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Sexual Harassment of Women During Covid-19 Pandemic

SNIGDHA GUPTA¹

ABSTRACT

Crime against women has been common in our society. The outbreak of COVID-19 has worsened the situation by snatching away all the freedoms women had achieved so far by breaking the gruesome norms put upon them by the society. With the fact that the COVID-19 has brought downfall for the entire nation, deterioration of the women in the country at this time was furthermore distressing. With the sudden imposition of nationwide lockdown the women in the country faced an increased number of crimes and offences against them as they were compelled to survive in traumatised situations. Number of cases of sexual harassment, molestation, rape, gang rape, murder, and domestic violence had immensely increased during this time. Moreover, it decreased the number of calls at the helpline numbers for women safety compared to pre-pandemic times. In light of this, the article will focus mainly on the sections of women against whom the number of crimes increased during the pandemic, the nature of the crimes and the plausible reasons regarding this and how also why the initiatives taken by the NGOs to overcome this situation proved to be inadequate. Further, this article would also mention that how the Government of India's step of imposing the nationwide lockdown failed to safeguard the interest of its vulnerable section typically the women, compelling them to survive in more repugnant situations facing sexual abuse during the prevailing health crisis in the country.

I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic which resulted to be deadly for the entire world has resulted to be even more dreadful for the women at large. When the entire world started coming under the trap of the corona virus disease the normal lifestyle of the people got affected. With the sudden imposition of nationwide lockdown on 24th March 2020, in India, people working in all of the

¹ Author is a student at Amity University Kolkata, India.

three sectors whether primary, secondary or tertiary faced a huge impact resulting in shutting down their work for an uncertain period of time. People coming from remote areas who migrated to the metropolitan cities for work are now heading back to their places as they are left with no more means of livelihood. While both male and female workers were largely affected, the pandemic has proven to be more worsening for the women. The women of the backward areas who never got any such opportunities and were living in traumatised situation for years and had somehow managed to migrate to another places and start their lives in their own ways were now again compelled to move back. Many cases were reported about the women workers being raped, abducted or killed while returning back to their villages. Many such cases went unreported. Among those who managed to come back to their villages safely faced sexual harassment at the quarantine centres. Other than this, the pandemic has also witnessed an increasing report of domestic violence. This article will solely discuss about the harassments faced by the women during the pandemic.

II. PREJUDICES DURING PANDEMIC

Like the two sides of a coin, the COVID-19 pandemic also has two facets covering two completely different aspects under it. One, concerning the health crisis faced by the entire world while, the other concerning the increasing reports of sexual harassment faced by the women at large.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of female migrants had outnumbered the male migrants when it comes to inter-state migration but it is mostly considered to be due to the marriage purpose. But even after this, it is widely been observed that a number of those women accounts to be the labour force after their migration. The number of cases of violence against women by her spouse and his family could account to be a major factor behind this because of which the women decides to manage her own livelihood and have her own identity. But the pandemic has all overtook them back from where they had started. Now, they have not just lost the independence they have got after a long time but they again got locked in the houses where they were being tortured with no option left.

Besides migrating for marriage, now a good section of women mostly the women of rural areas who take the burden of their families or single mothers have started migrating to the cities for work purposes solely. But with the imposition of the lockdown, they had to move back to their places as they were left with no income. According to a report, number of women work force losing their jobs out numbers the male work force. By this time the transportation system was being suspended in the country over night. Both men and women workers returning back to

their places choose every way possible and even walked miles and miles back to their land. Eventually, many women workers on their way back lost their lives, got abducted, raped and many of them are still missing and never returned to their places. Those who managed to reach their land were then admitted to the quarantine centres which again subjected the women to sexual harassments, many reports showed.² Cases of women and girl child who tested positive of COVID-19 being raped in the ambulance by the driver or being sexually harassed by the ward attendants after getting admitted in the hospital has been seen. In Kerala, a 19-year-old woman COVID-19 patient was allegedly raped by an ambulance driver while shifting her to a first line treatment centre.³ 23rd May 2020, two rape cases were recorded from Sasaram Quarantine centre.⁴ Haryana has recorded 66 rapes, 62 cases of abduction and 142 incidents of molestation in April this year. Out of 66, as many as 17 have been gang rapes.⁵ Data by The New Indian Express indicates that between March and May, there were a total of 64 rape cases and 716 molestation cases in Karnataka.⁶ It was reported that three migrant workers from UP were arrested for allegedly gang raping a 14-year old minor in Kerala.⁷

Beside this, the male population moving to the cities for jobs leaving their wives and children behind are now coming back to their places with no jobs left which increased inebriation. This has been seen to be one of the major factor behind the increased reports of domestic violence. During this pandemic, number of sexual harassment and domestic violence cases have majorly increased. A major number of women, mostly belonging to the backward areas, could not raise their voices against the tortures they were subjected to within the four walls of their homes because of continuous proximity with the abusers and lack of outside help on the other hand, the girl children who have not even got into their senses completely are no more safe inside their own houses. Five cases were reported between the months of March and May where

² India coronavirus: 14-year-old sexually assaulted at Delhi Covid-19 centre, BBC NEWS, 24th July 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53522998> accessed on 20th Feb, 2021

³ Woman COVID-19 patient raped by ambulance driver in Kerala, Healthworld.com From The Economic Times, 7th Sep, 2020, <https://health.economictimes.indiatimes.com/amp/news/industry/woman-covid-19-patient-raped-by-ambulance-driver-in-kerala/77969298> accessed on 20th Feb, 2021

⁴ 2 migrants came out of quarantine centre in Bihar to rape teenager, nabbed, Hindustan Times, 23rd May, 2020 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/2-migrants-came-out-of-quarantine-centre-in-bihar-to-rape-teenager-nabbed/story-6BOuuusuQDYIJPfL8zDEM.html> accessed on 20th Feb, 2021

⁵ 66 rapes, 142 molestations, rise in dowry deaths in Haryana during lockdown, The Tribune, 23rd May, 2020 <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/haryana/66-rapes-142-molestations-rise-in-dowry-deaths-in-haryana-during-lockdown-88882> accessed on 20th Feb, 2021-02-23

⁶ Crime against women spike during lockdown, The New Indian Express, 02nd July, 2020 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2020/jul/02/crimes-against-women-spike-during-lockdown-2164100.html> accessed on 21st Feb, 2021

⁷ 14-year-old girl gang raped in Kerala; three migrants from UP arrested, The Indian Express, 25th Aug, 2020 <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kerala-minor-gangrape-uttar-pradesh-migrants-6568656/lite>, accessed on 21st Feb, 2021

fathers had raped their daughters, including one incident involving a 75-day-old baby girl.⁸ According to recent data of National Legal Service Authority, the rates of domestic violence have increased all over the nation after lockdown.⁹ At the beginning of lockdown, 257 reports of different offence against women have been received by National Commission for Women out of which 69 cases have been reported as domestic violence. As per as NALSA's report, maximum number of domestic violence cases have been received from Uttarakhand 144 followed by Haryana 79, Delhi 63 respectively.¹⁰ These numbers shows an increase in the crime rate against the women during this time, compared to prior of this pandemic.

Even though a number of non-governmental organisations have come up for the women facing such violence they have reported that with the imposition of lockdown the number of women seeking help have reduced. Shakti- Shalini a Delhi based NGO has reported that the number of calls on their helpline numbers have reduced immensely to which they said that as the victims are now living twenty- four- seven with the abuser which has further restricted their only source of speaking openly and situations are now even more worsening for the women.¹¹

III. CONCLUSION

With the sudden imposition of nationwide lockdown and the suspension of the transportation system overnight to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the government of India had failed to plan its impact on the weaker and vulnerable sections of the country. The group that was majorly put into risk were the women who faced both, health as well as physical and mental crisis during the pandemic. Those who were subjected to the sexual violence prior to the pandemic and managed to escape are now compelled to move back to those abusive environments and those who didn't, found themselves even more isolated and being sexually harassed by the people outside. The increased cases of domestic violence and the cases of rape and sexual assault in the quarantine centres and hospital shows the anguish women faced both in their houses as well as outside during this time. Even though the initiatives taken by the NGOs of having a 24x7 helpline number for the victims, the reduced involvement on the side

⁸ Man rapes 75-day-old daughter, imprisoned in Erode, Times of India, 29th May, 2020 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/erode/man-rapes-75-day-old-daughter-imprisoned/articleshow/76080040.cm> accessed on 21st Feb, 2021

⁹ Manob Das, Arijit Das and Ashish Mandal, Examining the impact of lockdown on domestic violence: An evidence from India, Asian Journal of Psychiatry <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7413053> accessed on 21st Feb, 2021-02-23

¹⁰ Manob Das, Arijit Das and Ashish Manda, Examining the impact of lockdown on domestic violence: An evidence from India, Asian Journal of Psychiatry <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7413053> accessed on 21st Feb, 2021

¹¹ Aathira Konikkara, Lockdown and domestic violence: As NGOs struggle to support women at risk, government plays catch up, The Caravan: A journal of politics and culture <https://caravanmagazine.in/gender/lockdown-domestic-violence-ngo-struggle-government-catch-up> accessed on 21st Feb, 2021

of the women indicates the inadequacy in redressing the situation during this time.

Lastly, the government of any country while bringing any new change to its working should not neglect the vulnerable sections of the country and even if any situation is captivating such steps for greater good, then also some steps must be taken in favour of the weaker section who is going to suffer from this. The government of India while imposing the lockdown should have been concerned about this section and the challenges they were going to face due to the lockdown. Initiatives must have been taken in regard to this along with the health crisis prevailing in the country because even though the corona virus has proved to be dangerous for the health of the people, women during this time were suffering from yet another issue, getting sexually traumatised along with their health. Although crime against women were prevalent for a long time this pandemic has seen to be brought another epidemic with it i.e., increasing rate of sexual harassment cases of women.
