially amongst the male member, which is directed towards the easiest target, that is, the woman (victim) who is considered to be in a weak and subordinate position. Increase in consumption of alcohol by the perpetrators who have access to alcohol and withdrawal symptoms of perpetrators who do not have access to alcohol are also some instances where anger and violence against women has increased. The Research Gap in the literature reviewed is that there are not many research studies which present solutions to combat violence against women in pandemic situations at the grass root level.

OBJECTIVES

This research paper after understanding the reasons of domestic violence against women especially in the pandemic situation will stress on various solutions that can be taken to curb violence against women in times of pandemic. It will highlight the contribution that Self-Help Groups can provide to prevent violence against women in times of pandemic a long with efforts taken by different nations to address this 'shadow pandemic'.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Research Methodology followed in this study is by relying on primary source and secondary sources. The primary sources include the Reports of the United Nations, UNFPA, WHO and judgements of the high courts. The study also relies on Secondary sources including research articles, different online news mediums and articles on various sites. In this study qualitative research was also conducted to study the program started by the Zilla Parishad, Pune Maharashtra to address the issue of domestic violence during the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdown situation, wherein interviews of different stakeholders were taken in the form of questionnaire.

Solutions to Combat Violence against Women in Times of Pandemic Situation

In the Pandemic situation, efforts must be taken and systems must be placed in order to respond to such a crisis. There are 2 types of systems *i.e.*, formal and informal systems, which will be required to be arranged so that women are able to actualise their right against violence

during times of pandemic. The formal system will include setting up systems by the government to provide access to justice, by making laws, policies and regulations by the government to deliver solutions, support and care to women who face violence in times of pandemic. But inspite of such formal systems, there are various social barriers that come in the way of women to report instances of violence against them. Therefore it is important to devise such effective techniques in order to tackle such barriers and help women realize their rights against violence by creating a nexus between such formal and informal systems. It is important to create such support systems for women and various reach out programs that will ensure to that victims of domestic violence are able to access formal systems of justice. In many countries, almost 80% disputes can be resolved by resorting to informal justice mechanisms, by providing easy access, 'quick, relatively inexpensive and culturally relevant remedies' (UNDP, UNICEF & UNWOMEN, 2013).

Involving Self Help Groups in the National Response Plan

One of the initiatives taken by India towards women empowerment was that of forming Self Help Groups (NABARD's Pilot Project in 1992) whose objective was alleviation of poverty and improving the well-being of women and help them realize their rights. The number of SHGs as per the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, is 62,55,497 as on 28th September 2020. Self Help Groups comprises of members of the society, particularly women, who have come together with a social cause and hence are in a better position to understand the plight of a woman in distress and in whom the victim/woman in distress would be comfortable to disclose or share her grievances.

The United Nations in their Policy brief dated 9th April 2020, while discussing the effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic situation on women, stressed on such measures to be taken by nations to ensure that efforts are taken to prevent violence against women and provide for such services that are included in the response plans with respect to Covid-19. Further, the UN Women (2020) has also stated that it is important that additional resources are allocated to address violence against women and girls during a pandemic situation and include such research that is evidence based. Thus while devising the national response plans, Self Help Groups can be included in the prevention and services to respond to violence and additional resources can be allocated to fully utilize the potential of SHG's in such pandemic situations.

Access to Justice in the Pandemic Situation and Role of SHG's to Enable Women to Access Justice

India is still a patriarchal society where the victim is usually blamed and shamed for the acts of violence inflicted upon her, women usually fear this social stigma and do not report cases of domestic violence. Especially in this Covid-19 pandemic situation, in complete lockdown situations, victims of domestic violence are under tremendous fear as they are unable to move away from the perpetrator and further they are unable to even travel to a safe and secure place due to restrictions on movement as imposed by the Government. Inaccessibility to legal systems is of serious concern especially in matters involving domestic violence. In the pandemic lockdown situation, the issue of law and order take priority over issues relating particularly to domestic violence against women. In pandemic situations, victims are unable to go to the police stations or the courts. Though there have been helpline numbers and email addresses of the NCW as well as of various NGO's dealing with such issues, but either victims do not have access to the internet or the phone (almost 57% women do not have access to phones) (EPW Engage, 2020) or in many cases such victims are uneducated, from economically weaker sections and do not know how to access the internet or phone numbers.

It is important to provide access to justice to report acts of domestic violence especially during such difficult times and to treat any services aiding victims of domestic violence as essential. First line of response to victims of domestic violence including helpline numbers

designated safe spaces and such services that will ensure that the victim is safe, must be provided to women. In order to provide safe spaces to the victims inflicted by domestic violence especially during the lockdown situation persisting during a pandemic, pharmacy shops have been declared as safe spaces to report abuse in Argentina and France. In France, in addition to grocery stores there has been housing pop up services, 20,000 rooms that are accessible to victims of domestic violence who need shelter from abusive situations. In Spain, along with providing helpline number to victims of domestic violence, a campaign has been launched where women who face abuse have been asked to alert pharmacy shops by asking for 'Mascarilla-19' (Mask-19) so that the pharmacy can alert emergency services, including the police. In New Delhi, India, authorities have involved pharmacy shops and mother dairy booths to connect to victims.

Apart from pharmacies and grocery stores, hospitals can also assist victims of domestic violence in times of Pandemic. Many a time's victims of domestic violence resent going to the police station or taking support of legal redressal even in case where the acts of violence are severe. Taking medical help is easier and there is fewer stigmas attached to a victim of violence going to the hospital as compared to going to the police station, courts or even counselling centres (UNFPA, 2008). Thus provisions for counselling as well as legal aid can be made available in the hospital itself to victims of domestic violence. The Colombian government has also provided legal and psychological advice, police and justice services for gender based violence. While providing access to such services, it must be ensured that it is not at the risk of victims losing their livelihood. Novel ways to address violence can be used for victims to report instances of violence during the lockdown persisting during the Pandemic. Technology platforms can be used to enable women to report instances of violence.

Especially in the pandemic crisis, it is difficult to reach the grass root level and inform women about the various safety options and services that ensure the safety of victims. In such situations, Self-help groups- who are already a strong support system to women, can be the first point of contact in cases of domestic violence and can play an active role to assist women facing violence to actualise her legal rights. Further, Self Help Groups can aid victims who are uneducated, from economically weaker sections, and who unable to access helpline numbers and technology platforms, to access such essential platforms. Innovative ways can be used by Self Help Groups to aid victims to report domestic violence. One such innovative way to report such instances of abuse or violence is launched by WEFT Foundation (Women Entrepreneurs For Transformation) in India, where the victim of domestic violence can report the violence without alarming the perpetrator by placing can put a sign of a 'red dot' on her palm. SHG's can also be trained to use technology and 'innovative virtual solutions' to create awareness on domestic violence during lockdown situations. Various innovative virtual campaigns introduced across various countries such as #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringEpidemic in China, #SafeHome launched by FIFA, European Commission, and WHO, can be introduced to Self Help Groups who in turn can demonstrate the use of such technology to women.

SHG's -a Link between Victims and Protection Officers

Women are unaware their legal rights and provisions of law such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, passed with an intent to protect women from Domestic violence. Further, women are not aware that Protection officers are assigned under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, under Section 8, who are required to register a Direct Information Report (DIR), and conduct enquiry, submit such report to the concerned magistrate/court and ensure the implementation of the magistrate/courts order (Tulsyan, 2016). In reality, the powers of the Protection officers, who are supposed to be the first point of contact and responsible to support the victim of domestic violence, are not fully utilized and many women- victims are troubled by experience of reporting violence (Johari, 2017). Thus either women are unable to assert their legal rights because of not being aware of

the same or then even if victims are aware of the legal recourse, they are unable to access, get any legal, psychological or medical help during times of Pandemic situation.

By training and involving the network of Self-Help Groups, a strong and effective reach out program can be created to combat violence against women especially in times of Pandemic. This reach out program can involve legal awareness programs that can help victims assert their rights. Self Help Groups can also help women to develop their skills and get the confidence to stand on her own feet and speak up against instances of violence. Self Help Groups are easily accessible to the victim and thus could facilitate resolving the issues of the victim, could facilitate the victim to approach the concerned authorities for redressal of her grievances and also extend her help like providing shelter, food, etc. at the time of her distress. In fact they can be a link between the victims and the protection Officers who are appointed under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. In Tamil Nadu, India, Anganwadi workers who work at the grassroots attend calls with respect to domestic violence on helpline numbers and report the same to superior officials. Such complaints received are monitored by the District social welfare offices through the Protection officers who are appointed under the 2005 domestic violence law.

Powers of the Protection Officers must be strengthened to ensure the non-occurrence of Domestic violence cases. It is important that protection officers are independent, are appointed full time to work on cases of domestic violence, and are trained to handle such cases sensitively. In fact, in a letter dated 12th July, 2018, the Ministry Women and Child, the Government of India, has requested Chief Ministers of all states to appoint Protection Officers that have an independent charge and are available to address issues regarding domestic violence. The letter states the allocation of a separate budget for the effective operation of Protection officers, conducting trainings for police, judicial officers and medical personnel, creating awareness about the domestic violence law by giving information of Protection Officers and such information at panchayat offices, police stations and through wall writings apart from providing support to victims of domestic violence. Thus especially during pandemic lockdown situation, women of the Self Help Groups are aware of the Protection Officer assigned for their area, they can surely ensure jointly that the victim is given all the support that is required. From a study in Tamil Nadu, it is observed that from 25th March 2020 till 21st April 2020, in most cases of Domestic violence received, women only wanted to caution the abuser of the different legal consequences and only required counselling to be conducted for the abuser and themselves. Thus if Self Help groups and the Protection Officers are jointly involved, it will be easier to intervene, to address violence inflicted on victims and counsel the perpetrator and the family.

SHG's and Shelter Homes

Women abstain to report instances of domestic violence as they do not have a secure place to stay especially in times of pandemic. Thus it is important to arrange for infrastructure and necessary resources such as Shelter Homes where women can be given shelter in times of pandemic if they are affected by the 'Shadow pandemic'. The UN policy brief dated 9th April 2020 has highlighted the need to designate Shelter homes as an 'essential service' for victims of Domestic Violence during the Pandemic situations. It is important that number and capacities of shelter homes for victims are increased and spaces like hotels and educational institutions that are empty are utilized. Various countries, like Canada, Australia and Mexico have dedicated funds to shelter victims who have faced gender based violence. There is an urgent need to have more shelter homes for victims of domestic violence especially in the pandemic situation in India. Self Help Groups can aid the government to realise the requirement of Shelter Homes and in the absence of any, direct the government authorities to provide for shelter homes to ensure that the victim is given immediate shelter and food if she is required to escape the perpetrator especially in lockdown situation.

Psychological Support and Counselling

During the Pandemic situation, victims of domestic violence are lonely, isolated and face psychological issues, like depression and anxiety. It is important that increased Psychological support and counselling is provided to women and girls. SHG's can be a strong support to victims and can be trained to understand early signs of depression and anxiety to provide immediate relief to victims by being connected to a counsellor. In Spain, to provide for psychological support to victims who have faced violence, an online chat room service is provided *via* instant messaging service with geolocation function. In such circumstances, SHG's can aid the victim of domestic violence to access such counselling through telephone and online mediums in times of pandemic. The Maharashtra State Commission for Women apart from assigning a helpline number (18001210980), are planning to issue material regarding building up capacity in women to cope with depression and anxiety (Ganapatye, 2020). This document can be distributed to Self Help Groups who can get trained and share this knowledge with the community. Further, Self Help Groups can help families understand early signs of domestic violence, intervene to stop such instances of violence at an early stage, not judge victims and further discourage blaming and shaming the victim. Self Help Groups can aid to change mind set on victim shaming and ensure that violence is not 'justified or rationalized' (UNFPA, 2008).

Legal Service Authorities and Self Help Groups

In India, Legal Services Authorities have been set up under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987 at various levels- being the National, State, District and Block (Taluka) level with the aim to provide free legal aid and assist victims. The National Legal Services Authority India, vide email dated 11th April 2020, directed all the State Legal Service Authorities to provide legal assistance to women and children (Mohammed Arif Jameel vs Union of India, 2020). It is important for the NALSA to come up with innovative ideas and techniques to provide timely legal help to those who are victims of violence and in need of legal assistance in pandemic situations. As stated under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, it is essential that NALSA works along with law school clinics. Thus during the pandemic situation where lockdown are frequent, NALSA can take the assistance of legal aid clinics at law schools who can support such legal service authorities and reach out to victims of violence (Pandey, 2020). The Hon'ble High Court Jammu and Kashmir has directed the Legal Services Authority at Jammu and Kashmir to take the help of police officials and paralegal volunteers to provide legal aid to victims of domestic violence. Thus Legal aid clinics can take assistance of the Self Help groups at the grassroots.

Self Help Groups can Aid Women to Access to Emergency Health Care Facilities

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) includes causing woman caused harm by forced intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion by her partner or husband (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi & Lozano, 2002). In times of pandemic lockdown, when women are under the same roof with their partner or husband, there are high chances of such intimate partner violence. During such times there is no availability or access to contraception or many a times women do not knowledge of proper contraception. During the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdown situation, though abortions have been treated as emergency services in India, women do not have access to emergency health facilities especially for termination of unwanted pregnancies and thus get limited health care due to the absence of transportation facilities, restriction in movement, access to contraceptives (Srivastava, 2020). Thus it is not sufficient to make abortions only as essential services but it is essential to address the issues of reproductive and sexual rights of women. Self Help Groups can provide access to women to actualize such rights, help create awareness on contraception and aid women to receive proper and immediate access of health care facilities during pandemic lockdown situations.

Informal Solutions to Involve Self Help Groups for Continued Efforts

Capacity Building on Gender Equality

Early interventions and continued efforts for capacity building for gender equality must be taken even during situations of Pandemic. Thus Self Help Groups can be trained with such knowledge to effectively engage with society and have early interventions to ensure that there is gender equality at the grassroots. Self Help Groups can be a catalyst to urge such conversations around gender equality and provide confidence to women to speak up against the violence, report such violence at an early stage and take action against the abuser even during the times of Pandemic.

It has been recognized that increasing the contribution of men to support women and speak up against violence against women will surely bring about a sea of change. The United Nations 'HeForShe' movement must gain momentum at grassroots in order to attain gender equality. Self Help groups can use their networks and engage men to be a part of this movement to achieve gender equality.

Awareness on Legal Provisions

Awareness on the rights of women against violence, various laws that protect women from domestic violence and legal remedies available during times of Pandemic Situation should be widely disseminated. According to the 2005 law, duty has been cast on State Governments under Section 11 (a) to publicise the said law through public media- electronic as well as print media. By imparting trainings to Self Help Groups on the different legal provisions regarding violence against women, they will be able to address such issues more effectively. Legally empowered women of the Self Help Groups can in turn create awareness on the legal provisions at the grass root level to give women the confidence to resort to law if required. In fact, if the Legal Services Authorities, law school clinics and police involve Self Help Groups, this can ensure that there is a maximum awareness, outreach and legal aid can be effectively provided to victims of violence.

Steps Taken by Pune Zilla Parishad in Pune District, Maharashtra, to Involve Self Help Groups and Other Grassroot Workers, to Address Domestic Violence during the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown Situation

It is interesting to study the model of the Pune Zilla Parishad, Pune, Maharashtra, which has taken proactive steps to curb the instances of domestic violence against women in rural areas during the pandemic situation. In order to study this model, a qualitative research was conducted with the important stakeholders being the CEO Pune Zilla Parishad, the Deputy CEO Woman and Child Development Department, the President of the Women and Child Development Department, the Child Development Project Officers, the Dakshata Samiti or the Vigilant Committee members and victims. The study was conducted with an objective of to examine the program started by the Pune Zilla Parishad in April 2020 wherein different mechanisms were devised to address the issue of domestic violence during the pandemic lockdown situation. For the said study, field research was conducted of the different stakeholders across 13 Talukas within Pune District, wherein interviews in questionnaire format were taken.

Indicators of this Study and Aim of the Program

The indicators of Domestic violence in this study were by considering the definition in India as under the Protection of women from domestic violence Act, 2005 and also giving regard to the International Conventions- being Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women. The complaints received by the Dakshata Samitis or the

Vigilant Committees, included instances of physical, mental, verbal, emotional and economic abuse by the husband and/or family members of the aggrieved woman/Victim. Such instances of abuse have been recognized under international law as well as under laws prevalent in India. Realizing the barriers of access to justice of women especially during the Pandemic, the social stigma attached to the reporting of such instances of violence, understanding that in many quarters of the society such violence is also considered acceptable and speaking about it is considered as a social stigma, there was a need felt to devise a program whereby domestic violence is addressed and at the same time women are given a strong support to stop the instances of domestic violence. Thus this program devised by the Pune Zilla Parishad, adopted a social based approach to address the issue of domestic violence during the Covid 19 Pandemic lockdown situation. The aim of the program was not to register offences against the perpetrator, for which there is already an existing system of approaching the local police and the Protection Officer, but the aim was to provide counselling and social support to the victims and if need be, involve such authorities like the police and the concerned Protection Officers as designated under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005.

Format of the Program Started by the Pune Zilla Parishad

The Pune Zilla Parishad, which has the control of 13 Talukas (21 Integrated Child Development Projects), devised a program which is headed by Child Development Project Officer (CDPO) at each Taluka. Further on 16th April, 2020, a total number of 1455 'Dakshata Samitis' or vigilant Committees were formed at every gram panchayat/village within the Taluka within the District of Pune. The said 'Dakshata Samitis' or vigilant Committees consist of members being-, Member of Panchayat Samitis (elected women representatives in gram panchayat), President and member of Self Help Group, Anganwadi Sevikas/worker, Asha Worker and Member of the Mahila Gram Sangh. Such members of the Dakshata Samitis or Vigilant Committees are closely known and associated with women of the village and thus women are easily able to approach such persons to discuss their personal issues and problems. Therefore in order to efficiently handle the issues of domestic violence and provide effective counselling to the victim as well as the perpetrator, members of the Samitis or Committees are imparted training from time to time on various aspects of counselling.

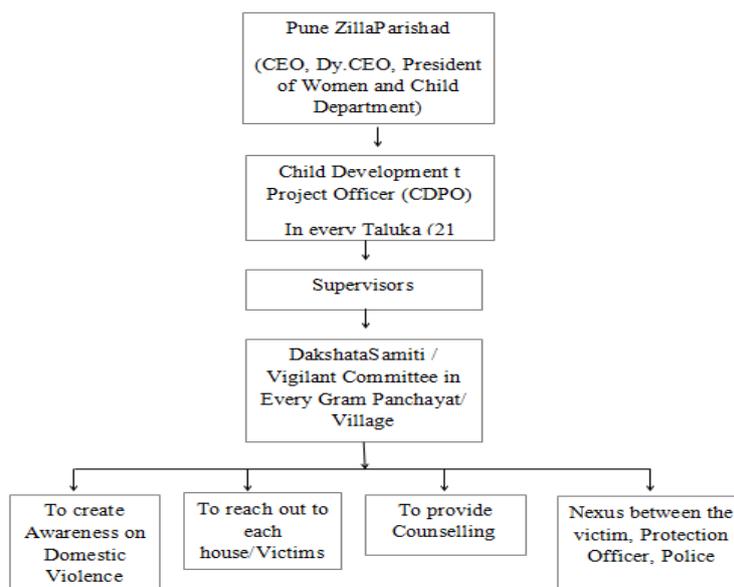


FIGURE 1
FORMAT OF THE PROGRAM STARTED BY THE PUNE ZILLA PARISHAD

The Role of the Dakshata Samitis or the Vigilant Committees

The Dakshata Samitis or the Vigilant Committees are required to reach out to all the houses in order to create awareness on the program addressing domestic violence especially in the pandemic lockdown situation. Such Samitis or committees are required to provide assistance to the victim by counselling the perpetrators- being the husband or the other family members as well as the victims. Further if the abuse doesn't stop or if it is severe, then the Samitis or committees are required to be a nexus between the Protection Officer and the local police so as to enable the victims to take appropriate legal recourse.

According to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, victims of domestic violence can be sent to a shelter home for their protection. But under this program by the Pune Zilla Parishad, it was directed that if the domestic abuse continued, the perpetrator would be sent to quarantine facility situated in every gram panchayat so that the woman stayed safe in her own home. This ensured that victims did not fear complaining instances of violence just because of the fear of losing her residence. But in the program, none of the perpetrators were sent to such a quarantine facility till date, but instead the Protection officer and the Police were involved in certain cases where the abuse was severe or continued even after primary counselling by the Samiti or Committee members.

Complaints by the Victims to the Dakshata Samitis or the Vigilant Committees

A total number of 932 cases were received during the lockdown (from April 2020 to September 2020) by the Dakshata Samitis, out of which the Dakshata Samiti members themselves intervened in 832 incidents after they came to know of the same and in the remaining 37 incidents, the victims themselves approached the Dakshata Samitis. It was observed that the reason why the women usually do not complain of domestic violence is due to the fear that they have that their family would be broken if they raised a voice and if people in the society would come to know about their domestic violence issues they would have had to deal with the stigma attached to victims. Further victims also stated that they were financially dependent on their husband and his family. Most of the victims only wanted the domestic violence to end so that they are able to continue their marital life.

There were cases where not only there was physical violence involved but also verbal, emotional, economic abuse involved. Some reasons for cases of violence involved denial of food to woman, suspecting the character of the aggrieved women by the perpetrator, demand of dowry, consumption of alcohol by the perpetrator and denial of providing for the economic needs. Many incidents of violence against the victims were prevalent before lockdown, but the magnitude of the violence increased post lockdown where the victim and the perpetrator were forced to be under the same roof for a long time.

Thus in most of the cases, the victims stated that since counselling was provided by the Dakshata Samiti Members, the attitude of the perpetrators changed due to such effective counselling and the families remained intact as many of the domestic issues were resolved. Further they also stated that since the dakshata samitis consist of members at the local level victims could easily approach them, discuss their personal problems as confidentiality was maintained and therefore they did not face the social stigma that is attached to a victim of domestic violence.

Impact of the Presence of this Committee at the Grass Root Level

By this effective preventive intervention program started by the Pune Zilla Parishad, a positive impact is observed at the grassroots level to address domestic violence, especially in the lockdown situation. The interventions have certainly attempted to bring about a change by gaining the confidence of women to voice their concerns especially of domestic violence and speak about the same freely to the committee members who are known to them. That because of

such individual led interventions, women are able to easily confide in the members of the Dakshata Samiti without being affected by any social stigma. Further by helping the victims and perpetrators by counselling them, in many cases the dakshata samiti members have been able to effectively resolve the issues of violence and abuse and have brought about an attitudinal and behavioural change of the perpetrators.

Additionally the program has attempted help the victim of domestic violence realize her rights and has also brought about a nexus between the police machinery, the Protection Officer, the Victim and her support system. In order to reach out to more number of women at the grassroot level and to help the dakshata samitis gain their confidence, the Pune Zilla Parishad has gone a step ahead by including the Dakshata Samitis or the Vigilant Committees to undertake other interventions in the program whereby women are empowered holistically.

By encouraging the formation of Self Help Groups at each village/Gram Panchayat level, the Pune Zilla Parishad along with National Rural Livelihood Mission, Maharashtra is encouraging Dakshata Samitis or the Vigilant Committees, to start such Self Help groups in villages in order to give women proper training and help them address their various needs.

Challenges of the Program

Though the Program has involved various mechanisms, it was observed that there needs to be more awareness and training on the legal provisions prevalent in the country with respect to protection women from domestic violence. There also need to be trainings conducted on Gender Sensitization through Dakshata Samitis, so that mind-sets can be changed. Due to the spread of Covid-19 and Pandemic lockdown situation, not all Dakshata Samiti members could reach every house to conduct awareness. Women at the grassroot level also do not have access to technology and thus it is difficult to conduct online trainings at the village level.

Though the members of the Samitis are women, but to resolve some cases, where the CDPO's or Supervisors who are male members, were involved, the perpetrators did not like the involvement of such male members. But even then it is important that there is a presence of male in the committee so that the men also can be explained about the importance of prevention and prohibition of domestic violence. In some cases the perpetrators as well as the victims questioned the legal status or the authority by which such members of the Dakshata Samiti got involved to resolve such issues of domestic violence which are considered as personal family issues. Therefore it is important that the Dakshata Samitis members are recognized under law all through the state or the country.

In many places, the Protection Officers were not receptive and did not come to give timely help. Therefore, there requires being a stronger nexus between the Protection Officer and the Dakshata Samitis. Further, it is required that more Protection Officers are appointed at the village level as at the moment there is one protection officer for every Taluka, that there is only one Protection Officer across many villages.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY CONDUCTED

Though there are certain challenges that were observed, nevertheless, the program of the Pune Zilla Parishad in Pune, Maharashtra is certainly a positive step to address the issue of domestic violence during the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown wherein various formal and informal mechanisms have been involved by involving Self Help Groups and other important grassroot workers.

CONCLUSION

In the coming years, there are going to be many situations that will increase the vulnerability of women and girls and thus will require long term solutions and an increased need in humanitarian assistance and protection (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Affairs (OCHA), 2019). Achieving Sustainable Development Goals, particularly, Gender Equality, even during times of Pandemic must be a priority by every nation. Thus measures to combat gender based violence must be made a part of pandemic preparedness and sufficient measures in order to curb such violence, especially domestic violence, during lockdown situation persisting during pandemic to be an important part of the national response plan. Further, achieving gender equality must be given importance and there must be on-going programmes and initiatives that reach every part of the society in order to ensure that there are no instances of domestic violence in pandemic situations. It is important to come up with novel ways to address this issue especially at the grassroots and provide access to justice systems. Thus by involving Self-Help Groups, by considering them as an 'essential service', and by developing a nexus between different authorities, our nation will definitely be able to effectively respond to violence against women during pandemic situations.

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